

You didn't want it yesterday

A short book about buying things for the lift, which lasts
about as long as the delivery

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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. You're tired or flat or fed up, you start looking at things to buy, and you buy one. For an hour or so you feel better. A few days later the thing arrives, and not long after that it's one more object in the house.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the lift you get from buying is real. Researchers have measured it, and I won't pretend it's imaginary. The second is that the lift sits in the wanting, the choosing and the waiting, and hardly any of it sits in the thing. It's mostly over by the time the box is open. So you're paying the full price of an object to get a feeling that the object doesn't supply. The third is practical. One question, asked before you pay, sorts most purchases into the right pile, and there are cheaper ways to get what the evening was short of. Chapters 14 and 15 cover both.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't a case for owning less, living plainly or feeling guilty about nice things. You need to buy things, and some of what you buy will give you years of pleasure. Chapter 12 is about those purchases. It isn't a budgeting book either. There are no spreadsheets here.

Four cautions.

If you're missing payments, borrowing to cover food or rent, or afraid to open your statements, don't wait until the end of a book. Free debt advice exists for this. In the UK the NHS points people to

Citizens Advice, StepChange, National Debtline and MoneyHelper. Ring one of them this week.

If your buying feels out of your control, takes up hours of most days, or is something you hide, chapter 16 describes what doctors call compulsive buying and where to get help. A book on its own may not be enough, and that isn't a failing in you.

If your spending comes in bursts, along with feeling unusually high, confident and full of energy and needing very little sleep, please talk to a GP. The NHS lists being extravagant with money among the signs of mania in bipolar disorder. That needs a doctor. A book about shopping won't touch it.

And if your trouble is that there isn't enough money for the things you need, this book isn't aimed at you. It's about buying things you didn't need for a feeling that didn't last. Going without is a different problem.

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

The parcel on the mat

It's Tuesday, ten past nine in the evening, and you're on the sofa.

The day wasn't terrible. A meeting was moved twice, someone sent a short email that could be read two ways, and dinner was something reheated. You're tired without having done anything you're proud of. You pick up your phone, and one of the things on it is a picture of a weekend bag. It's tan canvas with leather handles, and it costs sixty-eight pounds.

You have no weekend away planned. You look anyway. You read the reviews, and you find two similar bags and compare the pockets. There's an olive version, and for ten minutes the choice between tan and olive is the most interesting thing that has happened to you all day. You pick tan. Your card details are already there, so paying takes one tap. You put the phone down feeling brisker than you did at nine o'clock, like someone who has dealt with something.

On Wednesday an email says the bag has been dispatched, and that's a small pleasure. On Thursday you check the tracking twice at work. When you get home it's on the mat. You open it in the hall. It's a nice bag, and it smells of new canvas. You carry it upstairs and put it on top of the wardrobe. A milk frother from last month is up there too, still in its box.

By the following Tuesday you couldn't say where the bag is without stopping to think. That Tuesday you're on the sofa again, looking at something else.

Nothing here is a disaster. Sixty-eight pounds won't sink most households, and the bag may get used one day. I'm not going to tell you it was a sin. What I'd like you to look at is one odd fact about it. On Monday you didn't want a weekend bag. You hadn't thought about weekend bags in years. If someone had stopped you on Monday and offered you sixty-eight pounds or the bag, you'd have taken the money without a pause.

So the want wasn't about the bag. It turned up on Tuesday evening, along with the tiredness and the two-way email, and it happened to land on a bag. A week earlier it landed on a milk frother.

I'll use a few terms throughout the book. The lift is the rise in mood that comes with wanting, choosing and ordering something. A lift purchase is one made mainly to get that rise, whatever reason you'd give if asked. A planned purchase is one you'd have made anyway, on a good day, because you need or want the thing.

The lift has some habits worth writing down now, because the details matter later.

It arrives fast. A few minutes of browsing will do it. It peaks early, somewhere between choosing and paying, and it has a few small echoes afterwards in the dispatch email and the tracking page. It's tied to a mood you were in before you started, and that mood is nearly always a low or empty one. And it passes itself off as a want for the object. At ten past nine you'd have sworn you wanted that bag.

Here's something to do before the next chapter, and it takes five minutes. Open the order history of whichever shop you use most, or look down last month's bank statement. For each thing you bought that wasn't food or a bill, ask one question. Had I wanted this the day before I bought it? Don't judge the answers. Just count them.

I can't tell you what your count will be. I'd guess it splits more evenly than you expect, and that the things you hadn't wanted the day before are the ones you've thought about least since.

The lift is real

The usual advice about this habit starts by telling you that shopping doesn't make you happy. You know from experience that's false. On Tuesday evening it made you feel better within a quarter of an hour. Any book that denies that has lost the argument on page one, and deserves to.

So let's start with what buying gives you, because the research is on your side here.

Selin Atalay and Margaret Meloy published a paper in 2011 called "Retail therapy". They found what you'd expect, that people in a bad mood bought more unplanned treats for themselves. Then they found something the scolds wouldn't expect. The treats worked. Mood improved, the improvement lasted, and the people who'd bought to cheer themselves up didn't report regret or guilt about it afterwards.

Three years later Scott Rick, Beatriz Pereira and Katherine Burson looked at why. Their starting point was that sadness goes with a sense that circumstances are running your life. They reasoned that shopping is full of choices, and that making choices might hand back a small sense of being in charge. In three experiments, making shopping choices reduced lingering sadness, and the sense of restored control explained the effect. It didn't work for anger, which is about other people and not circumstances.

Go back to the sofa with that in mind. The day had happened to you. The meeting was moved by someone else and the email was written by someone else. Then for twenty-five minutes you were the one deciding. You chose tan over olive and this bag over two others, and nobody could overrule you. I think that's a large part of why you put the phone down feeling like a person who'd dealt with something. In a small way you had.

There's more in the lift than control. There's novelty, because a new thing is interesting and an evening can be short of interest. You now have Thursday to look forward to. And there's a sense of reward after a day that didn't pay you much. These are real needs, and I'd be lying if I said they were foolish ones. A person who wants some say over their day, something to look forward to and a bit of newness is in good working order.

