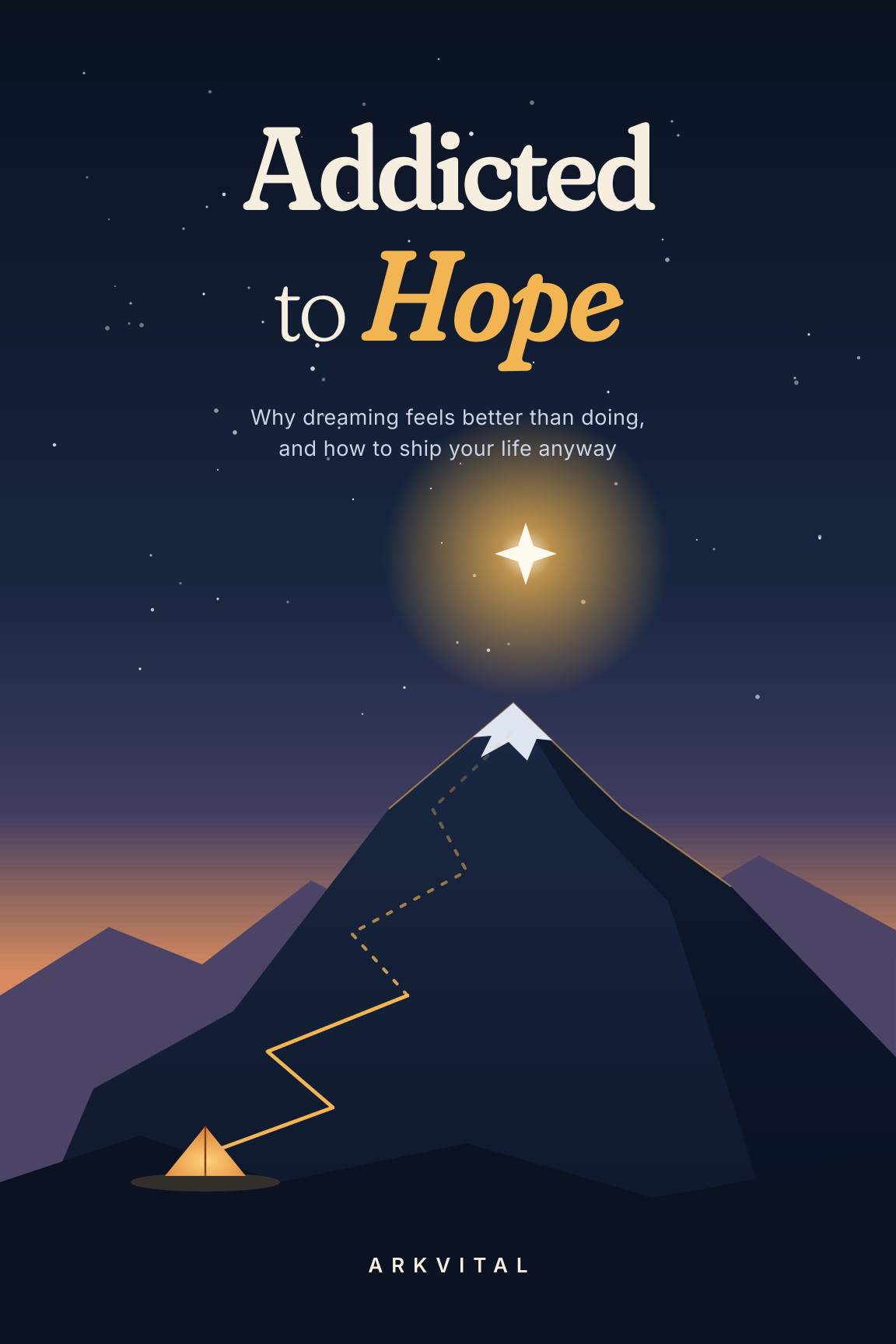
Addicted to *Hope*

Why dreaming feels better than doing,
and how to ship your life anyway



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The people in this book are imagined composites. Any resemblance to real persons is coincidental. The research described is real and is listed at the back.

This book offers general information and personal perspective. It is not medical, psychological, legal or financial advice. If you are struggling, please talk to a qualified professional or, in an emergency, call your local emergency number. In Canada and the US you can call or text 988.

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Before You Start

This book is a tool, not a treat. I say that up front because books like this one are part of the problem they claim to solve. Reading about change feels like change. You underline a sentence, feel a small lift, and close the book a little more hopeful and exactly as stuck. That lift is the drug this book is named after. So here are the rules.

Rule one: every chapter ends with a field test. It is one small action, designed to take less than thirty minutes, that you do within 24 hours. Not a reflection. An action. If you skip the field test, don't read the next chapter. Go back and do it. A book you read in a weekend without doing anything is just a nicer form of scrolling.

Rule two: you are allowed to stop reading. If by chapter 20 you are building something, put the book down and keep building. Come back when you get stuck. The best possible outcome is that you never finish this book because you were too busy.

Rule three: take the evidence seriously, not literally. I'm an engineer, so I care about whether things are true. Where the research is solid, I say so. Where a famous study turned out to be shaky, I say that too. Psychology is a young science, and some of its best-known findings have not held up. The tools in this book are the ones that survive both the lab and real life.

The climbers

The people in this book are imagined. They are composites, built from patterns that show up again and again in anyone trying to make something. You have met them. You may be one of them.

- **Marcus**, 38, a software engineer with a folder of 40 business ideas and a mother who always asked, "Are you sure?"
- **Lena**, 33, a home care nurse who grew up in chaos, sketches buildings on the backs of care logs, and has trained herself not to want anything.
- **Priya**, 45, an aerospace engineering director who has achieved everything on paper and hasn't started the one thing she cares about.
- **Theo**, 27, Marcus's cousin, told all his life that he could be anything, and currently trying to be six things at once.
- **Ruth**, 81, a retired machinist who runs a Tuesday night workshop in her garage and has exactly one rule: you may only talk about what you did this week, never about what you plan to do.

How the book is built

- **Part I, The Diagnosis:** why dreaming feels better than doing, and what it costs.
- **Part II, Where Did You Begin:** how your upbringing set your default, and the shame you carry up the mountain.
- **Part III, The Hard Truths:** death, obscurity, and the mind's habit of building your reality. Facts that break the spell.
- **Part IV, The Rewire:** mental tools that turn hope from a substitute for action into a starter motor.
- **Part V, The Build:** an engineer's toolkit for actually doing it.
- **Part VI, The Climb:** where the joy turns out to live.

At the back is a Field Guide that puts every tool on one page. If you are the kind of person who skips to the end, start there. Then come back for the field tests.

PART I

The Diagnosis

CHAPTER 1

The Most Beautiful Version

It is 11:40 on a Friday night and Marcus is happy.

His wife is asleep. The house is quiet. On his laptop is a folder called IDEAS_v7, and inside it are 40 documents, each one a business he has not started. Tonight he is in his favorite one: QuoteKit, an app that lets plumbers build a job quote on their phone in ninety seconds instead of an hour at the kitchen table.

Marcus knows that kitchen table. His father was a plumber who wrote quotes by hand on carbon paper after dinner, glasses on his forehead, swearing at the calculator. QuoteKit would have given him his evenings back. Marcus has been working on it for three years.

“Working on it” means this: a 22-page spec. A logo, redrawn four times. A pricing model with three tiers. A spreadsheet of competitors. A mock-up of the dashboard that he opens just to look at, the way some people look at photos of a holiday they are planning. Tonight he adds a feature for scheduling follow-up calls. He imagines a plumber in Ohio tapping a button and smiling. He imagines the first review. He imagines telling his mother.

At 1:15 he closes the laptop feeling like he has done something.

He hasn’t written a line of code. He hasn’t spoken to a single plumber since his father died.

The frictionless version

Every engineer knows the difference between a simulation and a field test. In a simulation you control the variables. Friction is a parameter, and you can set it to zero. Nothing rusts. Nobody misreads the manual. The model behaves.

The dream is a simulation with friction set to zero. In the dream, QuoteKit has no bugs, no angry customers, no plumber who says "I'll just keep using paper, thanks." There are no Tuesday afternoons where nothing works and you can't remember why you started. Of course the dream outperforms reality. Reality has friction. Comparing them is like comparing a frictionless physics problem to a car on a gravel road and concluding the car is broken.

The problem isn't that Marcus dreams. Dreams are where every project starts. The problem is that the dream has become the product. He gets the satisfaction of building something without the cost of building it. Starting would mean trading a perfect imaginary product for an imperfect real one, and some part of him keeps refusing the trade.

This is not laziness

If you recognize yourself here, notice what you are not. You are not lazy. Lazy people do not write 22-page specs. You are not short on ideas; you probably have too many. And you are not stupid. The people who get stuck this way are often the most capable people in the room, because capability is exactly what makes the simulation so vivid.

What you are is hooked. Not on a substance, but on a feeling: the feeling of the most beautiful version of things, the one that only exists before you start. Hope.

Hope is the most socially acceptable addiction there is. It looks like ambition. It sounds like planning. Your friends admire it. And it pays out its pleasure before you have done a single real thing. The next eight chapters take that habit apart: why it feels so good, what it does to your brain, and why it quietly keeps you at base camp for years.

The folder audit

Before you go further, find your folder. Everyone has one. It might be a literal folder, a notes app, a drawer of notebooks, a domain registrar account, or simply a sentence that starts with "One day I'm going to…"

Then run three numbers:

1. **Age:** When did you first have this idea?
2. **Investment:** Roughly how many hours have you spent thinking, planning, researching, or daydreaming about it?
3. **Contact:** How many hours have you spent doing something that touched reality: building, selling, asking a real person, putting it in front of anyone?

Marcus's numbers were three years, around 400 hours, and about two. That ratio, 200 to 1, is the clearest picture of a hope addiction I know.

You don't need to fix the ratio today. You just need to see it.

Field test: Write down your folder audit: the idea, its age, hours of planning, hours of contact. Put the ratio somewhere you'll see it tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER 2

The Dopamine Ledger

Marcus owns fourteen domain names. Quotekit.com was taken, so he has quotekit.io, getquotekit.com, quotekitapp.com, and eleven others for ideas in the folder. Every year he gets the renewal emails and pays them, about $170 in total. He tells himself it's protecting the brand. If he is honest, buying a domain is one of the best feelings he knows. For about four minutes, the business is real.

His cousin Theo does the same thing with gear. A $900 camera for a YouTube channel that has three videos. A standing desk for a startup that doesn't exist yet. A set of chisels for a woodworking business he researched for a month. The buying is the high. The using never quite happens.

What dopamine actually does

Dopamine is usually called the pleasure chemical. That's wrong in a way that matters.

In a landmark 1997 paper, neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz and his colleagues recorded dopamine neurons in monkeys learning that a light predicted a squirt of juice. At first the neurons fired when the juice arrived. But once the monkeys learned the light meant juice was coming, the firing moved. The neurons now fired at the light, the promise, and barely responded to the juice itself. And if the

juice failed to arrive, activity dropped below normal at exactly the moment it was expected.

The psychologist Kent Berridge sharpened the point by separating "wanting" from "liking." Dopamine drives wanting: the pull toward a reward, the anticipation, the craving. Liking, the actual enjoyment when you get it, runs largely on other systems. You can want something intensely and like it only a little once it's in your hands.

Read that like a balance sheet. Your brain pays you up front, at the cue, for things that haven't happened. The domain name, the camera, the spec, the daydream at 11:40 on a Friday: each one is a cue that says *something good is coming*, and each one triggers a payout. You are making withdrawals from an account you never deposited into.

Why doing feels worse than dreaming

Here is the cruel part. When Marcus finally sits down to write code, the payout is gone. The reward was already collected in the dreaming. Now there is only the cost: the setup, the bugs, the documentation he doesn't understand. His brain has no new signal to give him, because from its point of view the good news already arrived.

Worse, real work almost always falls short of the dream, and dopamine responds to a shortfall with a dip. You expected the beautiful version and got a blank editor. That dip feels like evidence that the project is wrong. It isn't. It's just the accounting.

This is why "addicted to hope" is not a metaphor. The anticipation loop is the same basic machinery that keeps people pulling slot machine levers and refreshing their feeds. The hope addict has found a version that looks productive.

Moving the payout

You can't switch off wanting, and you shouldn't. You need it to climb anything. What you can do is change what it's attached to. The goal is to make the brain's reward fire on progress, not on promises.

Three practical moves:

1. **Stop buying the cue.** No more domains, gear, courses, or tools until the thing they support has been used for real. The rule Theo eventually adopted: you may buy the camera after the tenth video, shot on your phone.
2. **Earn the daydream.** Dreaming isn't banned. It's a reward. Twenty minutes of building buys you five minutes of imagining. Do it in that order and the brain starts linking the good feeling to the work.
3. **Make progress visible.** The brain responds to cues, so give it cues of real progress. A wall calendar with an X for each day you touched the project. A log of what you shipped. A visible pile of finished drafts. Small wins, seen daily, are the deposits.

Field test: List every "cue purchase" you've made for your dream in the past two years: domains, gear, courses, books, apps. Add up the cost. Then cancel or pause one thing you are paying for but not using.

CHAPTER 3

Positive Fantasies, Negative Results

Priya has a ritual. On long flights home from supplier visits, she closes her eyes and imagines the reading.

It's a small independent bookshop, the kind with creaky floors. Forty folding chairs, all full. She is reading the first chapter of her novel, the one about her grandmother's crossing from Gujarat to Nairobi in 1952. People laugh in the right places. Afterward a young woman waits in line to tell her the book made her call her own grandmother. Priya can feel the weight of the hardcover in her hands.

She has done this on perhaps a hundred flights. She lands relaxed and happy. The novel is eleven pages long and hasn't changed since 2019.

The research nobody put on a poster

For decades, self-help told us to visualize success. See it, believe it, achieve it. The psychologist Gabriele Oettingen spent her career actually testing that idea, and the results are uncomfortable.

In a set of studies published in 2002, she and Doris Mayer asked people to describe their fantasies about a goal and then tracked what happened. Graduates who fantasized more positively about getting a great job had a harder time entering working life over the next two years. Students who fantasized about a romance with a crush were less likely to end up in the relationship. Students with

rosier fantasies about an exam got lower grades. Patients who fantasized most positively about recovering from hip replacement surgery were rated by their physical therapists as recovering less well. An earlier study with dieters found the same pattern for weight loss.

Why? Later lab work by Oettingen and Heather Kappes offers a clue. When people indulged in positive fantasies, their energy dropped, measured both by how energized they said they felt and by their systolic blood pressure. The body was standing down. In the fantasy, the goal is already achieved, so why spend energy chasing it?

That is the mechanism behind this whole book in one sentence: **a vivid fantasy tells your nervous system the job is done.**

Expectations are not fantasies

This doesn't mean optimism is bad. In the same studies, Oettingen made a crucial distinction. *Positive fantasies*, free-floating images of a perfect outcome, predicted less effort and worse results. But *positive expectations*, a judgment that success is likely based on your past experience, predicted more effort and better results.

The difference is evidence. An expectation says, "I've written 80,000 words of technical reports; I can probably write a novel draft in a year." A fantasy says, "Forty chairs, all full." One is grounded in what you have done. The other floats free of it, and it feels better precisely because nothing holds it down.

The hope addict lives almost entirely on fantasy. That's why the fix is not to stop hoping. It's to tie hope to the ground: to evidence, to obstacles, to a next action. Chapter 24 gives you the full tool for this, a four-step method Oettingen developed called WOOP. For now, the simpler move is to catch yourself in the act.

Catching the fantasy

When you notice you're in the bookshop, or the launch party, or the TED talk, ask three questions:

1. **What part of this is evidence, and what part is decoration?**
2. **What would have to be true by next month for this to be more likely?**
3. **What is the first obstacle I would hit tomorrow if I started?**

The third question is the one that matters. The fantasy can't survive contact with a specific obstacle, and that's the point. The obstacle is where the energy comes back.

Priya tried it on her next flight. Evidence: eleven pages, some of them good. Obstacle tomorrow: she would open the file, reread page one, decide it was bad, and close it. That was it. That was the whole thing that had been stopping her for six years. Seeing it written down on a napkin at 37,000 feet, it looked smaller than she expected.