So I won't ask you to believe that the lift is fake, or that you've been fooled into feeling something you didn't feel. You felt it.

The questions this book asks are narrower, and I think more useful. Where in the process does the lift sit? How long does it last? What are you paying for it, in money and in other ways? And is the object needed for it at all?

That last question has a surprising answer hidden in Rick's paper, and I'll come back to it in chapter 14. For now, notice one detail in the summary of their work. The shopping choices reduced sadness whether they were real or hypothetical. People who chose things and didn't buy them got the benefit too.

One caution about these studies. They involved small treats and short time spans, and I've read only the published summaries. They tell us that buying can lift a low mood on the day. They don't tell us what a habit of doing it twice a week does over five years. For that we have to look elsewhere.

Where the lift is

Think back over the bag, and this time follow your mood and not the parcel.

At nine o'clock you're flat. By twenty past you're absorbed, and by the time you've chosen tan you're enjoying yourself. The moment of paying is a small high point. On Wednesday and Thursday there are echoes, the dispatch email and the tracking page and the thought of it waiting at home. Opening the box is a second, smaller peak. Then the line drops back to wherever your week was anyway, and the bag goes on top of the wardrobe.

Nearly all the pleasure came before you owned the thing. After you owned it there were about four minutes in the hall.

Marsha Richins, a marketing professor, tested this pattern directly. In three studies, one of which followed the same people over time, she measured the emotions that products stirred up before and after purchase. She was interested in people who score high on materialism. In her sense that means people who expect that getting things will make them happier and change their lives in ways that matter. Those people showed a clear rise in good feeling before buying and a decline after. She concluded that for them, wanting and anticipating a product may be more pleasurable than owning it.

I should be straight about the limits. People who scored low on materialism didn't show the pattern. So this isn't a law about all shoppers. My reading is that on a Tuesday night like the one in

chapter 1, you've joined the high scorers for the evening. You're expecting a purchase to change how you feel. That's my interpretation and not her finding, but it fits what happened to the bag.

Other work points the same way. Amit Kumar, Matthew Killingsworth and Thomas Gilovich ran four studies on waiting, and found that people get real happiness from anticipation, before anything has arrived. At the severe end, the psychiatrist Donald Black reviewed the research on compulsive buying and described four phases, which he called anticipation, preparation, shopping and spending. He notes that the purchase that ends the sequence is often followed by a sense of let-down. Those are patients, and their buying is on a different scale from yours. The order is the same as yours, though.

A firework is a fair picture of it. The pleasure is in the climb and the burst, and nobody goes looking for the stick afterwards. A lift purchase is a firework where the stick costs sixty-eight pounds and has to be stored.

This changes what the sixty-eight pounds bought. You thought you were buying a bag and getting a nice feeling thrown in. It's closer to the truth that you were buying a nice feeling and getting a bag thrown in. The feeling was used up by Thursday evening. The bag is what's left over, and it's the part you paid for.

That's also why the habit repeats so neatly. If the pleasure were in the bag, owning the bag would go on supplying it, and you wouldn't need to be back on the sofa a week later. The pleasure is

in the run-up, so the only way to get it again is to start another run-up. The delivery marks the end of the good part.

If a parcel is already on its way to you, you can test this. Notice when you feel best about it. I'd bet it's before the knock on the door.

Why the thing goes quiet

The bag didn't change between Thursday and the following Tuesday. It was as well made on day six as on day one. What changed is that you got used to it, and getting used to things is one of the most reliable facts about people.

Psychologists call it adaptation. A new thing in your surroundings gets your attention because it's new. Within days it's part of the background, and your attention goes back to whatever it was on before. This isn't ingratitude. A mind that stayed excited about every object in the house would never get anything done.

You already know this. If I asked you in general whether people get used to new possessions, you'd say of course they do. The odd thing is that you don't use the knowledge at the moment it would help. Jing Wang, Nathan Novemsky and Ravi Dhar studied that gap. They found that shoppers often fail to predict how their enjoyment of a product will fade. People hold the right beliefs about getting used to things. They don't think of those beliefs while they're deciding. When the researchers made the length of ownership more prominent, the beliefs came to mind and people's choices changed.

At ten past nine you pictured the bag on its best day. It was new, on your shoulder, on the way to a train. You didn't picture it in week three, which is the week that would have told you more. By then it's a shape on top of the wardrobe that you look past when you're reaching for a jumper.

There's a second finding worth having. Leonardo Nicolao, Julie Irwin and Joseph Goodman compared purchases of things with purchases of experiences, such as trips and meals out. They found that people adapt more slowly to experiences than to objects. That cuts both ways, because a bad experience stays bad for longer too. But it suggests that objects are the purchases we get used to fastest, and objects are what a lift purchase nearly always is.

Here's the honest objection. "Some things I bought years ago still please me every time I use them." I believe you. Look at which ones they are, though. My guess is that they share two features. You use them often, so they keep doing something for you. And you wanted them for a good while before you bought them, so the want wasn't made by one evening. The bag has neither feature. Chapter 12 comes back to this, because it's the difference between a lift purchase and a good one.

The practical point is small and it comes straight from Wang's study. Before you pay, move the picture forward. Don't ask how you'll feel when it arrives, because the answer is always "pleased". Ask what this thing will be in its third month. Where will it live, how often will you pick it up, and will you notice it's there? You're prompting your own mind to use something it already knows.

For some purchases the third-month picture is good, such as the kettle you'll use four times a day or the coat you'll wear from October to March. For a lift purchase the honest third-month picture is usually a cupboard.

What sends you to the shop

If the want didn't come from the bag, it came from somewhere. The research points to your mood.

In 2008 Cynthia Cryder and three colleagues ran a small experiment that has become well known. Thirty-three people watched a film clip. Some saw a sad scene about a boy whose mentor dies, and the others saw a neutral one. Then, in what they were told was a separate task, each was offered the chance to buy an insulated water bottle, naming the most they'd pay out of their ten-dollar fee. The people who'd watched the neutral clip offered an average of 56 cents. The people who'd watched the sad one offered \$2.11. It was the same bottle, and it was worth nearly four times as much to someone who'd just been made sad.

Two details matter. The effect appeared only in people whose sadness had turned their attention onto themselves. And a later study by Nitika Garg, Lisa Williams and Jennifer Lerner, which repeated the finding in a new setting, confirmed that it happens even when people are unaware of it. Nobody in these studies thought, I'm sad, so I'll pay more for a bottle. They thought the bottle was worth two dollars.

That's the important bit. A low mood doesn't announce itself as a reason to shop. It works by making things look more worth having, so from the inside all you notice is a nice bag.

Outside the laboratory the same link shows up at scale. Mark Fenton-O'Creevy, Sally Dibb and Adrian Furnham analysed a UK survey of more than a hundred thousand people. Impulsive buying was more common in those with the most need to manage their moods and the fewest good ways of doing it. It also went with worse financial outcomes, and not only among the heaviest buyers. And in Black's review of compulsive buying, the feelings that patients most often named as coming before a spree were depression, anxiety, boredom, self-critical thoughts and anger.

You've probably been told not to go to the supermarket hungry. The hunger fills the trolley, and the person who unpacks it at home isn't hungry any more and wonders who chose all this. A flat mood does the same job on a shopping site, except that nobody warns you about it.

This is where the title of the book comes from. If a want is produced by the state you're in tonight, then it has no history. It wasn't there yesterday. A want that comes from your life and not your mood usually does have a history. You've noticed the lack before, more than once, on good days as well as bad. So there's a question that sorts the two well enough.

Did I want this yesterday?

It isn't proof. Now and then you'll see something for the first time that you need, and the answer will be no. But in that case nothing is lost by waiting, because a real need will still be there on Friday. A want that was made by Tuesday evening mostly won't outlast Tuesday evening. The question never tells you not to buy it. At most it tells you to hold off for tonight.

You can also turn the question round, and it's worth doing once. When the urge to browse arrives, ask what happened today. Most evenings you'll find an answer quickly. Something went wrong, or nothing went right, or the day was blank. That answer is what you were shopping for.

What the evening still needed

Let's say the lift works as advertised. You felt flat at nine and better at half past. Some things are still true at half past.

The email that could be read two ways is still in your inbox. You're as tired as you were, and you still haven't spoken to anyone since lunch. Whatever made the evening flat is where you left it. The lift went over the top of it for an hour.

I need to be careful here, because there's a lazy version of this argument and I don't want to make it. With something like smoking, you can argue that the habit produces the very discomfort it then relieves. Buying isn't like that. The shop didn't move your meeting or write that email. Your bad days come from your life, and a lift purchase doesn't cause them.

What it does is leave things behind that make later evenings a little heavier. None of them is dramatic, but they add up over a year. What follows is my own reasoning, and you can check it against your own experience.

The first is money. Sixty-eight pounds once is nothing much. A lift purchase most weeks is a few thousand pounds a year, and for a lot of households that's the difference between a cushion and no cushion. Money worry is one of the commonest reasons for a flat evening. Fenton-O'Creevy's survey found that impulsive buying went with worse financial outcomes across the whole range of buyers.

The second is the stuff itself. Every object you own has to be stored, moved, cleaned round and eventually got rid of. The top of the wardrobe fills up. A cluttered room is a mild, steady irritant, and the things in it that you never used are small reminders of money gone.

The third is a feeling you may recognise. It's the slight wince when another parcel arrives, or the habit of getting to the door before anyone else does, or the moment of not wanting to look at the total. It isn't strong enough to be called shame. But you don't get that feeling about things you bought on purpose.

There's also a broad research finding nearby that I'll mention with a warning. Helga Dittmar and colleagues pooled 259 samples and found that people who put a high value on money and possessions report somewhat lower well-being. The link is modest. It's a correlation too, so it can't tell us which way the cause runs, and unhappy people may well turn to things. I mention it only because it's the opposite of what you'd expect if things were a dependable route to feeling good.

The bigger cost, I think, is none of these. The evening needed something, and it didn't get it.

It may have needed rest, because you were tired. It may have needed a moan to someone who'd laugh in the right places.

Perhaps you'd spent nine hours doing what others asked, and you wanted the feeling of having finished something of your own. Or the next fortnight had nothing in it, and you needed something to look forward to.

Those are four different needs, and buying is a quick general answer to all of them, which is why it's such a tempting one. It's also why it answers none of them well. Twenty-five minutes of looking at bags doesn't rest you. It doesn't connect you to anybody. What you finish is a transaction, and what you look forward to is over on Thursday. The need goes unmet, so it's back next week, and so are you.

The shop is ready for you

So far I've talked as though this all happens inside your head. It doesn't. On the other side of the screen is a business whose job is to turn a passing want into a sale before the want passes. That's an ordinary thing for a shop to want. But it helps to see how well prepared it is.

Start with paying. Drazen Prelec and George Loewenstein pointed out in 1998 that spending money hurts a little at the moment you do it. They called this the pain of paying. It's useful, because it's the moment your mind weighs the thing against the money. They also noted that the hurt depends on how tightly the payment is tied to the purchase. Handing over cash ties the two closely. Cards loosen the tie, because the money leaves later and somewhere you can't see.

Priya Raghubir and Joydeep Srivastava tested this in four studies. People were willing to spend more when a credit card logo was present than when it wasn't. They spent more with vouchers than with cash of the same value. Anything that made parting with money less vivid made spending easier.

Now think about how you paid for the bag. You didn't count out notes or type in a card number. Your details were saved, and paying was one tap with your thumb. It may have offered to split the cost into three payments, which cuts one small pain into three that you'll barely feel. My reading is that the moment your mind was supposed to weigh the bag against sixty-eight pounds has been taken out of the process on purpose.

Then there's hurry. In 2019 a team at Princeton led by Arunesh Mathur sent an automated crawler round about eleven thousand shopping websites and examined some fifty-three thousand product pages. They found 1,818 examples of design tricks that push shoppers towards buying, on about one site in nine. There were 393 countdown timers and 632 low-stock messages. When they checked the timers by visiting again, 157 of them were false. The clock ran down and reset, or it reached zero and the offer carried on as before. They also found twenty-two companies selling these devices to shops ready-made.

A countdown timer exists to stop you asking the question from chapter 5. If the offer ends in fourteen minutes, there's no time to find out whether you'll want the thing tomorrow.