Field test: The next time you catch yourself in a success fantasy, stop and write down the single most likely obstacle you'd hit if you started tomorrow. Just name it. Don't solve it yet.

CHAPTER 4

Telling Is Not Doing

Theo's LinkedIn post went up on a Monday morning.

Big news. After a lot of thought, I'm going all in on building Forgeline, a marketplace connecting independent furniture makers with interior designers. The industry is broken and I'm here to fix it. Stay tuned. He added a rocket emoji and a photo of himself in a workshop he had borrowed for the afternoon.

It got 212 likes and 46 comments. His old manager wrote, "Proud of you, man." An aunt shared it. Theo spent most of the day refreshing the post, replying to comments, and feeling like a founder.

That was in March. By June, Forgeline was a landing page with an email signup form and nine subscribers, six of them relatives. Theo had moved on to a podcast.

Your brain counts applause as progress

In 2009, Peter Gollwitzer and his colleagues published a study with a deliberately provocative title: "When Intentions Go Public: Does Social Reality Widen the Intention-Behavior Gap?" They studied people strongly committed to identity goals, like becoming a lawyer or a psychologist. When someone else took notice of a person's intention to act on that goal, the person then worked *less* hard at it than people whose intentions went unnoticed.

The explanation comes from what Gollwitzer calls self-completion theory. Identity goals, like "I am a founder" or "I am a writer," can be partly satisfied by symbols: a title, a business card, a post that strangers applaud. When people acknowledge your intention, your brain gets a premature sense of already having the identity. The goal feels partly complete. The pressure to act drops.

Theo didn't get 212 likes for building a marketplace. He got them for announcing one. But his brain logged them as progress anyway.

The identity costume

This is the social side of the hope habit. Some of its most common forms:

- The vision board, admired daily, that substitutes for a plan.
- The job title in your bio ("Founder," "Author," "Creator") for something that doesn't exist yet.
- The dinner-party pitch, refined over years, for a project with no users.
- The "I've been thinking about…" conversation, held again and again with the same friends.

Each of these lets you wear the costume of the identity without doing the work it requires. The costume is comfortable. That's the problem.

Talk about what you did

The fix is simple, and it is the one rule of Ruth's Tuesday night workshop, which we'll visit in Part II: **you may only talk about what you did, never about what you plan to do.**

That doesn't mean working in total secrecy. Secrecy has its own costs, which we'll come to in the chapter on shame. And it doesn't

mean identity is the enemy. Chapter 31 shows how to claim an identity the right way. The difference is the order of operations:

- Announcing intentions gives you the reward before the work. Reporting results gives you the reward after it.
- "I'm launching a marketplace" is a costume. "I called eleven furniture makers this week and four said they'd try it" is evidence.
- If you want accountability, tell one person what you will do, by when, and ask them to check. Then report what happened. That is a contract, not a performance.

The test is whether a sentence would still be impressive if nothing came after it. "I'm going all in" is impressive with nothing behind it, which is why it's dangerous. "I shipped version one to four users" only works if it's true.

Field test: For the next seven days, ban the future tense when you talk about your project. If someone asks what you're working on, answer only with what you did this week, even if the answer is "nothing yet." Notice how that answer feels.

CHAPTER 5

Paralysis by Analysis

The spreadsheet has 11 columns and 34 rows.

The columns are mobile frameworks Marcus could use to build QuoteKit: React Native, Flutter, native Swift and Kotlin, and eight others. The rows are criteria: performance, community size, hiring pool, offline support, learning curve, license terms, long-term viability. Each cell has a score from 1 to 5 and a comment. Some comments link to forum threads from 2021. The sheet has a tab for weighting. Another tab tests the weighting.

He built it over four months. Two frameworks are tied. He is waiting for a new benchmark to come out before deciding.

Any of the top five would have been fine. A plumber in Ohio will never know or care.

The engineer's curse

Engineers are trained to measure twice and cut once. It's good advice when cutting is expensive and irreversible. Somewhere along the way, many of us started measuring forty times and never cutting.

Analysis feels like progress because it borrows the look of work. You are reading, comparing, learning. You come away with real knowledge. What you don't come away with is risk. You can never be wrong about a decision you haven't made. That's the hidden

payoff. Research is the most respectable hiding place an intelligent person has.

Maximizers and satisficers

The psychologist Barry Schwartz describes two ways people make choices. *Maximizers* need the best option, so they keep looking and comparing until they're sure. *Satisficers* set a bar for good enough and take the first option that clears it.

You would think maximizers would end up happier, since they do more homework. In Schwartz's research they don't. They report less satisfaction with their choices, more regret, and more second-guessing. In one study of graduating students, led by Sheena Iyengar with Rachel Wells and Schwartz, maximizers landed jobs with starting salaries about 20 percent higher, yet felt worse about their jobs and the search than satisficers did. They did better and felt worse.

There's a second cost. Past a certain point, more information doesn't reduce risk. It only reduces your willingness to act, because every new article surfaces a new thing to worry about. The spreadsheet grows. The confidence shrinks.

The value of information

Engineers have a better tool than willpower here. It's called the value of information, and it asks one question: **would any plausible answer change what I do next?**

If Marcus learns Flutter benchmarks 8 percent faster than React Native, does that change his next action? No. Either one runs a quote form fine. That information has a value of roughly zero, no matter how interesting it is.

Jeff Bezos put a number on it in his 2016 letter to Amazon shareholders: most decisions should be made with about 70 percent of the information you wish you had. Wait for 90 percent and you are probably being slow. Being wrong is often cheaper than being slow, as long as you notice and correct quickly. Chapter 35 is about building that correction loop.

A decision protocol for over-thinkers

1. **Write the bar first.** Before researching, list the three to five things the option *must* do. Not nice-to-haves. Musts.
2. **Timebox the research.** Give yourself a fixed budget: two hours, one weekend, one week for big things. When it runs out, you decide with what you have.
3. **Take the first option that clears the bar.** Not the best. The first that's good enough.
4. **Ask the value-of-information question** before every additional hour of research. If no answer would change your next step, stop.
5. **Write down what would make you switch.** "If offline sync takes more than two weeks, I'll reconsider." Now the decision has an exit, so it feels less permanent.

Marcus used the protocol on a Sunday afternoon. His musts: runs on iPhone and Android, works offline, and he can build a prototype in a month. Three frameworks qualified. He picked the one he already half knew. It took 40 minutes, and the four-month spreadsheet went into the archive.

Field test: Pick one decision you've been researching for too long. Write your must-haves, give yourself one hour, and decide. Write down what would make you switch.

CHAPTER 6

The Mountain of Opportunity

Theo's browser has 63 tabs open. He counted once.

There's a course on game design, a course on furniture making, a Reddit thread about dropshipping, three tutorials on video editing, a guide to getting a pilot's license, two job postings at climate startups, the Forgeline landing page, and a long article titled "How I Made $40K in My First Year on Etsy." Each tab is a door. Each door is a life he could have.

He is 27, healthy, smart, and lives in the most opportunity-rich moment in human history. He can learn anything for free, sell to anyone on earth, and start a company with a laptop. He feels like he's drowning.

More options, more paralysis

You may have heard of the famous jam study. In 2000, Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper set up a tasting booth in a grocery store. When it offered 24 jams, more people stopped to look, but only 3 percent bought. When it offered 6, 30 percent bought. More choice, less action.

In the spirit of honesty, the jam study is less solid than its fame suggests. A 2010 meta-analysis by Benjamin Scheibehenne and colleagues, pooling dozens of experiments, found the average effect of choice overload was close to zero. Sometimes more options paralyze people, sometimes they don't. It depends on

conditions, such as how hard the options are to compare and how unsure you are about what you want.

Unfortunately, life choices hit every one of those conditions. They are hard to compare (game design vs. furniture?), they're high stakes, and most of us don't know what we want until we've tried it. For the big decisions, choice overload is real.

The cost of keeping doors open

In a clever 2004 experiment, Jiwoong Shin and Dan Ariely had people play a computer game with several doors that led to rooms worth different amounts of points. If a door wasn't clicked for a while, it started to shrink and would eventually vanish. People spent clicks, and lost points, just to keep doors from closing, even when the rooms behind them were worth less. They paid real costs to keep useless options alive.

That's Theo's 63 tabs. Every open door has a maintenance cost: attention, guilt, the background hum of "I should really..." And the hope addict keeps them all open, because closing a door means admitting that life is finite and one path has to be chosen.

Keeping your options open feels like not choosing. It isn't. **It is a choice, usually the most expensive one, and the bill is paid in years.** At 27, Theo can afford a few. At 47, he'll look back on twenty years of half-explored rooms.

Every yes is a thousand nos

Steve Jobs liked to say that focus means saying no to the hundred other good ideas. The hard part isn't saying no to bad ideas. It's saying no to good ones, the ones that really could work, so that one of them can.

Here is how to start, before the full method in chapter 28:

1. **Make a not-now list.** Write every idea, project, and "someday" in one document. Seeing them all at once is sobering and oddly calming. They're safe there. You don't have to hold them in your head.
2. **Close the tabs, literally.** Bookmark them into a single folder called NOT NOW and close them. The ideas aren't lost. They've just stopped charging rent.
3. **Choose one to test, not one to marry.** You don't have to pick your life's work today. You have to pick the next experiment. That's a much smaller door.

Theo's not-now list ran to 31 items. He looked at it for a long time and said, "That's not a plan, that's a museum."

Field test: Write your not-now list. Every idea, every someday. Then close every tab, app, or notebook related to all but one of them.

CHAPTER 7

The Comparison Machine

It took Marcus one evening to kill QuoteKit for the first time.

He did the responsible thing and searched the market. Within an hour he had found more than fifty field service apps. Several had venture funding. One had a slick video of a plumber in a spotless van, grinning at a tablet. The founder was 24 and had been on a podcast Marcus liked. The logo was better than his. He closed the laptop and didn't open the folder for two months.

Priya has her own version. A woman she went to university with published a debut novel last spring. It was reviewed in a newspaper Priya reads. Priya bought it, read twenty pages, and put it face down on the shelf, where it has stayed.

Highlight reel versus blooper reel

In 1954 the psychologist Leon Festinger proposed that people judge their own abilities largely by comparing themselves with others. That made sense in a village. You compared yourself with a few dozen people you actually knew, and you saw their whole lives, including the bad days.

Now you carry a comparison machine in your pocket, and it is rigged. It shows you everyone else's launch day, funding round, and book deal, and none of their rejections, debts, or 2 a.m. doubts. Meanwhile you see every second of your own mess. You're comparing their highlight reel to your blooper reel. Author Jon

Acuff put it well: don't compare your beginning to someone else's middle.

What fifty competitors actually means

Here is the engineer's reframe. When Marcus found fifty competitors, he read it as "too late." The data says something else.

1. **Competitors prove demand.** Nobody builds fifty apps for a problem nobody has. An empty market is far scarier than a crowded one, because it usually means there's no market.
2. **Most competitors are fragile.** Many of those fifty are one or two people running on hope, too. Some haven't been updated in years. Funding is not a moat; it's a clock.
3. **You don't need to beat the market. You need a corner of it.** Writer Kevin Kelly argued in a well-known 2008 essay that a creator can make a living from about 1,000 true fans. QuoteKit doesn't need to beat a funded startup. It needs a few hundred plumbers who love it.

Read the one-star reviews

The most useful thing you can do with a competitor is not envy them. It's study their complaints.

When Marcus finally went back to his list, he skipped the marketing pages and read the one-star app store reviews. A pattern appeared within twenty minutes. "Built for big companies." "Too many features, I just need a quote." "$89 a month for a one-man shop? No thanks." "Can't use it with gloves on."

That last one stopped him. His father used to quote jobs with grease on his hands. The funded startups were building for companies with offices and dispatchers. Nobody was building for

the solo plumber standing in a basement. Fifty competitors had just handed him a product spec.

Comparison rules

- **Compare forward, not sideways.** The only fair comparison is you versus you, six months ago.
- **Study, don't scroll.** Look at competitors to learn something specific, with a timer, then stop.
- **Mute the triggers.** If a particular feed reliably makes you close your laptop, mute it. You can unmute when you've shipped.

Priya took the novel off the shelf a month later and read it to the end. It was good, not great. On page 112 there was a clumsy paragraph. She found it enormously encouraging.

Field test: Find your three biggest competitors or role models. Read twenty one-star reviews or critical comments about them. Write down the three complaints that come up most. That's your opening.

CHAPTER 8

The Arrival Fallacy

The email came on a Thursday: Priya had been promoted to Director of Propulsion Systems. She had wanted this for eleven years. Her team took her out for dinner. Her husband bought champagne. Her father, who rarely said anything nice, called and said, "Good. Now don't get comfortable."

Two weeks later she was sitting in her new, slightly larger office on a Tuesday afternoon, reading a budget spreadsheet, and she felt exactly as she had before. Not sad. Just normal. The summit had turned out to be a place, and you can't live on a view.

That night, without quite knowing why, she opened the eleven-page novel file for the first time in a year. She read it and closed it again.

The fallacy

The psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar coined the term "arrival fallacy" for the belief that reaching a goal will make us lastingly happy. He learned it the hard way as a young squash player. He believed winning the Israeli national championship would make him happy for good. He won. The happiness lasted a few hours.

The general mechanism is called hedonic adaptation. We get used to good things, and fast. New jobs, new houses, raises, launches: the boost is real, but it fades, often within months, and we drift back toward our baseline.

A quick honesty check. You may have heard that lottery winners end up no happier than anyone else. That claim comes from a small 1978 study of 22 winners and has been overstated for decades. Larger, more recent research on Swedish lottery players found that big wins do raise life satisfaction, and the effect lasts. Money and achievements matter. They just matter less, and fade faster, than the dream promised. The summit is nice. It is not salvation.

Why this keeps you at base camp

The hope addict senses the arrival fallacy without naming it. Somewhere inside, you suspect that finishing the app, the book, or the business won't feel the way the dream feels. So you keep the dream unfinished, where the promise stays intact. As long as you haven't arrived, arrival can still be perfect.

And for achievers like Priya, there's a second trap. Each summit is immediately replaced with a higher one. Director becomes VP. VP becomes the board. The finish line moves every time you approach it, so you never feel done and never feel free to do the thing you actually care about.

Flip it around

Here is the good news hidden in the fallacy. If arriving doesn't make you happy, then the arrival was never the point. The climb is. And the climb is the one part you can have right now, today, without waiting for anything.

Practically, that means changing what you measure:

- **Measure inputs, not just outcomes.** "Wrote 300 words" is under your control every day. "Got published" is not. Track the first, and the second takes care of itself more often than not.
- **Name the good parts of the process.** What will you enjoy about the work itself? The puzzle of the code, the quiet of the

early morning, the sentence that finally lands. Write them down. They're the real payoff.

- **Celebrate milestones briefly, then ask what you're learning.** Not "What's the next summit?" but "What's interesting now?"

Priya made a small change. Instead of a goal of "finish the novel," she wrote on a sticky note: *Spend Saturday mornings with my grandmother.* That's what the writing was, really. A way of spending time with someone she missed. That was something she could have every week, starting now.

Field test: Think of the last big goal you reached. Write down how long the good feeling lasted. Then write down three things you'd enjoy about the *process* of your current dream, regardless of how it turns out.

CHAPTER 9

The Two Kinds of Regret

Lena had been visiting Ruth twice a week for a month before she saw the drawing.

Ruth was 81, recovering from a fall that had cracked her wrist, and impatient about it. Lena was her home care nurse, there to check her medication and her blood pressure and make sure she wasn't climbing ladders. One afternoon, looking for a clean towel, Lena opened the wrong drawer and found a sheet of yellowed drafting paper: a precise, beautiful technical drawing of some kind of clamp, dimensioned in a careful hand and dated March 1974.

"That's a quick-change lathe chuck," Ruth said from the doorway. "I designed it at the plant. Would've saved every machinist on the floor twenty minutes a setup."

"What happened to it?"

"Nothing. That's what happened." Ruth took the drawing and looked at it for a while. "My foreman said patents were for engineers, not for girls on the floor. I believed him. Five years later a German company brought out something almost the same. I saw it in a catalog." She put it back in the drawer, gently. "I've made plenty of mistakes in my life. I've forgotten most of them. That drawing, I think about every week."