Add the rest. The email arrives in the evening because that's when people buy. The advert follows you from site to site because you looked once. At the checkout it tells you that people who bought this also bought that. None of it needs a villain. Thousands of businesses have each tested what works, and what works is whatever reaches you when your guard is down.

I don't say this so that you'll feel angry, though you may. I say it for two reasons.

One is that the ease you feel when you buy says nothing about your character. Skilled people have spent years removing every pause between the want and the purchase. You're a tired person on a sofa, up against a well-funded system that never gets tired. If you keep losing, that's what anyone would expect.

The other is that the pauses can be put back. You can delete a saved card and unsubscribe from the emails, and you can remove an app from your phone. Each of these gives you back a few seconds of the pain of paying, and those seconds are when the question gets asked. Chapter 15 lists them.

"It was reduced"

The bag in chapter 1 cost sixty-eight pounds. Suppose the page had said it was down from a hundred and ten. For a lot of us that would have settled it, and we'd have told the story afterwards as one about saving forty-two pounds.

The economist Richard Thaler gave this a name in 1985. He suggested that a purchase gives two separate pleasures. One comes from the thing itself. The other comes from the deal, the gap between what you paid and what you think the thing normally costs. He called the second one transaction utility. A good deal feels good in itself, apart from whatever you bought.

Once you see the two pleasures separately, the trouble is obvious. The pleasure of the deal can attach to anything at all. It'll attach to a bag you don't need as easily as to a boiler you do. And it's strongest on the evenings when you were after a lift anyway, because it adds a little sense of cleverness to the sense of control.

The arithmetic is simple. If you buy a bag for sixty-eight pounds, you have sixty-eight pounds less than you had. Whether you've saved anything depends on one thing only, which is whether you'd have bought that bag at full price. If you would, you're forty-two pounds up. If you wouldn't, then you've spent sixty-eight pounds, and the hundred and ten is only what somebody chose to print on the page.

You'll notice that "would I have bought it at full price?" is the chapter 5 question again. A thing you wanted yesterday, at its ordinary price, is a bargain when it's reduced. A thing you didn't want yesterday is no bargain, however much has been knocked off.

Remember Mathur's timers too. A fair number of the deadlines on those sites weren't real. The reduction that ends at midnight is often there again on Thursday.

None of this makes sales bad. They're the best time to buy things you've already decided on, and that's one of the main uses of the list I'll describe in chapter 15. If the coat you've wanted since last winter drops by a third in January, buy it and enjoy both pleasures. What makes it a good buy is that the wanting came first and the discount came after. With a lift purchase it's the discount that comes first, and the wanting is put together on the spot to fit it.

"I deserve it"

It's Friday. You've had a hard week, you got through it, and you did a couple of things well that nobody noticed. There's a jumper you've been shown twice, and the thought arrives fully formed that you've earned this.

I don't want to argue with the first half of that thought. You probably have earned something. People who work hard and look after others and never give themselves anything aren't admirable, only worn out. If this book left you feeling that spending money on yourself is a weakness, it would have done you harm.

The trouble is the join between the two halves. "I've earned something" is about you and your week. "So I'll have this jumper" is about a jumper that happened to be on your screen. Nothing connects them except timing.

Uzma Khan and Ravi Dhar studied how that join gets made. In five studies they found that after people had done something virtuous, or merely committed to it, they were more likely to pick an indulgent option in a later choice. The good act gave their view of themselves a brief boost, and the boost worked as a licence. The indulgence didn't have to be related to the good act in any way. It only had to come next.

So a hard week works like a voucher that can be spent on anything, and the shop is glad to take it. Notice also that "I deserve it" tends to turn up when part of you has doubts. You don't tell yourself you

deserve a new kettle when the old one has broken. You just buy a kettle. The phrase usually appears when you half know the purchase needs defending.

You can test how well these rewards work. Try to remember what you rewarded yourself with three Fridays ago. If it comes to mind and you're still glad of it, that was a good reward. If it doesn't come to mind at all, the week's effort was traded for something that had gone within days.

I think a reward that works has three features, and this is my view and not a finding. You choose it in advance, so your well-rested self picks it and not your worn-out Friday self. It's tied to the effort, so that you know what it's for. And you enjoy it at the time, so it can't be sitting in a box. A meal out on Friday night that you booked on Monday does all three. So does the coat you've wanted for a year, bought at the end of the project you said you'd finish first.

The jumper that appeared on your screen has none of those features. You can do better for yourself than that, and with the week you've had you ought to.

"I can always send it back"

This is the last of the three things people say at the checkout, and it may be the one that lets the most purchases through. It sounds like caution, as if you're keeping your options open.

It's also true. In the UK, if you buy online, by post or by phone, you generally have fourteen days from receiving the item to tell the seller you're cancelling, and another fourteen to send it back. You don't have to give a reason. There are exceptions, but for most ordinary goods that's the rule, and many shops offer more.

That's a good right to have. My argument is with what the thought does at ten past nine. What follows is my reasoning, not a study.

"I can always send it back" turns a decision into something that isn't a decision yet. You aren't really buying the bag, you tell yourself. You're only having a look at it, at home. That takes away the last of the pain of paying, because no money has been spent if it can all be undone. The thought works as permission to buy, however cautious it sounds.

Then look at who has to do the undoing. It isn't the brisk person who chose tan over olive. It's you on some later evening, probably a flat one, faced with finding the box, reprinting a label, taping it up and carrying it to a counter in your lunch hour. It's a chore, and there's nothing in it for you. The lift was used up days ago, and returning the thing can't bring it back. All a return offers is sixty-eight pounds you've already stopped missing.

So the bag stays. You haven't decided to keep it. You never get round to sending it back, and on day fifteen the question closes on its own.

Among the patients in Black's review, researchers recorded what happened to purchases afterwards. Some items were returned, some were sold or given away, and some were never taken out of the packaging. That's the severe end, and I'm not suggesting it describes you. But an unopened box is a clear sign that what was wanted wasn't the contents. It's worth looking on top of your own wardrobe.

Two practical things follow.

If you catch yourself thinking "I can always send it back" as you're about to pay, treat it as information. People don't say it about things they're sure of. It means you have doubts, and the time to settle them is before you order. Ask the chapter 5 question. If the answer's no, wait.

And when something you've bought on purpose turns out wrong, because it doesn't fit or it isn't what the picture showed, send it back that week. Put the box by the front door the day you decide. The right to return is worth a lot to someone who uses it promptly. It's worth very little to someone who relies on it as a reason to buy.

The person who owns it

Go back to the picture you had of the bag at ten past nine. It was on your shoulder, on a station platform, on a Friday afternoon. The person carrying it had somewhere to go and someone to go with. They were the sort who gets away for weekends.

That person was what you were buying. The bag was the part of them that could be delivered.

This is what Richins found underneath the rise and fall in chapter 3. The people who felt the most before a purchase were the ones who expected it to change something that mattered. They expected it to change how they lived, how others saw them or what kind of person they were. She called these transformation expectations, and they explained the rise. They also help explain the fall. The running shoes arrive, and the person who opens the box still doesn't run.

Two other studies show what's going on. Derek Rucker and Adam Galinsky found in three experiments that people who'd been made to feel powerless were willing to pay more for things, but only for things that signal status. Where they felt short of something, they reached for an object that stood for it. Then Monika Lisjak and colleagues looked at what happens next. They found that buying a symbol of the very thing you feel short of can backfire. It kept the sore spot in people's minds, they dwelt on it, and they did worse afterwards at tasks needing self-control. The object reminded them of the gap it was meant to cover.

A lot of lift purchases are of this kind once you look. There's the notebook for the person who writes every morning, the pan for the person who cooks from scratch, and the course for the person who's learning Italian. I'm not mocking any of it. The want underneath is a good one. You'd like to be someone who gets away at weekends, and you probably should.

But the purchase does something sly. It lets you feel you've made a start. Ordering the bag at ten past nine feels like a step towards weekends away, and it's the only step that takes one tap. The real steps are finding a free weekend, asking someone and booking a train. They're harder, and none of them has been done. The mild satisfaction of having acted makes them slightly less likely, because the itch has been scratched.

So the reframe is to reverse the order. Do the thing first, badly equipped. Go away for a weekend with the holdall you've had since college. Run in the trainers you've got, three times. Write on whatever paper is in the house for a fortnight.

Then see what you find. If you do the thing and keep doing it, you'll soon know what kit you lack, and you'll buy it with a history of wanting behind it. That's a planned purchase, and it'll be used. Or you may find you didn't much want the activity, only the idea of being the person who does it. That's worth knowing, and you'll have found out for nothing.

Either way you've spent the evening's energy on the life and not on the luggage. If it's weekends away you want, book the weekend first and think about the bag afterwards.

"But I like nice things"

Good. Nothing in this book asks you to stop.

This objection matters, because there's a reading of the last eleven chapters that ends with an empty flat, a capsule wardrobe and a slightly smug expression. I don't want that for you and I don't think it follows. The argument has been about one kind of purchase, the one made for the lift. It's an argument for buying on purpose, which usually means buying better things and enjoying them more.

So which purchases do pay? This is what I think the evidence and ordinary experience suggest.

Things you use often. Adaptation dulls the pleasure of having a thing, but it does much less to the pleasure of using a good tool. A sharp knife is nice every time you cut an onion, and a comfortable chair goes on being comfortable every evening you sit in it. If something will be in your hands most days, it's worth spending real money on.

Things you wanted for a long time. A want that has lasted six months has been through good moods and bad, paydays and lean weeks, and it's still there. There's a bonus too. A planned purchase gives you the wanting and the waiting that chapter 3 described, only over months. You get more of the enjoyable part.

Time. Ashley Whillans and colleagues surveyed more than six thousand people in four countries and found that those who spent money on time-saving services were more satisfied with their

lives. In a field experiment, working adults were happier after a purchase that saved them time than after buying an object. If there's a chore that sours every Saturday, paying to be rid of it may do more for you than any parcel.

Experiences, with a caution. Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich found that people reported more happiness from money spent on doing than from money spent on having. The finding became famous and then, as famous findings do, got overstated. Evan Weingarten and Joseph Goodman pooled 141 studies and confirmed the advantage, but judged that about a third of it might be down to publication bias. It was weaker for solitary experiences and for people with less money, for whom a useful object can matter a great deal. So I'd put it modestly. A meal with friends is often a better use of sixty-eight pounds than a bag nobody needs. That doesn't make every experience better than every object.

Other people. Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin and Michael Norton found that people who spent more of their income on others were happier, and that people randomly assigned to spend money on someone else reported more happiness than those assigned to spend it on themselves.

All these purchases have one thing in common, which is that the pleasure is still going after the delivery. You go on using the tool, you get your Saturday mornings back, you remember the meal and your friend is touched by the present. A lift purchase is nearly the only kind where the pleasure is over when the thing turns up.

So like nice things. Want them for a while, choose them carefully and pay what they're worth. Then use them until they wear out.

"I can afford it"

Perhaps you can. Not everyone who buys for the lift is in trouble with money, and I'd be inventing a crisis if I told you otherwise. If sixty-eight pounds a week disappears from your account without a ripple, the arguments about debt and cushions don't apply to you, and you can ignore them.

This objection deserves a straight answer, because it's the one that lets a comfortable person wave the whole book away. My answer is that money was never the main cost. It's only the easiest one to count.

The main cost is the one from chapter 6. The evening needed something and got a bag. That's as true on a large salary as on a small one. A well-paid person who's lonely on a Tuesday is as lonely after the purchase as a badly paid one, and both have now used up the evening. Being able to afford it makes it easier to go on not noticing, because nothing ever forces the question. No statement arrives that makes you stop and look. So the habit can run for twenty years.

The second cost is the one "I can afford it" is designed to hide, which is the total. The phrase is always about one purchase, and one purchase is always affordable, which is why the phrase never fails. Nobody ever says "I can afford all of them" at the checkout.

So do the sum once. Go back to the count you made after chapter 1, or make it now over the last three months. Add up everything that wasn't a planned purchase, then multiply by four. You're not doing

this to tell yourself off. You're doing it because you may never have seen the figure, and you ought to see what you're spending on this.