Action fades, inaction stays

Ruth's experience matches one of the most consistent findings in the psychology of regret. In 1995, Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Medvec reviewed the research and described a pattern over time. In the short term, people regret their actions more: the thing they said, the bad investment, the job they took. But over the long run, the balance flips. Looking back across a life, people regret what they *didn't* do far more: the business not started, the person not called, the risk not taken.

The researchers suggested reasons. When an action goes wrong, we deal with it. We learn, explain, repair, and eventually tell it as a story with an ending. Inactions have no ending. The untried path stays perfect in imagination, because it never had to meet reality. Its potential grows with time, while the cost of trying, which once seemed so large, shrinks in memory. Daniel Kahneman pushed back that many inaction regrets are wistful rather than painful. Later work with Gilovich found both were partly right: action regrets sting hot, while inaction regrets mix wistfulness with something closer to despair.

Bronnie Ware, a palliative care nurse, wrote about the regrets her dying patients shared with her. The one she heard most often was this: *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.*

Nobody, in her account, wished they had spent more time making sure everything was perfect first.

The process that never terminates

In software, a process that never terminates is a bug. It sits in the background, holding memory, using cycles, slowing everything else down. You may not notice it for years. Then one day the system

crawls and you finally find it, still running, still waiting for input that will never arrive.

That is what an untried dream becomes. Marcus's QuoteKit, Priya's novel, Ruth's chuck. A failed attempt eventually exits, with an error code and a lesson. An untried dream just keeps running.

Ruth didn't let hers run forever, in the end. In 2009, the year after her husband died, she cleared out the garage, set up her old lathe, and put a hand-painted sign on the door: TUESDAY SHOP NIGHT. 7 PM. BRING SOMETHING YOU DID. She told Lena it was "so nobody else keeps a drawing in a drawer."

Lena didn't say anything. She had a drawer too. It was full of sketches of buildings.

The regret audit

You can use the asymmetry of regret as a decision tool. It's the simplest form of the regret minimization framework in chapter 26.

1. **List your inactions.** Write down three things you didn't do that you still think about. Notice how alive they still are.
2. **Forecast the current one.** For the dream you're sitting on now, imagine two futures ten years from now: one where you tried and it failed, one where you never tried. Which one still hurts in twenty years?
3. **Find the smallest step that ends the process.** Not a full commitment. Just enough action to give the dream an exit code, success or failure.

That's the end of Part I, the diagnosis. You know now why the hope habit feels so good and what it costs. Part II asks a harder question: why do some of us get hooked so much more deeply than others?

Field test: Do the regret audit. Then do one thing, today, that moves your current dream from “never tried” toward “tried”: send the email, write the page, ask the question.

PART II

Where Did You Begin

CHAPTER 10

Where Did You Begin

Shop Night smelled of cutting oil and coffee.

Ruth's garage held a lathe older than anyone in the room, a pegboard of tools outlined in marker so you'd know where to put them back, and six mismatched chairs. On the wall hung a whiteboard with a single line at the top in Ruth's capitals: WHAT DID YOU DO THIS WEEK?

Marcus came because Ruth lived three doors down and had seen him carry a 3D printer box into his house a year earlier. She asked him what he'd printed. He admitted it was still in the box. "Tuesday," she said. "Seven. Bring the box." Theo came because Marcus didn't want to go alone. Priya came because Ruth had trained her on the shop floor as a 22-year-old intern, and when Priya called to tell her old mentor about the promotion, Ruth said, "Congratulations. When are you going to do something you actually want?" Lena came because Ruth asked her to stay after her shift, and she couldn't think of a polite way to say no.

Ruth went around the circle. When Marcus said he'd been "researching some frameworks," she said, "That's not something you did. That's something you're doing so you don't have to do anything." Then she asked the question she always asks newcomers, the one that gives this part of the book its name.

"Where did you begin? Who taught you what happens when you fail?"

Same advice, different ears

Two people can hear "just go for it" and hear different things. One hears permission. The other hears an accusation: *What's wrong with you that you haven't already*? A third hears nothing at all, because they stopped wanting things years ago. Advice lands on a foundation, and foundations get poured in childhood.

This isn't about blaming parents. Most were doing their best with what they had, and many of them were working from their own childhood blueprints. It's about understanding your defaults, so you can stop fighting yourself without knowing why.

What Freud got wrong, and what survived

Any talk about childhood shaping the adult runs into Sigmund Freud, so let's deal with him honestly.

Most of Freud's specific theories haven't held up. There's no good evidence for oral, anal, and phallic stages of development, or for the Oedipus complex as he described it. Psychoanalysis as he practiced it was built on case stories, not testable predictions.

But as psychologist Drew Westen has argued, a few of Freud's broad ideas survived in modified, testable forms. Much of mental life does happen outside awareness. People do feel conflicting motives at once. And childhood experience does shape adult personality. Modern research expresses that last idea mainly through attachment theory, which grew from the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. It studies how a child's early relationship with caregivers creates a template for safety, trust, and risk.

Here's the key finding for this book. A 2002 meta-analysis by R. Chris Fraley found that attachment security is moderately stable from infancy into adulthood. Moderately, not completely. People's

patterns shift with relationships, life events, and deliberate work. Researchers even have a term for adults who grew up insecure and became secure: *earned security*. Your starting point shaped you. It doesn't sentence you.

Legacy code

Here's how I think about it as an engineer. Your early programming is legacy code. It was written by people under pressure, with the tools they had, for an environment that no longer exists. Some of it is brilliant. Some of it is held together with tape. Much of it has no comments, so you don't know why it does what it does. You didn't write it, but you maintain it now.

You don't fix legacy code by deleting everything and starting over. You read it, figure out what each module was for, and refactor carefully, one function at a time.

The pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott offered a useful comfort. Children, he said, don't need perfect parents. They need "good enough" ones. The same holds for you. You don't need a perfect childhood to climb. You just need to know what you're carrying.

Four base camps

The next four chapters describe four common starting points. Few people fit only one, and some readers grew up on solid ground and picked up the hope habit from school, work, or culture instead. Read them all. You'll probably recognize yourself in one or two, and the people you love in the others.

1. **The Loving Parent Who Feared the Fall** (chapter 11): warmth, plus fear of failure and of looking bad.
2. **The Parent Who Made the World Feel Dangerous** (chapter 12): chaos, neglect, or fear.

3. **The Drill Sergeant** (chapter 13): high standards, little warmth.
4. **The Parent Who Said You Could Be Anything** (chapter 14): lots of praise, little friction.

Chapter 15 covers what they share: shame. Chapter 16 answers the question everyone eventually asks: do I need a kick or a hug?

Field test: Answer Ruth's question in writing, in five sentences or fewer: *Where did you begin? Who taught you what happens when you fail, and what did they teach you?*

CHAPTER 11

The Loving Parent Who Feared the Fall

When Marcus was nine, he was supposed to play in a piano recital. Two days before, he stumbled through his piece at home and got upset. His mother sat on the bench next to him, stroked his hair, and said, “You don’t have to do it, sweetheart. We’ll tell Mrs. Novak you’re sick. No one needs to see you like this.”

He felt enormous relief. He never played in a recital.

His mother was, and is, a wonderful person. She drove him to every practice, made his favorite soup when he was sad, and told everyone she knew about his engineering degree. She also asked “Are you sure?” about every risk he ever mentioned. When he told her at 26 that he was leaving his job to start a company, she was quiet for a long time and then said, “Your father worked so hard so you wouldn’t have to struggle. What will people think if it doesn’t work?”

At Shop Night, when Ruth asked who taught him what happens when you fail, Marcus said, “My mom. She taught me that if you fail, you’ve hurt her.”

Love wearing a helmet

This base camp is hard to see because it looks like good parenting. Warm, present, protective. The fear underneath it is usually love: fear of the child getting hurt, being rejected, being judged. Sometimes it's also the parent's own fear of what failure would say about *them*. It's love wearing a helmet.

The child learns two lessons, neither one spoken. First, failure is dangerous, so avoid it. Second, and more quietly, the warmth in the house rises and falls with how things go. Success makes Mom glow. Struggle makes her anxious. The child becomes an expert at keeping her calm.

What the research says

Psychologists Avi Assor, Guy Roth, and Edward Deci studied what they call *parental conditional regard*: affection and approval that depend on the child meeting expectations. In their 2004 research with college students, those who felt their parents' regard was conditional reported more anxiety before performing, more shame and guilt after failing, only brief satisfaction after succeeding, and self-esteem that swung with results. A 2022 meta-analysis pooling dozens of samples linked conditional regard to self-worth that depends on performance and to more depressive symptoms.

Note the pattern: anxiety before, shame after failure, a short high after success. That is the hope addict's emotional profile almost exactly. If doing the thing risks love, dreaming about it is the only safe way to enjoy it.

The pattern seems to be spreading. In a 2019 meta-analysis of more than 40,000 college students in the US, Canada, and the UK, Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill found that perfectionism rose between 1989 and 2016. The biggest increase, about a third, was in

socially prescribed perfectionism: the feeling that other people expect you to be perfect.

How it shows up in adults

- Polishing forever. The work is never ready to be seen, because being seen is when judgment happens.
- Researching instead of starting. (Hello, Marcus's spreadsheet.)
- Hiding projects from people you love, especially parents.
- Hearing "Are you sure?" in your own voice every time you consider a risk.
- Feeling relief, not just disappointment, when a plan falls through.

Rewriting the module

The work for this base camp is separating your worth from your output. You are not your release notes. A failed launch is an event, not a verdict on whether you're lovable.

1. **Hear the voice, name the owner.** When "Are you sure?" shows up, say, "That's Mom's fear, not my data." Naming it creates distance.
2. **Practice small, deliberate failures.** Ask for something you expect to be refused. Post something unpolished. Play the recital, even badly. Each one proves that failure is survivable and that you're still you afterward.
3. **Keep the warmth, drop the condition.** You were loved. Keep that. What you can drop is the rule that love has to be earned with results. Treat yourself the way you'd treat a nine-year-old who stumbled at the piano: warmly, *and* still encouraging him to play.

4. **Tell them after, not before.** If a parent's worry still knocks you off course, share projects once they exist. You're not hiding. You're just protecting the fragile early stage.

Marcus did one thing that week. He emailed his old piano teacher's music school to ask whether adults could play in the student recitals. They could. He didn't sign up yet. But he asked, and he noticed the sky didn't fall.

Field test: Do one small thing this week that you expect to fail or be refused, on purpose. Then write down what actually happened, and how long the sting lasted.

CHAPTER 12

The Parent Who Made the World Feel Dangerous

When it was Lena's turn, she said, "Nobody taught me. I just figured out early that trying doesn't do anything."

Ruth waited. Lena, who doesn't usually talk about this, kept going.

Her father drank. Not every day, but you never knew which day it would be, and the house changed temperature when his truck pulled in. Her mother worked nights at a distribution center and slept through the afternoons. By ten, Lena was making dinner for her little brother and checking that the doors were locked. When she was eleven, she won a school prize for a drawing of the city skyline. She brought it home, and it ended up under a beer can on the kitchen table, a ring soaked into the corner. Nobody said anything about it, good or bad.

"So I stopped wanting things," she said. "If you don't want anything, nobody can take it away."

She's a good nurse, calm in emergencies, reliable to a fault. She has a drawer full of building sketches that nobody has ever seen. When people ask what she wants to do with her life, she says, "This is fine."

Allergic to hope

Most of this book is about people who are hooked on hope. This chapter is about people who are allergic to it.

Children who grow up with chaos, neglect, addiction, or fear learn two lessons that make perfect sense at the time. The first is that the world is dangerous, so stay alert and expect the worst. The second is that hoping hurts, so don't care too much about anything. Numbness becomes armor. It protected you then. The problem is that armor built for a war zone is heavy to wear at the office, in relationships, and in front of your own dreams.

If this is you, "just go for it" can sound like a cruel joke. Go for what? Wanting things is exactly what you learned to stop doing.

What the research says

The landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences study, published in 1998 by Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and colleagues, surveyed more than 9,000 adults about hard experiences in childhood: abuse, neglect, a parent with addiction or mental illness, violence in the home. The more of these experiences people had, the higher their risk of a long list of adult health problems, from heart disease to depression. Childhood adversity is not just a sad story. It leaves measurable marks on the body and mind.

But there is a hopeful twist, and it comes from the scientists who invented the term "learned helplessness." In the 1960s, Martin Seligman and Steven Maier found that animals exposed to stress they couldn't control eventually stopped trying to escape, even when escape became possible. The theory was that they had *learned* to be helpless.

Fifty years later, in 2016, Maier and Seligman revisited the theory with modern neuroscience and concluded it had been backward.

Passivity, they wrote, is the brain's default response to prolonged bad events. What has to be learned is the opposite: the sense that you have control. In animal studies, they traced a brain circuit involved in detecting control and dampening the stress response, and they gave it a name you'll appreciate, given the title of this book: a "hope circuit."

This is animal research, and the details in humans are still being worked out. But the principle is encouraging. If you never learned control as a child, it's not because something is broken in you. It's because nobody gave you the chance to learn it. You can learn it now.

Learning control, one small win at a time

The path for this base camp is different. Safety comes before stretch.

1. **Start smaller than seems reasonable.** Not "apply to architecture school." Try "draw one building for ten minutes." The goal isn't the drawing. It's the experience of choosing something and making it happen.
2. **Keep a control log.** Every evening, write one thing you chose and did that day, however small. You're collecting evidence that your actions work. That evidence is what your hope circuit runs on.
3. **Let yourself want one small thing out loud.** To one safe person. Wanting will feel dangerous at first. That's the armor talking, not the truth.
4. **Get a climbing partner who's trained for this.** If this chapter describes you, an evidence-based trauma therapy, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy or EMDR, can do things a book can't. That's not weakness. It's like hiring a guide for a mountain that tried to kill you once.

Ruth didn't say much that night. At the end, she handed Lena a cheap sketchbook from the shelf and said, "One building a week. Bring it Tuesday. I don't care if it's good."

Lena took it. Later she said that was the first time in years anyone had asked her to want something, and expected her to show up with it.

Field test: Start a control log tonight. Write one thing you chose and did today. Do it for seven days in a row.

CHAPTER 13

The Drill Sergeant

Priya's father checked her homework every night with a red pen.

He was a civil engineer who had come to England from Nairobi with two suitcases and a degree nobody there recognized, and he rebuilt his career from the bottom. He loved his daughter fiercely. He expressed it through standards. When she brought home 96 percent on a maths test, he looked at it, nodded, and asked, "Where are the other four?" He meant it as a joke. Mostly.

She became exactly what he hoped: top of her class, a first-class engineering degree, the youngest director in her company's history. She can't take a Saturday off without guilt. She can't celebrate anything for more than an evening. And she won't try anything she can't be good at quickly, which is why a novel, a thing you are guaranteed to be bad at for a long time, has stayed at eleven pages for six years.

At Shop Night, she said, "My father taught me failure is a moral issue. If you got it wrong, you didn't try hard enough."

Ruth said, "Did it work?"

"Yes," Priya said. Then, after a pause: "No. It worked for everything except the one thing I care about."

High demands, low warmth

In the 1960s, developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind described parenting styles along two dimensions: how demanding parents are and how warm and responsive they are. Parents who are demanding but not very warm she called *authoritarian*. Rules are rules. Approval is rare. Love is real but often delivered as correction.

Research over the decades has generally linked the warm-and-demanding style, which Baumrind called *authoritative*, with better outcomes than the cold-and-demanding one. Children of drill sergeants often achieve a great deal. But they tend to carry the sergeant inside: a voice that never sleeps, never celebrates, and treats every mistake as a character flaw.

That voice has a cost. Research on perfectionism separates *perfectionistic strivings*, high personal standards, from *perfectionistic concerns*, the fear of mistakes and of others' judgment. A 2016 meta-analysis by Andrew Hill and Thomas Curran found that perfectionistic concerns are strongly linked to burnout. The standards aren't the problem. The fear is.

How it shows up in adults

- Achievement without joy. Each summit is immediately replaced by the next one.
- Rest feels like failure. Days off are spent catching up.
- Avoiding anything new where you'd be a beginner in public.
- A quieter hope addiction: dreaming of the day you'll finally feel good enough, and postponing that day forever.
- Harshness toward others' mistakes, which is often just the sergeant looking outward.

Keep the standards, fire the sergeant

You don't have to become someone who doesn't care. Your standards are an asset. The work is separating the standard from the sentence.

1. **Separate standards from judgments.** "This chapter needs a better opening" is a standard. "I'm a lazy fraud" is a sentence. Keep the first. Strike the second, out loud if you have to.
2. **Schedule a beginner project.** Choose something where you are allowed to be bad, on purpose, for a defined time. Priya's assignment from Ruth: write one deliberately terrible page of the novel. "Make it awful. That's the job."
3. **Treat rest as training.** Athletes don't apologize for recovery days. They plan them, because muscles grow during rest, not during the workout. Put rest on the calendar like a deliverable.
4. **Keep a done list.** At the end of each week, write down what you finished, before planning what's next. The sergeant never looks backward. You need to.

Priya's terrible page was, in her own words, "truly dreadful, like a hostage note written by a thesaurus." She laughed while writing it, which hadn't happened with the novel in years. On the back of the page, almost by accident, she wrote two good sentences about her grandmother's hands.

Field test: Write down the sentence your inner critic says most often. Next to it, write the standard hidden inside it, in neutral words. Keep the standard. Cross out the sentence.

CHAPTER 14

The Parent Who Said You Could Be Anything

Theo was tested for the gifted program at seven and got in. His parents were thrilled and told him so, often. "You're so smart." "You could be anything you want." "You're going to do something amazing."

He started violin and was the best in his group for a year. When the pieces got hard, he wanted to quit, and his parents, not wanting to crush his spirit, let him. Then chess, then soccer, then coding camp, then guitar. Each followed the same arc: fast early progress, praise, a wall, a new interest. Nobody made him climb a wall. They loved him too much to watch him struggle.

At Shop Night he answered Ruth's question with a grin. "Nobody taught me about failure. I just never stayed long enough to fail."

Ruth didn't smile back. "So you've never found out what you're actually capable of."

The grin went away.

Warmth without friction

Baumrind's framework has a third style: parents who are very warm but not very demanding. She called it *permissive*. Lots of love, few rules, and a strong wish for the child to be happy right now. It's a generous instinct. The cost is that children don't get

much practice with frustration, the thing that every skill and every project is mostly made of.

Add a culture of praise for being talented rather than for working hard, and you get a particular kind of adult. In a famous set of 1998 studies, Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck found that children praised for being smart were more likely to avoid challenging tasks afterward, and to struggle more after failure, than children praised for effort. In fairness, later attempts to replicate those studies have had mixed results, and researchers still debate how strong the effect is. But the pattern is easy to recognize in real life. If your identity is "the smart one," every hard problem is a threat, because struggling might prove you're not.

The purest hope addiction

This base camp produces the purest form of hope addiction, because the identity itself is built on potential. You were told you *could* be anything. And potential has one remarkable property: it stays perfect as long as you never test it.

- Friction feels like evidence you're not special after all, so you leave at the first wall.
- Choosing one path feels like losing all the others (back to chapter 6, Theo's 63 tabs).
- Beginnings feel amazing. Middles feel unbearable.
- You're secretly afraid of finding out that you're ordinary.

Here's the twist: you probably are ordinary, in the way almost everyone is. That's good news. Ordinary people who stay through the hard middle build extraordinary things all the time. Special people who leave at the wall build nothing.

Trade "could" for "getting better"

The work for this base camp is learning to stay. Not forever, just long enough to get past the first wall.

1. **Expect the plateau.** In his book *Mastery*, George Leonard described how real skill grows in short bursts separated by long plateaus where nothing seems to change. Plateaus aren't a sign you've chosen wrong. They are what learning looks like. Mark them on the calendar in advance.
2. **Commit to a time box, not a destiny.** "I'll make this for 90 days, no matter how it feels in week three." Ninety days is long enough to get past a first wall and short enough not to feel like a life sentence.
3. **Praise yourself for reps, not talent.** Track hours, attempts, finished pieces. Never "I'm good at this." Always "I did this."
4. **Seek honest friction.** Find someone who'll tell you the truth about your work, not a fan. Kindness is helpful. Flattery is not.

Ruth gave Theo a different assignment from everyone else. "Pick one thing. Finish something small with it. And until you finish it, you don't get to start anything new. I'll be checking."

Field test: Look at your not-now list from chapter 6. For each item, write down where you quit, if you started. Look for the wall that keeps showing up. Then pick one project and commit to it for 90 days, in writing.

CHAPTER 15

Shame, the Silent Partner

Three Tuesdays in, Marcus told the group something he had never told anyone outside his family.

At 26 he did leave his job to start a company, the one his mother had worried about. It was a scheduling tool for dental offices. He spent fourteen months and $41,000 of savings on it. He built a lot of features and talked to very few dentists. It never got a paying customer. He shut it down, moved back into his mother's spare room for three months, and got another engineering job. On his LinkedIn profile, those fourteen months are listed as "Independent Consultant."

"I've never said it out loud," he said. "That's why QuoteKit is still a spec. If I build it and it fails, that's twice. Then it's not bad luck. Then it's me."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Lena said, quietly, "I tell people my dad was 'in construction.' He was. When he could stand up."

Ruth just nodded at the whiteboard. Under WHAT DID YOU DO THIS WEEK she wrote: *Told the truth. Two people.*

"I did something bad" versus "I am bad"

Under every base camp in this section sits the same passenger: shame.

Researcher Brené Brown, who has spent two decades studying it, describes shame as the intensely painful feeling of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. The key word is *are*. Guilt says, "I did something bad." Shame says, "I am bad." Guilt is about behavior. Shame is about identity.

The difference matters for what happens next. In research by June Tangney and her colleagues, guilt tends to push people toward repair: apologizing, fixing, doing better. Shame tends to push people toward hiding, denial, or blaming someone else. Guilt lets you learn from a mistake. Shame makes you bury it.

How shame powers the hope habit

Brown found that shame needs three conditions to grow: secrecy, silence, and judgment. And she describes empathy as its antidote. Shame can't survive being spoken to someone who responds with "me too."

Now look at the hope habit through that lens:

- An unfinished project is a hiding place. Nobody can judge what nobody has seen.
- An idea that is never shipped can never fail, so it can never prove that you are a failure.
- A spec that grows forever is a way to stay busy without ever being exposed.

For Marcus, every month QuoteKit stayed in the folder was a month it couldn't confirm the story he was afraid of: that the first failure wasn't bad luck, it was him. The dream wasn't only pleasure. It was protection.

The arena

Brown took the title of her book *Daring Greatly* from a 1910 speech by Theodore Roosevelt:

"*It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles… The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood… who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.*"

The hope addict isn't the critic. But they aren't in the arena either. They're in the stands, imagining what it would feel like to be down there. Shame is the usher who keeps telling them the seat is safer.

Bringing it into the light

The fix is not to toughen up. Toughness is just armor over shame. The fix is exposure, done safely.

1. **Know your tells.** Shame shows up in the body first: hot face, a sinking stomach, the urge to disappear or to change the subject. Learn your signals so you can catch it early.
2. **Rewrite the sentence.** Change "I am a failure" into "I tried something that failed." Change "I'm a fraud" into "I don't know this yet." It's not spin. It's accuracy.
3. **Tell one safe person.** Not everyone. Not the internet. One person who has earned the right to hear it and who is likely to respond with empathy rather than advice.
4. **Separate the event from the story.** Marcus's event: a startup with no customers. His story: "It's me." The event is true. The story is a guess, and there's a better one available: "I built before I listened. I won't do that again."

That last sentence became the design principle for QuoteKit. The first failure, dragged into the light, turned out to be the most useful data Marcus had.

Field test: Write down one failure you've never fully told anyone about. Rewrite it from "I am" to "I did." Then tell one safe person, in person or by phone, within the next week.

CHAPTER 16

Kick or Hug? Rewriting the Inner Voice

After a few months of Shop Night, Lena noticed something odd about Ruth. She was a different coach for each person.

With Theo she was blunt to the point of rudeness. “You said you’d finish the level by Tuesday. It’s Tuesday. Where is it?” With Priya she was almost the opposite. “You worked till nine every night this week. Did you rest at all? No? Then that’s your homework.” With Marcus she asked questions, patiently, until he said the thing he was avoiding. With Lena she mostly sat beside her, looked at the week’s sketch, and said one specific thing she liked about it.

“How do you know who needs what?” Lena asked one night while they were sweeping up.

Ruth shrugged. “Same standard for everybody. You finish what you start, and you bring it Tuesday. The only thing that changes is how hard I push and how much I hold. Some people need a push to get moving. Some need to feel safe before they can move at all.”

What the research says about pushing

Most of us believe self-criticism is the motor. If I’m not hard on myself, I’ll get lazy. The research says it works more like a brake.

In a 2012 study, Juliana Breines and Serena Chen gave students a difficult vocabulary test that most of them did poorly on. Then

some students were encouraged to be kind and understanding toward themselves about it. Others got a self-esteem boost ("You must be intelligent if you got into this university"). Given the chance to study for a second test, the self-compassion group studied longer. Being kind to themselves didn't make them lazy. It made failure safe enough to face.

But kindness alone isn't the full answer. In a 2014 study, David Yeager and colleagues looked at the critical feedback teachers wrote on students' essays. Some essays came back with a short note that said, in effect: *I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations, and I know you can reach them*. Students who got that note were far more likely to revise their essays. In one group, revision rates jumped from a small minority to most of the class.

Put the two findings together and you get a formula:

warmth + high standards + belief = movement.

It's the same mix Baumrind found in the parenting style that works best: authoritative, meaning warm *and* demanding. Not a kick. Not a hug. A hand on your shoulder, then a push up the hill.

Different camps, different doses

The standard is the same for everyone. The dose changes.

Base camp	What you probably need more of	Watch out for
The loving parent who feared the fall	Push. Permission to fail in public.	Endless preparation disguised as care
The parent who made the world feel dangerous	Safety first, then very small stretches	Being pushed too hard, too fast, which confirms that trying hurts
The drill sergeant	Warmth. Rest. Permission to be a beginner.	Turning self-compassion into another performance goal

Base camp	What you probably need more of	Watch out for
The parent who said you could be anything	Honest friction. Deadlines. Someone who checks.	Mistaking flattery for support

The self-check

Answer quickly. Don't overthink it (yes, that's the point).

1. When I imagine failing publicly, my first feeling is: (a) worry about disappointing someone, (b) numbness or "why bother," © disgust at myself, (d) a sense that it would prove I'm not special.
2. The voice in my head when I make a mistake sounds most like: (a) "Are you sure that was wise?" (b) nothing, I just shut down, © "Pathetic. Do better." (d) "This isn't really your thing anyway."
3. My usual way of not doing the thing is: (a) research and polish, (b) not letting myself want it, © staying busy with other achievements, (d) starting something new.

Mostly (a): reread chapter 11. Mostly (b): chapter 12. Mostly ©: chapter 13. Mostly (d): chapter 14. A mix is normal. Use the table above to set your dose.

Be the coach you needed

The last step is the most important. You don't need to wait for a Ruth. You can become your own.

Write a short note to yourself in the voice of the coach you needed as a child. Use the Yeager formula. Say what you expect, say why, and say that you believe it's possible. Then read it before you work.

The rest of this book is written in that voice. It will hold you, and it will push you. Mostly it will keep asking the same question Ruth asks every Tuesday: *What did you do this week?*

Field test: Take the self-check. Then write your coach's note, three sentences: what you expect of yourself, why it matters, and why you believe you can do it. Put it where you'll see it before you work.

PART III

The Hard Truths

CHAPTER 17

You Are Going to Die

On the shelf above Ruth's workbench sits a large glass jar of steel washers. Next to it is an empty coffee can.

On her 80th birthday, Ruth looked up a life expectancy table, did the arithmetic, and counted out one washer for every Tuesday she could reasonably expect to have left. It came to about 430. Every Shop Night, before anyone else arrives, she takes one washer out of the jar and drops it in the can.

"The sound is the point," she told Theo, the first time he asked. *Clink*. "Every week I hear it. Every week I remember I don't get this one back."

Theo thought it was morbid. Marcus went home and did the math for himself. At 38, if he lived to 80, he had about 2,200 weeks left. If he saw his mother once a month, about 400 more visits, probably fewer. If he took one real vacation a year, maybe 40.

He sat at the kitchen table for a long time with that number. Then he opened the QuoteKit folder and, for the first time, wrote a date at the top of the spec.

The arithmetic

An 80-year life is about 4,000 weeks, a figure Oliver Burkeman built a whole book around. Written down, it looks like a lot. Then you subtract the weeks already gone, the third you'll spend asleep,

the hours of commuting, chores, admin, and illness. What's left for the things you actually care about is surprisingly small.

The writer Tim Urban made this vivid in a 2015 essay called "The Tail End." He pointed out that by the time many of us finish school, we've already spent most of the in-person time we'll ever have with our parents. The remaining visits can be counted, often in the dozens. The same goes for summers, ski trips, books you'll read, and chances to start something big.

The point isn't to feel bad. It's to see the real constraint.

Death as a design constraint

Every engineer knows that constraints aren't the enemy of good design. They're what make design possible. An unlimited budget and unlimited time produce sprawl. A hard deadline forces decisions: what matters, what gets cut, what ships.

Mortality is the ultimate hard deadline. Most of us spend our lives pretending it's soft, that it might slip. That pretense is what makes "someday" feel like a date. **Someday is not a date.** It's a way of storing a dream in a place where it doesn't have to compete with anything else, until it quietly expires.

The Stoic philosophers kept the phrase *memento mori*, "remember you will die," as a daily practice. It wasn't gloomy. It was a tool for clarity. Seneca wrote that it isn't that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a great deal of it. Two thousand years later, the advice holds up better than most productivity apps.

How to use it without getting morbid

1. **Count something real.** Not your total weeks, which is too abstract. Count something you love: visits with a parent,

summers with your kids at home, Tuesdays. Make the number concrete enough to feel.

2. **Put a date on the dream.** Not a launch date, which you can't control. A start date. "I will have a working prototype in front of one real person by March 15." Write it at the top of the plan.
3. **Find your jar.** Something physical that reminds you weekly that time is passing: a jar of washers, a calendar where you cross off weeks, a single line in your journal. It should take five seconds and be impossible to ignore.
4. **Use it to choose, not to panic.** The question isn't "How do I do everything before I die?" You can't. It's "Given that I can't do everything, what is worth one of my weeks?"

Marcus wrote March 15 at the top of the spec. Then, because it felt too big, he wrote a smaller line under it: *Talk to one plumber by Friday.*

Field test: Calculate one meaningful count, such as visits, summers, or weeks left in this decade of your life. Write it down. Then put a start date, not a someday, on the dream you're carrying.

CHAPTER 18

Nobody Will Remember You

"Name your great-grandparents," Ruth said one Tuesday. "All eight."

Nobody could. Priya got two, both on her father's side, because there was a photograph. Marcus got one first name. Theo got zero and looked it up on his phone, which Ruth disallowed. Lena didn't know her own grandfather's full name.

"Eight people," Ruth said. "Each of them had a whole life. First loves, bad bosses, a thing they always wanted to try. Every one of them worried what the neighbors thought. And four generations later, their own blood can't remember their names." She took a sip of coffee. "Fifty years after I'm gone, nobody will know my name either. Best news I ever got."

"How is that good news?" Theo said.

"Because it means nobody's keeping score."

The forgetting

This isn't cynicism. It's arithmetic. Within a few generations, almost everyone is forgotten by name. Even fame fades on a longer clock. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," a traveler finds the ruins of a statue in the desert. The pedestal reads: *My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!* Around it, nothing. Just sand, stretching away.

If the king of kings ends as a broken statue, the rest of us aren't building monuments. We're building sandcastles. Good ones, ideally. But sandcastles.

Why this is freedom

At first this fact feels crushing. Sit with it for a minute and it starts to feel like setting down a heavy pack.

If nobody will remember you, nobody will remember your failures either. The embarrassing launch, the business that folded, the talk where your voice shook, the novel that got three reviews. All of it gets wiped. The permanent record you've been afraid of damaging doesn't exist.

That changes the math of trying. Much of the hope addict's fear rests on the sense that a failure would be permanent and public, a stain. In reality, it would be small and temporary, noticed briefly by a few people and then forgotten by them too. You were never building a monument. So it never needed to be perfect.