Then hold that figure against chapter 12. Whatever the number is, it would also buy something from the list of purchases that go on paying. It might be the very good chair, a week away with someone you like, or a cleaner for a year of Saturday mornings. Those are all things you like too. The lift purchases don't add up to a bigger pile of nice things. Mostly they've been bought in place of the nicest ones, a bit at a time.

There's one more thing, and I hold it more loosely. "Afford" describes this year. Jobs end and rents rise, and a habit that was harmless at one income can be a real problem at another. It's easier to change while it costs you nothing much than later, when it's the thing you lean on in a crisis. I'm not predicting a crisis for you. I'm only pointing out that a bad year is when the lift will pull hardest.

I should be fair about where this argument stops. Suppose you can afford what you buy, you use it, your evenings are mostly fine, and the top of your wardrobe is clear. Then you don't have the habit this book is about, and you can stop reading with my blessing. The book is for the person who can afford the bag and still, somewhere around the following Tuesday, wonders why they keep doing this.

The lift without the parcel

Chapter 2 listed what the lift is made of. There was a sense of being in charge, something to look forward to, some novelty and a reward. Chapter 6 added what the evening may have been short of underneath, which was rest, company or the feeling of having finished something. If those are the real goods, the useful question is where else they're on sale, and for how much.

Start with being in charge, because there's a finding here I promised to come back to. In the experiments by Rick and his colleagues, making shopping choices reduced sadness whether the choices were real or hypothetical. People who chose and didn't buy got the benefit. The sense of control came from the deciding. Paying added nothing to it.

That changes what browsing has to mean. You can look at the bags. You can compare the pockets and pick tan over olive, and have the whole twenty-five minutes of being the one who decides. Then, where you'd normally tap to pay, you write the bag on a list with today's date and close the tab. If Rick's finding holds outside the laboratory, you've had a good share of the lift and spent nothing. Chapter 15 turns this into a method.

It won't always be enough. Sometimes what you need is to be in charge of something real. In that case a small job of your own, begun and finished inside half an hour, supplies it better than a checkout does. You could fix the drawer that sticks, or send the email you've been putting off. It has to be something you chose, and it has to have an end.

Looking forward is the easiest of the four to supply. Kumar's studies found that waiting for an experience was more pleasant and more exciting than waiting for a possession. So put something in the diary. It could be a walk with a friend on Sunday, a film on Thursday or a day trip next month. It needn't cost much. It needs a date, because people look forward to dates. If the next fortnight is blank, that alone may be why you're on the sofa looking at bags, and ten minutes with a calendar will do more than a parcel.

Novelty is there for the taking as well. Leif Nelson and Tom Meyvis found across six studies that a break in a pleasant experience made it more enjoyable afterwards, because the break undid some of the adaptation. People didn't expect this and avoided the breaks.

Applying it to possessions is my own step, but I think it holds. Put some things away for a few months and then bring them back. The jumper you haven't seen since March is close to a new jumper, and it's free. Libraries work on the same principle, and so does swapping with a friend.

Reward was covered in chapter 9. Choose it ahead, tie it to the effort and enjoy it at the time.

As for what the evening may have needed underneath, I'd only say that each need has its own plain answer and none of them is a shop. If you're tired, go to bed early, which won't feel like much and will do a good deal. If the day's been lonely, a ten-minute phone call will do more for it than any parcel.

There's a fair objection. "All of that is more effort than one tap." It is. That's the shop's great advantage, and I won't pretend otherwise. But the tap only looks effortless because its costs come later and

get paid by somebody else. That somebody is you in a fortnight, with less money, one more object and the same evening to get through.

The decision

Everything so far comes down to one decision. It isn't to stop shopping, and it isn't to spend less, though you probably will. It's this. You stop buying things on the day you first want them.

That's the whole rule. A want that arrives tonight can't be paid for tonight. It goes on a list with a date, and it can be bought on a later day if it's still wanted. You lose nothing you'd have been glad of. A real want comes through a wait with no trouble, and for a want that was made by a mood the wait is usually the end of it.

Here's how I'd set it up. Some of it happens in the moment, and the rest is arranged in advance.

Notice what you're shopping for. When you find yourself browsing, say to yourself "I'm after a lift." It isn't an accusation. It moves your attention from the bag to the evening. Then ask what happened today.

Ask the question. Did I want this yesterday? If yes, and you'd planned to buy it, go ahead with a clear mind. If no, carry on to the next step.

Put it on the waiting list. Keep one list, on paper or on your phone. Write the thing, the price and today's date. Enjoy the choosing as much as you like, because that part is free. Then close the tab without paying.

Give the evening what it needed. Look back at chapter 14 and pick one. Put a date in the diary, ring someone, finish one small job or go to bed.

Read the list on a good morning. Once a week, when you're rested and in an ordinary mood, read down it. For each item more than a few days old, ask whether you still want it, and what it'll be in its third month. I suggest waiting a week for small things and a month for anything that would make you wince. Those periods are my suggestion and nothing more scientific. Cross off whatever has gone cold. You'll be surprised how much has.

Buy what survives, and enjoy it. If something is still wanted after its wait, buy it without guilt. It's a planned purchase now. Watch for it in the sales if you like.

Then there are the arrangements, which take one evening and put back the pauses that chapter 7 described. Delete your saved cards from the shops you use most, so that paying means getting up to find your wallet. Unsubscribe from marketing emails, all of them, in one sitting. Take shopping apps off your phone and turn off their notifications. Decide that pay-later schemes are for planned purchases only, if you use them at all. Each of these gives you back a few seconds, and you don't need more than that to ask the question.

Plans of the form "when this happens, then I'll do that" have a good record in research on habits, because they attach the new response to the moment that needs it. You could make three. "When I notice I'm browsing in the evening, I'll ask what happened today." "When

I'm about to pay for something I didn't want yesterday, I'll put it on the list and close the tab." "When I see a countdown timer, I'll leave the page."