A note for the numb

If you come from the base camp in chapter 12, this chapter needs a warning label. "Nothing matters" can sound like confirmation of what the armor already told you: why bother?

That's not the lesson. The lesson is that nothing has to matter *forever* for it to matter *now*. A meal you cook tonight will be forgotten in a week, and it still feeds someone tonight. Insignificance on a cosmic scale isn't permission to stop caring. It's permission to care about small, close, human-sized things, without needing them to be grand.

Lena put it better than I can. After that Tuesday, she wrote on the inside cover of her sketchbook: *Nobody will remember this drawing.*

So I can draw whatever I want.

Legacy is local

If there's a legacy worth having, it isn't your name. It's the effect you have on the few people within reach: the plumber who gets his evenings back, the student who reads your book and calls her grandmother, the young intern a machinist trains on the shop floor. Ruth trained Priya twenty-three years ago. Priya doesn't remember most of what Ruth said. She remembers that someone believed she could do it.

That kind of legacy doesn't require greatness. It requires showing up.

Field test: Write the names of three people your project could help in the next year. Real names if possible. Not "users." People. Then ask yourself whether being forgotten in 100 years changes whether helping them is worth doing.

CHAPTER 19

The Spotlight Is Off

The post was four sentences long. It took Marcus two hours and eleven drafts.

Hi all. I'm a software engineer and the son of a plumber. I'm building a simple quoting tool for one-person plumbing businesses. Would anyone be willing to talk for 15 minutes about how you write quotes now? I'll buy you a coffee or send a $20 gift card.

He posted it in a regional Facebook group for plumbers with 8,000 members and immediately wanted to delete it. He pictured the replies. *Another tech guy who thinks he understands our trade.* He pictured someone from his old job seeing it. He pictured his failed dental startup being dug up somehow. He put his phone face down and went for a walk.

When he got back, the post had four likes and three replies. Two plumbers said sure. One asked if the app worked with gloves on. Nobody mocked him. By the next day the post had sunk below a photo of a spectacularly bad DIY pipe repair, and nobody in the group ever mentioned it again.

The shirt experiment

In a classic 2000 study, Thomas Gilovich, Victoria Medvec, and Kenneth Savitsky had college students put on a T-shirt with a large photo of Barry Manilow, chosen because students at the time found it deeply embarrassing, and walk into a room of peers.

Afterward, the wearers estimated that about half the room had noticed the shirt. In reality, about a quarter had.

The researchers called this the *spotlight effect*: we badly overestimate how much other people notice us, our mistakes, and our appearance. We're the center of our own experience, so we assume we're the center of everyone else's too. We aren't. Everyone else is the main character in their own movie, mostly worried about their own shirt.

Your nerves are less visible than you think

A related finding is the *illusion of transparency*. When we feel nervous, we assume it shows: the shaky voice, the flushed face. Gilovich and his colleagues found that people giving speeches thought they looked far more nervous than audiences actually rated them.

And here is the practical part. In a 2003 follow-up, Savitsky and Gilovich told some speakers about the illusion before they spoke: *your nervousness is less visible than you think*. Those speakers felt calmer and were rated as giving better speeches. Just knowing about the effect helped.

So, now you know.

Running the numbers on embarrassment

When you're afraid of being judged, treat it like an engineering estimate and check it against data.

1. **Estimate the audience.** How many people will actually see this? Not "everyone." A number.
2. **Estimate the attention.** Of those, how many will look closely? Usually a small fraction.

3. **Estimate the memory.** How many will remember it in a week? In a month?
4. **Estimate the consequence.** What is the realistic worst case if someone does notice and judge? Not the catastrophe in your head, the most likely bad outcome.
5. **Check afterward.** Write your estimates down before you act, then compare them to what actually happened. Over time, this recalibrates your gut.

Marcus's estimates before the post: 8,000 people would see it, hundreds would judge, someone from work would find it, and it would follow him. The actual results: a few hundred views at most, three replies, zero judgment, two interviews. He wrote both lists on an index card and stuck it to his monitor. It became his favorite piece of data.

The audience you're performing for is mostly imaginary. The two plumbers who said yes were real.

Field test: Do one visible thing you've been avoiding: post, ask, share, or show. Before you do it, write your estimates for audience, attention, memory, and consequence. Afterward, write what actually happened.

CHAPTER 20

Your Brain Runs the Simulation

Priya had two fantasies about her novel, and only one of them was pleasant.

The first was the bookshop reading. The second came at night, when she couldn't sleep. In it, the novel was published and reviewed. The review was brutal. *Clumsy. Sentimental. An engineer who should have stayed an engineer.* Her colleagues read it. Her father read it and said nothing, which was worse. She could see the exact font of the newspaper.

She had run the second simulation far more often than the first. When she finally sat down to write, her hands were cold and her chest was tight, as if the review had already happened. In a sense, for her nervous system, it had. She had rehearsed it hundreds of times.

Imagination uses the same hardware

You've probably heard that the brain can't tell the difference between imagination and reality. That's an overstatement. You know you didn't really eat the cake you imagined. But the engineer's version is more precise, and more interesting: imagining and doing run on heavily overlapping hardware.

Brain imaging studies show that picturing an action activates many of the same motor areas used to perform it, and visualizing a

scene engages parts of the visual system used to see it. The overlap is large enough to change the brain.

In a well-known 1995 study, Alvaro Pascual-Leone and colleagues taught people a five-finger piano exercise. One group practiced on a real keyboard for two hours a day for five days. Another group only imagined practicing. Brain mapping showed that both groups developed similar changes in the motor areas controlling their fingers. The imagination group's playing improved too, though less than the physical practice group's.

Sports research shows the same pattern. A 1994 meta-analysis by James Driskell, Carolyn Copper, and Aidan Moran found that mental practice reliably improves performance, though usually less than physical practice. Elite athletes use it on purpose: they rehearse the race, the routine, the free throw, step by step.

You are always training something

Here is the uncomfortable implication. Your imagination isn't a harmless screensaver. Whatever you rehearse, you're training.

- Rehearse the trophy, and you train relaxation and premature satisfaction (chapter 3).
- Rehearse the humiliation, and you train fear. Priya had practiced being destroyed by a review so many times that her body responded to a blank page as if it were a threat.
- Rehearse the work itself, the hard parts and how you'll handle them, and you train competence.

This is why dreaming feels so real and why it can replace doing. Your brain gets a convincing partial version of the experience. That partial version can either prepare you to act or satisfy you so you don't have to.

Audit your simulations

For one week, notice what your mind rehearses about your goal, and when.

1. **Log it.** Each time you catch yourself imagining your project, note which type it is: trophy, disaster, or process.
2. **Interrupt the disasters.** When you catch yourself in a disaster rehearsal, don't argue with it. Just switch the channel to a specific action. "Okay. What's the first sentence I'll write tomorrow?"
3. **Rehearse the hard moment, not the result.** Imagine the specific point where you usually stop, and imagine yourself continuing anyway. That's the rehearsal that pays off. Chapter 25 turns this into a full method.

Priya started by noticing that her disaster rehearsal always came between 11 p.m. and midnight, when she was tired. So she made a rule: no thinking about the novel after 10. Instead, every night before bed, she ran a two-minute simulation of sitting down at 5:30 the next morning, opening the file, and writing a bad first sentence without rereading yesterday's page. The rehearsal was boring. That was the point.

Field test: For the next three days, log every time you imagine your project, and mark it T (trophy), D (disaster), or P (process). Count them. Then do one two-minute process rehearsal before bed.

CHAPTER 21

Your Thoughts Are the Operating System

Two weeks after Ruth gave her the sketchbook, Lena started seeing drafting everywhere.

A flyer on the hospital noticeboard for a community college evening program in architectural drafting. A job posting for a "CAD technician, no degree required, will train." A man at the bus stop with a cardboard tube under his arm. A building on her route, one she'd walked past a thousand times, that turned out to have the most beautiful cornice she had ever seen.

None of these things were new. The flyer had been on that noticeboard for a month. The cornice was a hundred years old. What had changed was Lena. For the first time in years, she had let herself want something, and her brain had started looking for it.

The prediction machine

Modern neuroscience increasingly describes the brain as a prediction machine. Philosopher Andy Clark and others call this view *predictive processing*. Rather than passively recording the world, the brain constantly generates guesses about what it's about to see, hear, and feel, then checks those guesses against incoming signals. Much of what you experience is your brain's prediction, corrected where it's wrong.

One consequence is that what you expect and care about shapes what you notice. You've experienced this. Buy a red car and suddenly red cars are everywhere. Linguist Arnold Zwicky named it the *frequency illusion*. Nothing in the world changed. Your filter did.

Now apply that to beliefs about yourself. If you believe "people like me don't become architects," your filter screens out the flyer, the job posting, and the man with the tube. Every barrier gets noticed and logged as proof. Every door is invisible. The belief creates the evidence that supports it.

Expectations shape outcomes, modestly

You may have heard of the famous 1968 "Pygmalion" study by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, which claimed that when teachers were told certain students were about to bloom, those students' IQ scores rose. It's a great story, and its dramatic results have proved hard to replicate. But later reviews, such as a 2005 analysis by Lee Jussim and Kent Harber, concluded that teacher expectations do affect student outcomes. The effects are real but usually small.

More encouraging is research on small changes to the stories people tell about themselves. In a well-known study by Timothy Wilson and Patricia Linville, struggling first-year college students were shown evidence that grades typically improve after the first year. That single reframe, from "I'm not cut out for this" to "this is a normal rough start," led to better grades and fewer dropouts compared with students who didn't get it. Wilson calls this approach *story editing*.

The honest summary: your thoughts don't bend reality the way "law of attraction" books claim. Wishing doesn't move matter. But your thoughts steer your attention, and your attention steers your

behavior. Over months and years, that steering adds up to a different life.

Run a code review on your beliefs

Your beliefs about yourself are running code. Most of it was written in childhood (Part II) and has never been reviewed. Here's how to review it.

1. **Dump the code.** Write down every belief you hold about yourself and your goal. "I'm not creative." "I'm bad with money." "People like me don't start companies."
2. **Find the source.** For each one, ask where it came from. A parent? A teacher? One bad experience? A belief installed by a nine-year-old's interpretation of one event is not a reliable spec.
3. **Test it like a hypothesis.** What evidence supports it? What evidence contradicts it? What small experiment could you run this week to test it?
4. **Rewrite the line.** Replace the old belief with a more accurate one. Not a fantasy ("I'm a genius"), but a defensible statement ("I don't know yet whether I can do this; I've learned harder things before").

Lena's old line was *People like me don't do things like that*. Her rewrite: *I've never tried. I'm good at learning things under pressure. I'll find out*. Then she took a photo of the flyer.

Field test: Write down three beliefs about yourself that limit your goal. For each, note where it came from and one piece of evidence against it. Rewrite one of them into a more accurate line.

CHAPTER 22

Belief Changes the Body

Lena went to the community college open evening for the drafting program and nearly turned around in the parking lot.

Her heart was pounding. Her palms were wet. Her stomach had the same feeling it used to get when she heard her father's truck in the driveway. Every cell in her body said *leave*. She sat in the car with the engine running, and she texted Ruth: *I can't do this. I'm having a panic attack.*

Ruth called back immediately. "Is your heart going fast?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's your body bringing you extra fuel. You're a nurse. What does a racing heart do?"

"Pumps more blood," Lena said. "More oxygen to the brain and muscles."

"So it's getting you ready. It doesn't know the difference between a bear and a classroom. Tell it thank you and go inside."

She went inside.

Expectations reach the body

It's one thing to say thoughts steer attention. It's stranger to find they reach into physiology. But several lines of research suggest

they do.

Placebos without deception. Placebos work, and sometimes they work even when patients know they're placebos. In a 2010 trial led by Ted Kaptchuk at Harvard, people with irritable bowel syndrome were given pills openly labeled as placebos, "like sugar pills," and told that placebo effects can still help. They reported significantly more improvement than a no-treatment group. The study was small, but it has inspired a growing field of research.

The hotel housekeepers. In a 2007 study, Alia Crum and Ellen Langer told housekeepers at some hotels that their daily work cleaning rooms already met the recommended guidelines for an active lifestyle. Housekeepers at other hotels weren't told. Four weeks later, the informed group had lost weight and showed lower blood pressure and body fat, with no measured change in their activity. Critics have pointed out that small, unmeasured changes in behavior could explain part of it. Even so, the result is striking.

The milkshake. In 2011, Crum and colleagues gave people the same 380-calorie milkshake on two occasions. Once it was labeled a 620-calorie "indulgent" treat, and once a 140-calorie "sensible" shake. When people believed they were drinking the indulgent version, their levels of ghrelin, a hormone tied to hunger, dropped much more steeply.

Stress as fuel. In a 2010 study by Jeremy Jamieson and colleagues, students preparing for the GRE graduate admissions exam were told that feeling anxious during a test could actually improve performance, because arousal helps the body and brain meet a challenge. They scored higher on the math section than students who weren't told this, both in a practice test and on the real exam.

What this does and doesn't mean

None of this means you can wish yourself thin, healthy, or rich. Belief is not magic. What the research shows is that the story you tell about an experience can change how your body responds to it. Stress you interpret as a threat feels different, and probably works differently, from stress you interpret as fuel.

That matters enormously for going for it, because doing anything new produces stress. Your heart will race before the pitch, the class, the first post, the first page. If you read that signal as "danger, retreat," you will retreat. If you read it as "fuel, go," you have a fighting chance.

Choose the story on purpose

1. **Relabel the signal.** When you feel nervous, say "I'm excited" or "My body is getting ready." It sounds silly. It's one of the cheapest interventions there is.
2. **Count the effort.** Like the housekeepers, give yourself credit for the work you're already doing. Writing an hour a morning is training. Ten sales calls are reps.
3. **Notice your labels.** "This is a grind" and "this is practice" describe the same hour. One of them makes the next hour easier.

Lena sat in the back row at the open evening. Her heart pounded the whole time. She kept telling herself it was fuel. At the end, she took an application form. She didn't fill it in yet. But it was in her bag.

Field test: The next time you feel nervous before something related to your goal, say out loud, "My body is getting ready." Then do the thing anyway. Afterward, write one sentence about whether the label changed anything.

CHAPTER 23

The Universe Isn't Grading You

Theo took the great-grandparents conversation harder than anyone.

For about a week he went into what he later called "a full cosmic spiral." He read about the heat death of the universe at 3 a.m. He calculated that the sun will swallow the Earth in about five billion years. He texted Marcus: *if nothing lasts what is even the point of making a stupid video game*. Marcus, who was in the middle of his first plumber interview notes, wrote back, *ask Ruth*.

So on Tuesday, Theo asked Ruth.

She was oiling the lathe. She didn't look up. "There's no point. Not a cosmic one. Nobody up there is holding a clipboard."

"That's depressing."

"Is it? You've been living like someone's grading you. Waiting to pick the perfect thing, the one that'll matter enough. Nobody's grading. So make a game because you want to play it. Make it for one kid who's bored on a rainy Sunday. That's plenty." She wiped her hands. "Took me sixty years to figure that out. You're getting it at twenty-seven. Don't waste the head start."

Putting the hard truths together

This part of the book has handed you some heavy facts:

- You are going to die, sooner than it feels (chapter 17).

- You will be forgotten, and so will your failures (chapter 18).
- Almost nobody is watching you closely, even now (chapter 19).
- Your mind is constantly constructing your experience, through what you rehearse, believe, and expect (chapters 20 to 22).

You could read that list as bleak. I read it as the release of a parking brake I didn't know was on. There is no final exam. There is no permanent record. Nobody waits at the summit to score your route. The judges you've been performing for are mostly projections of your own fear, installed by people who are, mostly, also gone or going.

Cosmic insignificance therapy

Oliver Burkeman, in *Four Thousand Weeks*, calls this "cosmic insignificance therapy." The idea is that much of our anxiety comes from an unspoken demand that our lives be cosmically significant, that what we do must matter on a grand scale. Measured against that standard, every real project looks pathetic. A small app? A novel a few hundred people read? A drawing? Why bother?

Drop the demand, and the math flips. If nothing you do has to matter on the scale of the universe, then everything you do can matter on the scale of a human life. A tool that saves one plumber an hour a night is enough. A book that a few strangers love is enough. A game that entertains one bored kid on a rainy Sunday is enough. It was always enough. The cosmic standard just made it impossible to see.

This isn't lowering your standards. Do excellent work, by all means. It's lowering the stakes, so you can actually start.

Write the permission slip

This is the shortest tool in the book, and for some people the most powerful. Write yourself a permission slip, like the ones schools send home, for the thing you've been waiting to be allowed to do.

I give myself permission to make a small game that might not be good, for the fun of it, starting this week. Signed, Theo.

The slip should name three things: what you're allowed to do, that it's allowed to be imperfect or small, and when it starts. Sign it. Date it. It feels childish. That's part of why it works. Some part of you is still waiting for an adult to say yes.

That's the end of Part III. The hard truths have done their job if you feel lighter, not heavier. Part IV gives you the mental tools to turn that lightness into motion.

Field test: Write your permission slip: what you're allowed to do, that it's allowed to be small or imperfect, and when you'll start. Sign and date it, and keep it where you work.

PART IV

The Rewire

CHAPTER 24

Hope Is Fuel, Not Food

One Tuesday Ruth rolled a second whiteboard into the garage and wrote four letters down the side: W, O, O, P.

"Everybody does one," she said. "Out loud."

Marcus went first.

Wish: "Ten plumbers using a QuoteKit prototype by March 15."

Outcome: He started to say "a successful business," then stopped. "Plumbers getting their evenings back. Like my dad never did." The room went quiet for a second.

Obstacle: Ruth pushed him here. Not "no time," not "competition." What inside *him* would stop him? He thought for a long while. "When an interview gets awkward, or a plumber says something I don't want to hear, I'll go home and add features instead of calling the next one. Building feels safe. Listening doesn't."

Plan: "If I feel the urge to add a feature, then I'll call a plumber first."

Ruth wrote it on the board and underlined the plan twice.

Food versus fuel

You don't quit hope. You change what it's for.

Food is consumed for its own sake. You eat, you feel good, it's gone. Fuel is burned to move something. The hope addict treats hope as food. The dream is eaten, enjoyed, and digested, and nothing moves. The builder treats hope as fuel, burned to push through the obstacle and into action.

Chapter 3 showed why pure fantasy fails: it tells your nervous system the job is done. Gabriele Oettingen spent years figuring out what to do instead, and the answer is a technique called *mental contrasting*. You picture the future you want, then immediately picture the obstacle standing in the way. The contrast between the two is what generates energy. The wish pulls; the obstacle shows where to push.

She later combined mental contrasting with Peter Gollwitzer's implementation intentions, the if-then plans in chapter 34, and packaged the result as WOOP: Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan. In studies, this combination has helped people exercise more, eat better, study more, and manage their time better than comparison groups who just thought positively or made general plans.

How to WOOP

It takes about five minutes. Do it with your eyes closed for the middle steps.

1. **Wish.** Name something you want that is challenging but achievable within a set period. Make it specific. "Write the first draft of chapter 1 this month," not "become a writer."
2. **Outcome.** Imagine the best result of achieving it, and how it would feel. Let yourself enjoy this for a minute. This is the hope part, and it's allowed.
3. **Obstacle.** Now ask: what is the main thing *in me* that stands in the way? Not the economy, not your boss. Your fear, your habit,

your excuse, your 11 p.m. scrolling. Imagine it vividly, the exact moment it shows up.

4. **Plan.** Write one if-then plan for that obstacle. "If [obstacle], then I will [action]."

The inner obstacle is the step most people get wrong. External obstacles are real, but they're rarely what stops you. The thing that stops you is the moment you face the external obstacle and choose the comfortable retreat. That moment is what the plan is for.

The other WOOPs

Priya's obstacle: *When I reread yesterday's page, I'll decide it's bad and stop.* Plan: *If I open the file, then I start writing at the bottom without scrolling up.*

Theo's obstacle: *When the game gets boring to build, I'll get excited about a new idea.* Plan: *If I get a new idea, then I'll add it to the not-now list and work on the current game for thirty more minutes.*

Lena's obstacle: *When I get home from a shift, I'll tell myself I'm too tired to care.* Plan: *If I park the car after a shift, then I'll draw for ten minutes before going inside.*

Notice that none of these plans are heroic. They're small, specific responses to a predictable moment. That's what makes them work.

Field test: Do a full WOOP for your current goal, in writing. Spend real time on the obstacle: find the one inside you. Then make the if-then plan specific enough that you'll recognize the moment when it arrives.

CHAPTER 25

Simulate the Climb, Not the Summit

The night before his first plumber interview, Marcus did not imagine the interview going well.

Instead, sitting in his car in the driveway, he ran it the way Ruth had told him to: like a flight simulator, with the failures switched on. He imagined calling Dave, a plumber about an hour north, at 7:15 a.m. as agreed. He imagined Dave sounding distracted, a truck engine in the background. He imagined asking his first question, "How do you write quotes now?", and Dave saying, "Paper. Works fine." He imagined the silence that would follow, and his own urge to fill it by pitching the app.

Then he imagined not pitching. He imagined saying, "Walk me through the last quote you wrote. Where were you standing?" He imagined Dave warming up. He imagined writing down everything and saying almost nothing.

The real call went almost exactly like that, including the truck engine and "Paper. Works fine." Marcus had already been there. He didn't panic. He asked about the last quote. Dave talked for 25 minutes.

The study

In chapter 3, we saw that fantasizing about the outcome tends to backfire. Here's the experiment that shows what to do instead.

In a study published in 1999, Lien Pham and Shelley Taylor at UCLA asked first-year students to spend a few minutes a day, for about a week before a midterm exam, mentally rehearsing. One group pictured the *outcome*: seeing a high grade posted, feeling proud. Another group pictured the *process*: where they would study, when, sitting at the desk, reading the chapters, sticking to a study plan. A third group did both, and a control group just kept track of their studying.

The process group studied more, planned better, felt less anxious, and got better grades. The outcome group did worse than students who didn't do outcome simulation at all.

The lesson is simple. **Don't rehearse the trophy. Rehearse the work.** Your brain treats rehearsal as practice (chapter 20), so practice the part that's actually hard.

The process simulation protocol

Five minutes, once a day, before the work.

1. **Set the scene.** Where exactly will you be, and when? See the room, the chair, the screen.
2. **Run the first steps.** Picture yourself starting: opening the file, picking up the phone, putting on your shoes. Make it concrete and a little boring.
3. **Switch on the failure.** Picture the specific moment you usually stop or stall. The awkward silence. The bug you can't find. The page that reads badly.
4. **Rehearse the recovery.** Picture yourself responding well: taking a breath, asking the next question, writing the next sentence anyway.
5. **End on the next action, not the result.** Finish by picturing yourself doing the very next step, not winning.

The premortem

For bigger projects, there's a related tool from psychologist Gary Klein called the *premortem*. Before you start, imagine it's a year from now and the project has failed completely. Then write down every reason why it failed.

It sounds pessimistic, but it's the opposite. It uses your imagination to find problems while they're still cheap to fix. Engineers do this naturally with systems ("What happens if this component fails?") and almost never with their own plans.

Marcus's premortem for QuoteKit took twenty minutes and produced a list of nine reasons. Number one: *I built for six months without showing it to anyone. Again*. Number four: *Plumbers wouldn't type on a phone*. He turned both into rules: show a prototype every two weeks, and design for voice and big buttons first.

Field test: Before your next work session on your goal, run the five-minute process simulation, including the moment you usually stall and how you'll recover. Then, this week, write a premortem for your project: list every reason it might fail a year from now.

CHAPTER 26

The Regret Minimization Framework

In February, Priya was offered a vice president role. It meant moving to the company headquarters in another state, 60-hour weeks, and the end of her 5:30 a.m. writing sessions, which had produced 40 new pages since autumn. It was everything her father had wanted for her. She had a week to decide.

She brought it to Shop Night, and for once Ruth didn't say anything. She just tore a sheet off a legal pad, wrote for ten minutes, folded it, and handed it over. "Read it at home."

The letter said:

Priya. I'm writing from 81, which is close enough to the end to see clearly. Here's what I know. Nobody at my age is proud of their job title. I couldn't tell you the title of a single manager I had. I can tell you the exact weight of a drawing I never did anything with. You'll get more chances to be a vice president. That company will still be there. Your grandmother's story only exists in you, and you're 45. Whatever you decide, decide it as the old woman you'll be, not as the girl with the red pen marks on her homework. Ruth.

Priya read it three times. Then she declined the role.

Bezos at 80

In 1994, Jeff Bezos was about 30 and a senior vice president at the New York hedge fund D. E. Shaw. He had the idea of selling books online, and he faced the kind of decision every reader of this book recognizes: walk away from security for a risky dream, or stay.

He described later how he made the call. He imagined himself at 80, looking back on his life, and asked which choice he would regret. Would he regret trying and failing? No. He'd be proud of trying, even if it didn't work. Would he regret never trying? Yes, and it would haunt him. He called this his *regret minimization framework*. It made the decision, he said, incredibly easy.

The framework works because it uses the regret asymmetry from chapter 9. Your 80-year-old self knows what research confirms: failures fade into stories, but untried dreams stay open. Your 80-year-old self has nothing left to protect, no ego, no career, no reputation to manage. Their advice is almost always clearer than yours.

A caution

The framework isn't a rule that says always take the leap. Your 80-year-old self also regrets reckless decisions that hurt people they loved. Bezos had savings and skills; quitting wasn't going to leave his family hungry. Use the framework to see which choice you'd regret, then use the rest of this book, especially the two-way door test in chapter 27, to find a way to act on it that doesn't require betting everything.

Note, too, that Priya's decision wasn't between ambition and laziness. It was between two kinds of ambition: the kind her father had installed and the kind that was hers.

The letter from 80

1. **Set the scene.** Imagine yourself at 80. Where are you sitting? What can you see? Make it concrete.
2. **State the decision.** Write down the choice in front of you today, as plainly as possible.
3. **Write the letter.** In your 80-year-old voice, write to your current self about this decision. Don't plan it. Write fast, for ten minutes.
4. **Read it aloud.** Notice which sentences land hardest. Those are usually the true ones.
5. **Check the downside.** Ask: if I follow this advice, what's the realistic worst case? Can I make it survivable?

When Priya told her father she had turned down the promotion, he was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "What's the book about?"

She told him. He didn't say anything else. But the next week, a package arrived. Inside was a photograph of her great-grandmother she had never seen, and a note in his handwriting: *For the book. Check the dates; I may be wrong about 1952.*

Field test: Write your letter from 80 about the biggest decision you're avoiding. Ten minutes, no editing. Then write one sentence: what would make following its advice survivable?

CHAPTER 27

One-Way and Two-Way Doors

The application form had been in Lena's bag for five weeks.

Every time she took it out, the decision grew. If she applied, she'd have to quit nursing. If she quit nursing, she'd lose her income. If she lost her income and failed the program, she'd have nothing, and everyone who said people like her don't do things like that would be right. By the time she reached the bottom of the first page, she'd mentally lost her apartment.

She finally showed it to Ruth. Ruth read it for a minute and pointed at a line. "It says evening program. Two nights a week. One semester at a time."

"I know."

"So you don't quit anything. You take one class. If you hate it, you stop. If you love it, you take another one." Ruth handed the form back. "You've been treating a screen door like a bank vault."

Type 1 and Type 2

In his 2015 letter to Amazon shareholders, Jeff Bezos divided decisions into two types.

Type 1 decisions are one-way doors. They're consequential and irreversible, or nearly so. Once you walk through, you can't come back. Selling your house, having a child, signing a ten-year lease,

taking on large debt. These, Bezos wrote, should be made slowly and carefully, with deliberation and consultation.

Type 2 decisions are two-way doors. They're reversible. If you walk through and don't like what you find, you can walk back. Launching a beta, posting the video, trying a new pricing tier, taking one evening class. These should be made quickly, by individuals or small groups, without heavy process.

Bezos wrote that most decisions are Type 2. His warning was about what happens when you treat them as Type 1: slowness, unthoughtful risk aversion, failure to experiment enough, and less invention. That's a perfect description of the hope addict's life.

Why every door looks one-way

The hope addict treats almost every decision as a one-way door. There's a reason. If a decision is irreversible, it deserves endless analysis, which justifies not making it yet. Labeling a door as one-way is a sophisticated form of avoidance.

Fear also distorts the picture. When you're anxious, you imagine the worst-case chain of consequences, like Lena losing her apartment over an evening class. Each link seems plausible. The chain as a whole is absurd.

The door audit

Before you agonize over a decision, label it.

1. **Ask: can I undo this?** If you tried it for a month and hated it, could you go back to roughly where you are now? If yes, it's a two-way door. Decide this week.
2. **Estimate the cost of reversing.** Some two-way doors are heavier than others. A wasted $40 or a slightly awkward conversation is cheap. Weigh the cost honestly, then usually go.

3. **Convert one-way doors into two-way doors.** Many big decisions can be broken into reversible steps. Don't quit your job; take one class. Don't buy the van; rent one for a weekend. Don't launch the company; get three paying customers first. Engineers call this reducing the blast radius.
4. **Save your deliberation for the true one-way doors.** There are a few in every life. They deserve your best thinking. Don't spend it on screen doors.

Marcus did the audit on his QuoteKit decisions and found that every single one he had been agonizing over was a two-way door: the framework, the name, the price, the logo, which trade to start with. He made all five decisions in one evening. The only one-way door on the list was quitting his job, and he crossed it off. He didn't need to make that decision yet. Maybe not for a long time.

Lena mailed the application the next morning, before her shift. The fee was $40. It was, she said later, the cheapest door she ever walked through.

Field test: List every decision you've been putting off about your goal. Label each one as a one-way or two-way door. Make at least one two-way decision today, and convert one one-way door into a smaller reversible step.

CHAPTER 28

Pick a Mountain

Ruth's rule for Theo, one thing until it's finished, had a problem. Theo didn't know which thing.

"If I pick wrong," he said, "I'll waste a year on the wrong mountain."

"You've wasted ten years on no mountain," Ruth said. "Wrong would be an improvement."

But she agreed to a compromise, and Marcus, being an engineer, helped design it. Theo would run three experiments, two weeks each, from his not-now list. Then he would pick one and commit for 90 days. No new ideas allowed in between.

The three experiments were restoring a broken chair from the curb, making a tiny video game with a single level, and filming three videos explaining basic electronics. Each night, he wrote down three numbers: hours worked, how much he wanted to keep going when he stopped (1 to 10), and whether anyone else cared about what he made.

The chair was satisfying but slow, and his wants-to-continue score drifted down to 4. The videos got 61 views total, and he dreaded editing them. The game was the surprise. He lost track of time three nights in a row. And his eight-year-old neighbor, who played the single level on Theo's laptop, came back the next day and asked if there was a second one.

"That's your mountain," Ruth said. "The one a kid asked for more of."

Explore, then exploit

The book says go for it. But go for what? This is the question the hope addict uses to stay at base camp forever, and it deserves a real answer.

Computer scientists have studied a version of this problem for decades. It's called the *explore/exploit tradeoff*. Should you try something new (explore) or stick with the best option you've found so far (exploit)? Brian Christian and Tom Griffiths, in *Algorithms to Live By*, describe how the answer depends on how much time you have left. Early on, explore more, because anything good you find will pay off for a long time. Later on, exploit more, because there's less time to benefit from new discoveries.

The hope addict gets this backward in a particular way: they explore *in imagination* forever, never exploring in reality and never exploiting. Theo had "explored" 31 ideas without testing a single one for more than a few weeks.

A rule of thumb from optimal stopping

There's a famous math puzzle, sometimes called the secretary problem, about choosing the best option from a series when you can't go back. The optimal strategy turns out to be to look at the first 37 percent or so of the options without committing, just to calibrate, and then commit to the first one that's better than everything you've seen.

Life isn't a math puzzle, and you shouldn't calculate your career to two decimal places. But the principle generalizes well: **explore deliberately for a defined period, then commit.** The exploring has a deadline. The committing has a time box. Both are finite.