As for what to expect, the urge to browse will keep turning up on flat evenings, probably for good, because flat evenings keep turning up. An urge is only a feeling, and you can have it without doing anything about it. With practice I'd expect the list to take the heat out of most of them within minutes. I'd expect fewer parcels and more money at the end of the month. I'd also expect the things you do buy to please you more. That's what I expect and I can't promise it, because the method hasn't been tested as a package. You can test it on yourself, though, and a month is long enough to see.

Sales, paydays and bad weeks

Some occasions are harder than others, and it helps to know them in advance.

Late evening is the obvious one. You're tired, your judgement is at its lowest, and the phone is in your hand. If most of your lift purchases happen after nine, the simplest fix is a rule about time. The list is open at night and the checkout isn't.

Payday is another. The balance looks healthy and the pain of paying is at its weakest. Move whatever you mean to save on the day it arrives, before the evening does.

Then there are the big sale weeks in November and January, and the run-up to Christmas. The timers and the low-stock warnings are everywhere, and buying for other people gives cover to buying for yourself. Go in with your list. It's the best defence you've got, and it's also the way to get real bargains on things you'd already chosen.

And there are bad weeks. After a row, a bereavement, a redundancy or a run of poor sleep, the pull will be stronger, because there's more to get a lift from. Expect that. It doesn't mean the book has stopped working. Cryder's water bottle showed the same thing on a small scale. In a bad week, be kinder to yourself and stricter with the checkout.

You'll have lapses. One night you'll buy the thing, feel the lift and remember this book on Thursday when the box arrives. That's normal and it doesn't mean you didn't understand or didn't want to

change. Do three things. If the item's unwanted, send it back that week. Ask what the evening needed, since that's still worth knowing. And put the next want on the list. One lapse doesn't make it a habit again unless you decide the lapse proves something.

For some readers the difficulty is of a different size, and I'd like you to know when that's so. Black describes compulsive buying as a preoccupation with shopping, a build-up of tension or anxiety beforehand and a sense of relief on buying, to a degree that causes distress or damages the person's life. It isn't rare. A pooled analysis by Anikó Maráz and colleagues put it at about one adult in twenty. Black notes that it often goes along with depression, anxiety and other conditions. He adds that no treatment is standard yet, though group cognitive behavioural therapy has looked promising.

Talk to a GP if any of these is true.

- Thoughts of shopping take up much of most days, or you shop to get rid of a tension that keeps building.
- You hide purchases, lie about what you've spent, or have debts that someone close to you doesn't know about.
- You've tried several times to stop and couldn't, and it's harming your money, your work or your relationships.
- Your spending comes in bursts when you feel unusually high, confident and energetic and need little sleep. The NHS lists this among the signs of mania.
- You've felt low, worried or hopeless for more than a few weeks, whatever your spending is doing.

In England you can also refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without seeing a GP first. If you're taking prescribed medication, keep taking it. And if you ever feel you can't cope or that life isn't worth living, get help the same day through NHS 111, an urgent GP appointment or 999.

For debt, get free advice early. Citizens Advice, StepChange, National Debtline and MoneyHelper all help people every day who are in far more of a tangle than they like to admit. Black also mentions Debtors Anonymous and financial counselling as things that help some people. Going to any of them is nothing to be ashamed of.

The parcel on the mat again

Here's the same Tuesday once more, as an example of how it might go.

It's ten past nine and you're on the sofa. The meeting was moved twice, the email could be read two ways and dinner was something reheated. You pick up your phone, and there's a picture of a weekend bag in tan canvas with leather handles, for sixty-eight pounds.

You look, because looking is fine. You read the reviews and compare the pockets, and you spend ten pleasant minutes on tan against olive. You pick tan. Somewhere in there you notice what's going on and think, without any scorn, that you're after a lift. You ask what happened today, and the answer takes about four seconds. You were pushed around all day, and the next fortnight has nothing in it.

Your card isn't saved any more, so paying would mean fetching your wallet from your coat, and in that small gap you ask the question. Did I want this yesterday? You didn't. You write "weekend bag, tan, £68" on the list with Tuesday's date, and close the tab.

Then you do one thing the evening needed. You message the friend you keep meaning to see and ask about the Saturday after next. She says yes before you've put the kettle on. Now there's a date in the fortnight. You go to bed at a sensible time, a bit brisker than you were at nine o'clock, and for roughly the same reasons as before.

Ten days later, on a Saturday morning, you read down the list. The bag is there, and you feel nothing much about it. You cross it off, along with a desk fan and a set of glasses. One thing on the list does still appeal, a good pair of walking boots you've thought about since the spring, and you leave those on. In January they're reduced by a quarter and you buy them. They're by the door now with mud on them.

That's all it was ever going to be. I haven't promised you a transformed life or a smug bank balance, and you won't have a house with nothing in it. Some evenings will still be flat, and on some of them you'll still buy something you didn't need, because tired people do. But there'll be fewer boxes on top of the wardrobe and more dates in the diary. More of what you own will be in use. And you'll know what you're looking at when the want arrives at ten past nine. It's a mood that's gone looking for an object.

One thing to do today, before the feeling of having read a book wears off. Delete the saved card from the shop you use most. It takes a minute. The next time you're about to buy something there, you'll have to get up and find your wallet, and that's long enough to ask whether you wanted the thing yesterday.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical, psychological or financial advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor, therapist or debt adviser who knows your situation.

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 notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 13 and 17, the three costs in chapter 6, the argument in chapter 10 and the method in chapter 15. The NHS and GOV.UK pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England or the UK, and rules and services differ elsewhere. Most of the research was done in the United States, often with students, and much of it in laboratories with small sums.

Before you start. The debt advice organisations are those listed on the NHS page "Coping with financial worries". The line about extravagant spending is from the NHS page "Symptoms, bipolar disorder", which lists "being impulsive or extravagant such as spending lots of money" among the symptoms of mania.

Chapter 2. Atalay and Meloy, "Retail therapy: a strategic effort to improve mood", *Psychology and Marketing* 28, 2011, pages 638 to 659. The summary says the positive effect on mood was lasting and doesn't say for how long. Rick, Pereira and Burson, "The benefits of retail therapy: making purchase decisions reduces residual

sadness", Journal of Consumer Psychology 24, 2014, pages 373 to 380. Three experiments. The summary says the choices helped "whether they were hypothetical (Experiment 1) or real (Experiment 2)". The list of what else the lift contains is mine.