The mountain-picking protocol

1. **Shortlist three.** From your not-now list, pick three ideas you'd genuinely be glad to spend time on.
2. **Run short real experiments.** One or two weeks each. Not research. Doing. Build the tiniest version, make one, sell one, try one.
3. **Measure three things nightly.**
   - **Energy:** How much did I want to keep going when I stopped?
   - **Traction:** Did I make visible progress?
   - **Pull:** Did anyone else care, use it, or ask for more?
4. **Pick the one with pull.** Energy keeps you going. But pull, someone else wanting the thing, is the strongest signal that the mountain is real.
5. **Commit for a fixed period.** Ninety days is a good default. Write the start and end date. During that time, new ideas go on the not-now list. No exceptions.
6. **Review at the end.** After 90 days, decide: continue, adjust, or switch. Switching is allowed. Not deciding isn't.

The mountain you pick isn't your life's work. It's the next climb. You'll learn more from 90 days on one real mountain than from ten years of looking at maps.

Field test: Choose three ideas from your not-now list and design a one- or two-week real experiment for the first one. Start it this week, and track energy, traction, and pull every night.

CHAPTER 29

Good Enough Is a Spec

Ruth picked up the 22-page QuoteKit spec, weighed it in her hand like a part off the lathe, and gave it back.

"What's the tolerance?"

Marcus didn't follow.

"On the floor," she said, "every drawing has a tolerance. Plus or minus a thousandth, plus or minus a tenth. The new kids always wanted to hold everything to a tenth, because it felt like doing a good job. I'd tell them: if the part only needs a thousandth, holding a tenth wastes your whole day and the customer doesn't get a better part. They get a later one." She tapped the spec. "What does this need to be good to? Not perfect. Good to."

That night Marcus cut the spec to one page. Three features. Speak the job into your phone, and it turns into line items. Prices pulled from your own price list. Send the quote as a text message. Everything else, including the scheduling module he'd spent four months designing, moved to a file called LATER.

Tolerances

No real-world part is exactly its nominal size. A bolt hole drawn at 10 millimeters is really 10 plus or minus some tolerance, because perfection is impossible, and approaching it is expensive. Good engineering isn't about perfection. It's about knowing what precision the job actually requires, and delivering that, reliably.

Yet when it comes to our own work, many of us demand zero tolerance. The first draft has to be publishable. The prototype has to look finished. The first video has to be as good as channels that have been running for ten years. We'd never accept that kind of specification at work. We'd call it gold-plating, and we'd cut it.

The last 20 percent

The Pareto principle, a rule of thumb rather than a law, says that roughly 80 percent of the value often comes from 20 percent of the effort. In practice, the curve of polish is steep at the end. The first rough version of anything delivers most of what users need. The last stretch of polish can cost more than everything before it, and often delivers value nobody notices.

Voltaire popularized an old Italian proverb that says it plainly: the best is the enemy of the good. A perfect product that never ships has a value of exactly zero. An adequate one that ships has a value greater than zero, plus everything you learn from shipping it.

Write the spec for "good enough"

1. **Define done before you start.** Software teams call this a *definition of done*. Write down, specifically, what the first version must do to count as finished. Not what would be nice. What is required.
2. **Write it for one user and one problem.** "A solo plumber can create and send a quote in under two minutes, on a job site." That's a spec. "The best quoting platform for trades" is a wish.
3. **Make a LATER file.** Everything that isn't required for done goes in it. It's not deleted; it's queued. This makes cutting feel safe.
4. **Set tolerances for quality.** Decide in advance what level is acceptable: typos allowed in draft one, ugly design allowed in

the prototype, phone-quality video allowed for the first ten.

5. **Ship when you hit the spec.** Not when you feel ready. When the spec says done. Feeling ready is not a measurement.

Priya applied this to the novel. Her definition of done for draft one: *Every chapter exists. Some are bad. The story runs from Gujarat to Nairobi to London.* Typos, clumsy dialogue, and missing research were explicitly allowed. She put a sticky note on her monitor that said TOLERANCE: ±A LOT.

Field test: Write a one-page definition of done for the first version of your project: one user, one problem, the minimum it must do. Start a LATER file and move everything else into it.

CHAPTER 30

Action Comes Before Motivation

The acceptance letter for the evening drafting class came in March. Lena felt nothing. Not joy, not fear. Just tired.

She was working three twelve-hour shifts a week, plus an extra one to cover for a colleague. By the time she parked outside her apartment at 8 p.m., the idea of sketching anything felt absurd. Her WOOP plan said *If I park the car after a shift, then I'll draw for ten minutes before going inside*. Most nights she sat in the car, looked at the sketchbook on the passenger seat, and thought: *I'll do it when I feel like it*.

She told Ruth she'd lost motivation. Ruth asked how many nights she'd drawn that week. None. "Then you didn't lose it," Ruth said. "You never had it. Nobody does. You get it after."

So Ruth shrank the plan. "Don't draw for ten minutes. Open the sketchbook and draw one line. A straight one. Then you're allowed to go inside."

The next night, Lena drew one line. Then, because the pencil was already in her hand, she drew a window. Then the building across the street. She went inside 25 minutes later and realized, standing in her kitchen, that she felt better than she had all week.

Motivation is a result

We wait to feel ready. We wait to feel inspired. We wait for the mood to strike, as if it were weather. But for a lot of tasks,

psychology suggests the order is reversed. Feeling follows doing.

One of the clearest examples comes from the treatment of depression. *Behavioral activation* is one of the best-supported psychological treatments for depression, and its core idea is simple: don't wait to feel better before doing things. Schedule small, meaningful activities and do them regardless of mood. Mood tends to improve as a result of the activity, not before it. If this works for people in the grip of depression, it can work for a tired engineer on a Tuesday night.

Lower the activation energy

In chemistry, *activation energy* is the energy needed to start a reaction. Some reactions release plenty of energy once they get going but won't start on their own. A catalyst lowers the activation energy so the reaction can begin.

Starting is the expensive part. Once you're in motion, momentum carries a lot of the load. So the strategy is not to find more energy. It's to lower the energy needed to start.

1. **Shrink the first step until it's almost embarrassing.** Not "write a chapter," but "open the file and write one sentence." Not "go to the gym," but "put on gym shoes." James Clear calls this the two-minute rule: scale a new habit down until the start takes less than two minutes.
2. **Commit to five minutes, not five hours.** Tell yourself you can stop after five minutes. Usually you won't. Sometimes you will, and that's fine. Five minutes still counts.
3. **Prepare the reaction.** Leave the sketchbook on the seat, the laptop open to the right file, the guitar out of its case. Every bit of setup you remove lowers the activation energy.
4. **Use a starting ritual.** The same coffee, the same playlist, the same chair. Over time the ritual becomes a cue, and the cue

does some of the starting for you.

The feeling is waiting for you

The hope addict has this exactly backward. They wait for the feeling, and the feeling never comes, because the feeling is a byproduct of the action they're not taking. Meanwhile, they get a cheaper version of the feeling from dreaming, which removes any pressure to act.

Stop waiting for the feeling. The feeling is waiting for you to move.

Lena kept a new rule after that: one line, every night, before she goes inside. Some nights it stays one line. Most nights it doesn't. Over the next eight weeks she filled the sketchbook Ruth had given her and started a second one.

Field test: Pick your project's hardest-to-start task. Shrink the first step until it takes under two minutes, set up everything you need for it tonight, and do that first step tomorrow at a set time. Only the first step is required.

CHAPTER 31

Don’t Do It. Be the Person Who Does It

This is the most useful shift I know, and I learned it from my own kitchen.

For years, “clean the house” was a task on my list. It sat there like every other task, waiting for motivation. Every evening it opened a negotiation. Am I too tired? Can it wait until the weekend? Does it really matter if the counter is a mess for one more night? Most nights, the negotiation went badly for the house.

Then, almost by accident, I changed the sentence. I stopped telling myself to clean the house and started telling myself something else: *I’m a guy with a clean house*. It sounds trivial. It changed everything. A guy with a clean house doesn’t negotiate about the dishes. He just does them, the way a non-smoker doesn’t negotiate about a cigarette. There’s no debate, because the question has already been answered. It’s not a task. It’s who I am.

I’ve used the same trick on almost everything since. I don’t “try to exercise.” I’m a guy who walks every morning. I don’t “work on my side project.” I’m someone who ships something every week.

Why identity beats tasks

A task needs motivation every time. An identity doesn’t, because it makes the decision in advance. Several lines of psychology explain

why.

We learn who we are by watching what we do. Daryl Bem's self-perception theory, developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, proposed that people come to know their own attitudes partly by observing their own behavior, much as an outsider would. If you see yourself doing the dishes every night, you conclude you're a person who keeps a clean house. Each action becomes evidence for the identity.

"I don't" beats "I can't." In 2012, Vanessa Patrick and Henrik Hagtvedt studied how people refuse temptation. People who used the framing "I don't" ("I don't skip workouts") persisted with their goals better than people who said "I can't." "I can't" sounds like an external rule, something imposed and resented. "I don't" sounds like a choice and a statement of identity. It feels empowering rather than depriving.

Nouns can move behavior. In a 2013 study by Christopher Bryan, Gabrielle Adams, and Benoît Monin, people cheated less when asked, "Please don't be a cheater" than when asked, "Please don't cheat." Being a *cheater* implicates the self in a way that cheating, the act, doesn't.

An honest caveat, because you deserve one. Bryan's better-known study, which found that asking people how important it was to "be a voter" increased turnout compared with asking about "voting," did not hold up in several larger repeat trials. So a label alone isn't magic. Changing a word on a form isn't enough. **The identity needs evidence.**

How this fits with chapter 4

In chapter 4 we saw that announcing an identity, "I'm a founder!", can backfire by giving you a premature sense of having already arrived. So which is it? Does identity help or hurt?

The difference is where the identity comes from. An announced identity is a costume: you claim it with words and get applause before you've done anything. An earned identity is a record: you claim it with actions, one at a time, and the evidence piles up. James Clear puts it neatly in *Atomic Habits*: every action is a vote for the type of person you want to become. You don't need a unanimous vote. You just need to keep casting votes until the majority is clear.

Choose identities you can control

There's one more subtlety, and it connects back to chapter 14. Some identities are fragile. "I'm talented." "I'm a successful founder." "I'm a bestselling author." These depend on outcomes you don't control, so every failure threatens them, and you'll avoid risks to protect them.

Other identities are robust, because they're built on behavior: "I'm someone who writes every morning." "I'm a guy who talks to customers." "I'm someone who finishes things." No single failure can take those away, because they're defined by what you do, not by how it turns out.

The identity protocol

1. **Write the identity sentence.** "I'm someone who [behavior]." Make the behavior specific and within your control.
2. **Define the smallest proof.** What's the tiniest action that would count as a vote? Two hundred words. One customer call. One line in a sketchbook.
3. **Cast a vote today.** Not tomorrow. The first vote is the most important one.
4. **Keep the tally.** Mark each vote on a calendar or in a log. You're building the evidence your self-perception runs on.

5. **Use "I don't" for the threats.** "I don't check email before I write." "I don't add features before I talk to users."

At Shop Night, Ruth made everyone write their sentence on the whiteboard.

Marcus: *I'm a guy who ships something on Fridays.*

Priya: *I'm a writer who writes badly at 5:30 in the morning.*

Lena: *I'm someone who draws every day. Even one line.*

Theo stared at the board for a long time, then wrote: *I'm someone who finishes things.* Under it, in smaller letters: *(starting now).*

Ruth left the board up for a year.

You are not someone who is going to write a book. You are a writer who wrote 200 words this morning. Do it, and the identity grows. Grow the identity, and doing it gets easier. That's a flywheel, and it's the exact opposite of the hope loop.

Field test: Write your identity sentence and your smallest proof. Cast your first vote today, and start the tally. For one week, replace every "I can't" about your goal with "I don't" or "I do."

PART V

The Build

CHAPTER 32

Ship the Prototype

The first version of QuoteKit wasn't an app.

It was a phone number. A plumber could call it from a job site and describe the work out loud: "Replace 40-gallon water heater, gas, new expansion tank, haul away the old one, about four hours." The call was recorded and transcribed automatically. Then Marcus himself, at his kitchen table, turned the transcript into a quote using the plumber's own price list in a spreadsheet, and texted it back as a clean PDF within an hour.

No app. No framework. No login. Behind the curtain, it was one engineer with a spreadsheet and a template. He built the whole thing over one weekend, mostly out of tools he already used.

He sent it to Dave and two other plumbers from the Facebook group on a Friday, keeping his identity promise from chapter 31. On Monday, Dave called it from a basement in a town an hour north. The quote went out at 10:40 a.m. The homeowner accepted it before lunch.

Dave texted: *That's the first quote I didn't do at my kitchen table in 22 years.*

Marcus read it in a meeting at work and had to step out into the hallway.

Gall's law

In his 1975 book on systems, John Gall wrote a principle engineers now call Gall's law: *A complex system that works is invariably found to have evolved from a simple system that worked. A complex system designed from scratch never works and cannot be patched up to make it work.*

That is the death sentence for the master plan in your folder. The 22-page spec, the full business plan, the 400-page novel outline: all of these are complex systems designed from scratch. Gall's point is that they almost never work, no matter how much thought goes into them. What works is starting with something simple that works, then growing it.

The startup world calls this a minimum viable product, a term popularized by Eric Ries in *The Lean Startup*: the smallest version of a product that lets you start learning from real customers. The idea applies far beyond startups. The one-page website before the platform. The weekend workshop before the course. The short story before the novel. The single game level before the game.

Why prototypes beat plans

A prototype does something no amount of planning can: it touches reality and reports back. Within a week, Marcus learned more from three plumbers using a phone number than from three years of specs.

- Plumbers didn't want an app. They wanted to talk. Typing on a phone with dirty hands was the real problem.
- They cared more about speed than design. A plain PDF in an hour beat a beautiful one tomorrow.
- They wanted the quote to come from *them*, with their name and logo, not from QuoteKit.

None of these were in the 22-page spec.

Be a little embarrassed

LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman has a well-known line: if you're not embarrassed by the first version of your product, you've launched too late.

Marcus was embarrassed. The "app" was him at a kitchen table. That embarrassment was exactly the right calibration. It meant he had shipped at the earliest moment something real could be learned.

The prototype protocol

1. **Find the core.** What is the single most important thing your project does for one person? For QuoteKit: turn a spoken job description into a sent quote.
2. **Fake everything else.** Do it by hand, behind the scenes. Use spreadsheets, templates, phone calls, existing tools. Automate later, once you know what's worth automating.
3. **Set a Friday.** Pick a ship date no more than two weeks away. Ship whatever exists on that date.
4. **Ship to three real people.** Not friends being nice. People who have the problem.
5. **Watch, don't explain.** Let them use it without a demo. Where they get confused is your next week's work.

Field test: Define the core of your project in one sentence. Then build the smallest, ugliest, most hand-made version that delivers that core, and put it in front of three real people within two weeks. Put the date on your calendar now.

CHAPTER 33

Quantity Makes Quality

In April, Priya gave herself a challenge she would have considered professionally insulting a year earlier: 30 scenes in 30 days. Five hundred words each, written between 5:30 and 6:30 a.m., not edited, not reread until the month was over.

The rules were Ruth's: quantity only. A bad scene counted exactly as much as a good one. Skipping a day was not allowed, but writing garbage was encouraged.

By day 9 she hated most of what she'd written. By day 17 she had stopped caring whether it was good, which she later identified as the turning point. By day 30 she had 15,000 words. She read them all on a Saturday. Most were mediocre. Four were bad in a useful way, showing her what the book wasn't. And three were the best things she had ever written, including a scene about her grandmother bargaining for a sewing machine in a Nairobi market in 1953, which made Priya cry at her own kitchen table.

She would never have written those three scenes if she'd been trying to write three good scenes. She had to write thirty to find them.

The pots

In their book *Art & Fear*, David Bayles and Ted Orland tell a story about a ceramics teacher who divided a class into two groups. One group would be graded purely on the quantity of pots they

produced: fifty pounds of pots for an A, forty for a B, and so on. The other would be graded on quality: they needed to make only one pot, but it had to be their best.

At grading time, the best pots all came from the quantity group. While the quality group sat theorizing about perfection, the quantity group was churning out pots, making mistakes, and learning from each one.

The authors later said the real version of the story happened in a photography class taught by Jerry Uelsmann at the University of Florida, not a ceramics class. The lesson is the same, and it has held up in many fields since.