Chapter 3. Richins, "When wanting is better than having: materialism, transformation expectations, and product-evoked emotions in the purchase process", Journal of Consumer Research 40, 2013, pages 1 to 18. Two cross-sectional studies and one longitudinal. The rise and decline appeared in high-materialism consumers only. Treating a reader on a low evening as a temporary high scorer is my step and hasn't been tested. Kumar, Killingsworth and Gilovich, "Waiting for Merlot: anticipatory consumption of experiential and material purchases", Psychological Science 25, 2014, pages 1924 to 1931. Black, "A review of compulsive buying disorder", World Psychiatry 6, 2007, pages 14 to 18. I read the full text. The four phases are the author's own clinical observation.

Chapter 4. Wang, Novemsky and Dhar, "Anticipating adaptation to products", Journal of Consumer Research 36, 2009, pages 149 to 159. Nicolao, Irwin and Goodman, "Happiness for sale: do experiential purchases make consumers happier than material purchases?", Journal of Consumer Research 36, 2009, pages 188 to 198. The third-month question is my application of Wang's finding. The two features of purchases that go on pleasing are my guess.

Chapter 5. Cryder, Lerner, Gross and Dahl, "Misery is not miserly: sad and self-focused individuals spend more", Psychological Science 19, 2008, pages 525 to 530. I read the full text. Thirty-three participants aged 18 to 30, so it's a small study. Garg, Williams and

Lerner, "The misery-is-not-miserly effect revisited: replication despite opportunities for compensatory consumption", PLoS One 13, 2018, e0199433. Combining the original and the replication, the authors put the effect at small to medium. Fenton-O'Creevy, Dibb and Furnham, "Antecedents and consequences of chronic impulsive buying: can impulsive buying be understood as dysfunctional self-regulation?", Psychology and Marketing 35, 2018, pages 175 to 188. The sample was 109,472 people in the UK. It's a survey, so it shows what goes with what and can't show cause. The feelings that come before a spree are from a study by Miltenberger and colleagues, as reported in Black 2007. The question "Did I want this yesterday?" is mine and hasn't been tested.

Chapter 6. Dittmar, Bond, Hurst and Kasser, "The relationship between materialism and personal well-being: a meta-analysis", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 107, 2014, pages 879 to 924. The pooled correlation for the most widely used measure was minus 0.19. Fenton-O'Creevy and colleagues 2018, as above. The figure of a few thousand pounds a year is arithmetic on the example price and isn't a statistic about anyone.

Chapter 7. Prelec and Loewenstein, "The red and the black: mental accounting of savings and debt", Marketing Science 17, 1998, pages 4 to 28. Raghubir and Srivastava, "Monopoly money: the effect of payment coupling and form on spending behavior", Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied 14, 2008, pages 213 to 225. Mathur, Acar, Friedman, Lucherini, Mayer, Chetty and Narayanan, "Dark patterns at scale: findings from a crawl of 11K shopping websites", Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction 3, 2019, article 81. I read the full text. The crawl

covered English-language sites and was run in 2019, so today's figures will differ. What I say about saved cards, one-tap payment and pay-later schemes is my reading of Prelec and Loewenstein. I haven't looked for studies of those schemes. The remarks about email timing and adverts that follow you are common knowledge and I haven't sourced them.

Chapter 8. Thaler, "Mental accounting and consumer choice", Marketing Science 4, 1985, pages 199 to 214. Mathur and colleagues 2019, as above.

Chapter 9. Khan and Dhar, "Licensing effect in consumer choice", Journal of Marketing Research 43, 2006, pages 259 to 266. The three features of a reward that works are mine.

Chapter 10. The cancellation rule is from the GOV.UK page "Accepting returns and giving refunds", in the section on online and distance selling, which is written for businesses. What became of patients' purchases is from a study by Schlosser and colleagues, as reported in Black 2007.

Chapter 11. Richins 2013, as above. Rucker and Galinsky, "Desire to acquire: powerlessness and compensatory consumption", Journal of Consumer Research 35, 2008, pages 257 to 267. Lisjak, Bonezzi, Kim and Rucker, "Perils of compensatory consumption: within-domain compensation undermines subsequent self-regulation", Journal of Consumer Research 41, 2015, pages 1186 to 1203. The claim that ordering the kit makes the real steps less likely is my own and I know of no test of it.

Chapter 12. Whillans, Dunn, Smeets, Bekkers and Norton, "Buying time promotes happiness", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 114, 2017, pages 8523 to 8527. The samples totalled 6,271 people in the United States, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands. Van Boven and Gilovich, "To do or to have? That is the question", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 85, 2003, pages 1193 to 1202. Weingarten and Goodman, "Re-examining the experiential advantage in consumption: a meta-analysis and review", Journal of Consumer Research 47, 2021, pages 855 to 877. Dunn, Aknin and Norton, "Spending money on others promotes happiness", Science 319, 2008, pages 1687 to 1688. The journal published a correction to this paper in 2009, which I haven't read. The points about things used often and things wanted for a long time are mine.

Chapter 14. Rick, Pereira and Burson 2014 and Kumar, Killingsworth and Gilovich 2014, as above. Nelson and Meyvis, "Interrupted consumption: disrupting adaptation to hedonic experiences", Journal of Marketing Research 45, 2008, pages 654 to 664. Their experiences were things like songs and a massage chair. Carrying the finding over to a jumper put away for six months is my step.

Chapter 15. Plans in "when, then" form are from 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 waiting list, the waiting periods and the arrangements haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 16. Black 2007, as above. Maráz, Griffiths and Demetrovics, "The prevalence of compulsive buying: a meta-analysis", *Addiction* 111, 2016, pages 408 to 419. The pooled figure for representative adult samples was 4.9 per cent, from eight estimates covering 10,102 people. Estimates varied a good deal with the questionnaire used. The signs in the list are my plain-language version of Black's description and aren't a diagnostic test. The advice on when to see a GP, on talking therapies and on urgent help is from the NHS pages "Coping with financial worries", "Symptoms, bipolar disorder", "NHS talking therapies" and "Where to get urgent help for mental health".