The equal-odds rule

The psychologist Dean Keith Simonton spent decades studying creative output, from composers to scientists. One of his most consistent findings is what he called the *equal-odds rule*. Within a creator's career, the proportion of their work that turns out to be a hit stays roughly constant. Their most successful periods aren't the ones where they're more careful. They're the ones where they produce more.

In other words, if you want more great work, the most reliable lever is not trying harder to make each piece great. It's making more pieces. Mozart, Picasso, and Edison all produced enormous amounts of work, much of it forgettable. The masterpieces came from the volume.

Volume beats theory

The hope addict makes one pot in their head and polishes it forever. It never cracks in the kiln, because it never goes in the kiln. The builder makes a hundred real ones, and ninety of them crack, and each crack is a free lesson.

This is especially important for perfectionists from the drill sergeant camp in chapter 13. Volume gives you permission to be bad without being a failure, because each piece is just one of many.

The volume protocol

1. **Set a quantity target, not a quality target.** Thirty scenes. Twenty videos. Ten prototypes. Fifty sales calls. Make it a number you can count.
2. **Fix the size of each unit.** Five hundred words. One-minute videos. A single feature. Small units make the target achievable.
3. **Separate making from judging.** Don't edit or review during the run. Judge everything at the end, all at once.
4. **Count bad ones as wins.** A finished bad piece is a rep. An unfinished perfect one is nothing.
5. **Harvest at the end.** Review the whole batch. Keep the best few, learn from the worst few, and use them to set your next run.

Theo ran his own version for the game: one new tiny level every two days for a month. Fifteen levels. His eight-year-old neighbor played them all and declared five of them "actually fun." Those five became the game.

Field test: Set a volume challenge for your project: a specific number of small units in a specific time, such as 10 in 10 days. Start the first one today, and don't review any of them until the run is over.

CHAPTER 34

If-Then Engineering

The drafting class met Mondays and Thursdays at 6 p.m. Mondays were easy, because Lena rarely worked them. Thursdays were a problem.

The first Thursday, Lena's charge nurse asked her to stay late to cover for someone who'd called in sick. Lena said yes before she'd thought about it. She always said yes. She missed the class. The second Thursday it happened again. By the third, she was starting to believe the old story: *people like me don't get to do things like this*.

Marcus, of all people, fixed it. "You need an exception handler," he said at Shop Night. Lena stared at him. "In code, when something predictable goes wrong, you write a rule in advance for what happens. So you don't have to think about it in the moment."

She wrote it on an index card and kept it in her badge holder: *If someone asks me to cover on a class night, then I say: "I can't tonight, I have class." No explanation. No apology.*

The next Thursday, the charge nurse asked. Lena looked at the card, said the sentence, and walked out the side door at 5:15. Her heart pounded all the way to the car. Fuel, she told herself. She made it to class with four minutes to spare.

Implementation intentions

Good intentions fail at the moment of decision. You meant to write after dinner, but after dinner there's a phone, a show, a tired brain,

and a hundred reasonable reasons to wait. The intention was real. It just wasn't connected to the moment.

Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer studied a simple fix he called *implementation intentions*. Instead of a goal intention ("I will exercise more"), you form a specific if-then plan that links a situation to a response: "If it's 7 a.m. and I've poured my coffee, then I put on my running shoes."

It sounds almost too simple to matter. It matters a lot. A 2006 review by Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran, covering 94 independent tests, found that forming implementation intentions had a medium-to-large effect on reaching goals. A much larger 2024 review, covering more than 600 tests, confirmed that if-then plans help, while showing the size of the effect depends on how the plan is written and how motivated the person already is. They're not magic. They're one of the most reliable tools behavioral science has.

Why do they work? Because they move the decision from the moment, when you're tired and tempted, to the planning stage, when you're clear-headed. When the situation arrives, the response is already chosen. You don't negotiate. You execute.

Write event handlers, not resolutions

This is event-driven programming for your life. You define the event, you define the handler, and when the event fires, the function runs.

Start triggers. These tie your work to an existing part of your day. BJ Fogg, in *Tiny Habits*, uses the format "After I [existing routine], I will [new behavior]."

- *After I pour my first coffee, I will open the manuscript.*
- *After I park the car after a shift, I will draw one line.*

Obstacle handlers. These answer the inner obstacles you found with WOOP in chapter 24.

- *If I feel the urge to add a feature, then I'll call a plumber first.*
- *If I get a new game idea, then I'll write it on the not-now list and keep working for thirty minutes.*

Exception handlers. These cover the predictable things that go wrong.

- *If someone asks me to cover on a class night, then I say I have class.*
- *If I miss a morning session, then I do a ten-minute version that evening.*

The protocol

1. **List your three most common derailers.** When, exactly, does your plan usually fall apart?
2. **Write one if-then for each.** Be specific about the situation (time, place, feeling) and the response (a concrete action).
3. **Make the response small and immediate.** "Then I open the file" works. "Then I write for two hours" doesn't.
4. **Put them where the event happens.** On the fridge, in your badge holder, on your phone's lock screen.
5. **Debug weekly.** When a handler fails, don't blame yourself. Rewrite the handler.

Field test: Write three if-then plans for your goal: one start trigger, one obstacle handler, and one exception handler. Put them where the moment happens.

CHAPTER 35

Tight Feedback Loops

By May, eleven plumbers were using the QuoteKit phone number. Marcus kept a spreadsheet, of course. But this one was different from the framework spreadsheet. It didn't compare options. It recorded reality.

Every Friday he looked at one number, quotes sent per plumber per week, and called two users. He didn't ask whether they liked QuoteKit. Ruth had warned him about that: "People are polite. Ask them what they did." So he asked about the last quote they'd sent, how long it took, and what went wrong.

The Friday calls changed the product almost every week. Week three: plumbers wanted their own logo on the PDF, not QuoteKit's. Week five: a plumber named Hector stopped using it, and when Marcus called, he learned that half of Hector's customers preferred quotes in Spanish. Week seven: Marcus asked every user whether they'd pay $29 a month. Nine said "probably." Then he sent an actual payment link. Four paid.

Four paying customers. After three years of specs, it took seven weeks of feedback.

The thermostat

A thermostat is a beautiful machine. It measures the temperature, compares it with the target, and adjusts the heat. Then it measures

again. Because the loop is tight, the room stays comfortable. A heater with no thermostat either roasts you or freezes you.

Engineers call this a closed-loop control system. Its quality depends almost entirely on the speed and accuracy of the feedback. A slow loop overshoots, oscillates, and wastes energy. A fast loop corrects small errors before they become big ones.

Most of my abandoned projects ran open-loop. I would work in secret for months, then reveal the thing and discover nobody wanted it. Marcus's dental startup was a textbook case: fourteen months of building, almost no measurement. He wasn't short on effort. He was short on feedback.

Dreams have no feedback loop at all. That's exactly why they feel so safe, and why they teach you nothing.

You are a bad estimator (so is everyone)

Feedback matters even more because our predictions are terrible. In a classic 1994 study by Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin, and Michael Ross, students estimated how long their senior theses would take. On average they predicted about 34 days. They took about 56. Only around 30 percent finished within their own estimate. Psychologists call this the *planning fallacy*: we underestimate how long our own projects will take, even when we know similar projects ran late.

Engineers know this joke as Hofstadter's law: it always takes longer than you expect, even when you take Hofstadter's law into account. The fix isn't better guessing. It's measuring, so reality corrects you quickly.

Ask about the past, not the future

In *The Mom Test*, Rob Fitzpatrick explains why most customer conversations are useless. People will tell you your idea is great, and that they would definitely use it, because they are kind and because it costs nothing to say. The fix is to ask about specific past behavior, not opinions or hypotheticals.

- Not "Would you use this?" but "When did you last have this problem? What did you do?"
- Not "How much would you pay?" but "What are you paying now to solve it?"
- Not "Do you like it?" but "What did you do with it this week?"

Compliments are noise. Behavior is signal. Money is the strongest signal of all, which is why Marcus's payment link told him more than all the "probablys" put together.

Build your loop

1. **Pick one number.** The single measure that best shows whether your project is working. Quotes sent. Pages written. Levels played. Weekly, not daily.
2. **Set a weekly review.** Same time every week. Look at the number. Write one sentence about what changed and why.
3. **Talk to two real people a week.** Users, readers, customers. Ask about what they did.
4. **Change one thing.** Each week, make one adjustment based on what you learned. Then measure again.
5. **Ask for real commitment.** At some point, ask for money, a signature, or time. That's when you learn the truth.

Field test: Choose your one number and schedule a recurring weekly review. Then contact two people who have the problem

your project solves and ask them about the last time they dealt with it. Don't pitch. Just listen.

CHAPTER 36

Choose Your Rope Team

In June, Theo handed Ruth an envelope with $500 in cash inside.

"If I don't put a playable demo of the game online by August 1," he said, "you donate this to the supporters' club of the team I hate most." He named the team. He had hated them since he was nine.

Ruth put the envelope in the drawer with her lathe chuck drawing. "August 1. I'll be checking."

For the next eight weeks, Theo worked on the game every day. Some days for twenty minutes. Some days for six hours. He was tempted by at least four new ideas, and every one went on the not-now list. Whenever he wanted to quit, he imagined the rival team's supporters spending his money on scarves. He uploaded the demo on July 29, at 11:52 p.m., to a small indie game site. Ruth gave him the envelope back at Shop Night and the whole garage applauded. It was, Theo said, the first thing he had ever finished.

Why climbers rope up

On a glacier, climbers travel roped together. The reason is simple: crevasses can be hidden under snow, and a climber who falls in alone may not get out. When climbers are roped, one fall is caught by the others, who drop into a self-arrest and hold the line.

That's what a good rope team does for a project. It doesn't do the climbing for you. It catches you when you fall, and it keeps you

moving in the same direction.

All five people in this book were climbing alone before Shop Night. Marcus with his folder, Priya on her flights, Lena with her drawer, Theo with his tabs, Ruth with her drawing. Each had tried before and stalled. What changed wasn't information. They all knew what to do. What changed was that every Tuesday, someone was going to ask what they did.

Commitment devices

Theo's envelope is a *commitment device*: an arrangement you make now that raises the cost of backing out later.

In a 2010 study, economists Xavier Giné, Dean Karlan, and Jonathan Zinman offered smokers in the Philippines a savings account called CARES. Smokers deposited their own money for six months and agreed to take a surprise urine test for nicotine at the end. If they passed, they got their money back. If they failed, the money went to charity. Only about one in ten smokers who were offered the account signed up, but among the whole group offered it, quit rates were measurably higher than in a control group, and the effect held at a surprise test a year after the start. Among those who actually used the account, the effect was much larger.

Commitment devices work because they make your future self's excuses expensive. They also work best when you pick them yourself and set the stakes high enough to matter but not so high they're cruel.

Accountability done right

Chapter 4 showed that announcing your plans to an audience can backfire. A rope team is different, for three reasons.

1. **You report results, not intentions.** Ruth's rule was always "What did you do this week?" Applause comes after the work.
2. **It's a few people, not an audience.** Two to six people who know what you're working on and will notice if you stop.
3. **It's regular.** Same day, same time, every week. The rhythm does the work.

Building your rope team

1. **Find two to five people who are also building something.** They don't need to work in your field. Mixed teams are often better; they see your blind spots.
2. **Set a weekly rhythm.** In person, a video call, or a group chat thread. Same day, same time.
3. **Use one rule:** each person reports what they did since last time, and what they'll do by next time. That's it.
4. **Add a commitment device for big deadlines.** Money in an envelope, a public promise to a specific person, or a consequence you'd hate. Make it real, make it yours, and make it survivable.
5. **Hold the line for each other.** When someone falls, don't lecture. Ask what happened and help them choose the next small step. Chapter 38 shows how.

If you can't find a group, start with one person. A rope team of two still catches falls.

Field test: Name two people who could be on your rope team. Ask one of them this week to meet or message weekly, with one rule: you each report what you did. For your next deadline, set a commitment device with real stakes.

CHAPTER 37

Debug, Don't Despair

The call came on a Saturday morning. Dave was angry.

A quote QuoteKit had sent the day before, for a full bathroom re-pipe, had gone out $640 too low. The homeowner had accepted it within an hour. Dave would either have to eat the loss or call the customer and look like an amateur. "I trusted this thing," he said. "This is my name on the quote."

Marcus hung up and felt the old floor drop away. *Here it is. The second failure. It's not bad luck. It's me.* He spent most of Saturday not opening his laptop and composing, in his head, the email shutting QuoteKit down.

On Sunday he did something different. He opened a blank document and typed a heading he'd used dozens of times at work but never on himself: POSTMORTEM.

The blameless postmortem

When a system fails at a well-run engineering organization, the team writes a postmortem: what happened, the timeline, the contributing causes, and what will change. Google's site reliability engineering teams, among others, made the *blameless* postmortem a core practice. The rule is that you look for causes in systems and processes, not in the character of whoever was holding the keyboard. People don't get fired for the bug. The bug is data.

The reasoning is practical. If people are blamed for failures, they hide them. If failures are hidden, the system never improves. Blamelessness isn't softness. It's a way of getting accurate information.

Most of us run the opposite process on ourselves. Our personal postmortems are all blame and no analysis. They end with a conclusion about our character, "I'm just not good at this," and no change to the system. That's shame doing the debugging (chapter 15), and shame is a terrible engineer.

Resulting

The former professional poker player Annie Duke, in *Thinking in Bets*, warns against what poker players call *resulting*: judging a decision only by how it turned out. A good decision can have a bad outcome because of luck. A bad decision can turn out fine. If you judge every decision by its result, you'll learn the wrong lessons, abandoning good strategies after bad luck and repeating bad ones after good luck.

The fix is to separate the two. Ask: given what I knew at the time, was this a reasonable decision? And separately: what happened, and what in the process caused it?

Marcus's postmortem

What happened: A re-pipe quote for Dave went out $640 too low.

Timeline: Dave updated his copper pipe prices two weeks ago and emailed Marcus the new list. Marcus saved it as a new file. The quote template still pointed to the old file.

Contributing causes: Price lists stored as separate files. No check that the template used the newest one. Marcus doing the quotes by hand late at night after his day job.

What changes: One master price list per plumber, never duplicated. Every quote shows the price-list date at the bottom so the plumber can catch errors. Any quote above $2,000 gets a second look before it goes out.

Decision review: Was launching a hand-made prototype a bad decision? No. It was the right call, with a predictable weakness, and now that weakness is fixed.

On Monday, Marcus called Dave, walked him through what had happened, and sent him $640 from his own account. Dave was quiet for a second. Then he said, "Nobody's ever paid me back for a supplier's mistake in my life." He stayed. He also started double-checking the price-list date, which caught another error two months later.

The postmortem template

1. **What happened?** Facts only, no adjectives.
2. **What was the timeline?** The sequence of events that led to it.
3. **What were the contributing causes?** Look for process, setup, and environment. "I was tired" is a cause; "I'm useless" is not.
4. **What will change?** Specific, concrete changes to the system.
5. **Was the decision reasonable at the time?** Separate decision quality from outcome.

Keep a log of these. Over time, it turns your failures into a changelog: a record of how the system, and you, got better.

Field test: Pick a recent setback on your project, or an old one you still feel bad about. Write a blameless postmortem using the template. End with one specific change, and make it this week.

CHAPTER 38

When You Fall Off the Wall

In September, Lena's mother had a stroke.

It wasn't the worst kind. She would recover most of her speech and some movement in her left hand. But for three weeks Lena lived between the hospital, her mother's apartment, her own shifts, and phone calls with insurance companies and a brother who kept promising to help and didn't. She missed four drafting classes. She stopped drawing. She stopped coming to Shop Night. She stopped answering texts.

When things calmed down, she didn't go back. Every day she didn't go back made it harder. *There's no point now*, she told herself. *I'm too far behind. I knew this would happen. People like me don't get to have things like this.* The old story was waiting for her like it had never left.

On the fourth Tuesday, Ruth knocked on her apartment door holding two coffees and her cane.

"You're not in trouble," Ruth said. "You fell. That's all. Everybody falls. I came to see if you want a hand up."

Falls are guaranteed

Every project, every habit, every climb has falls. Illness, family crises, a brutal month at work, or just a slow drift where one skipped day becomes ten. If your plan only works when life cooperates, it doesn't work.

The question isn't whether you'll fall off the wall. It's what happens next. For the hope addict, a fall is dangerous, because it gives the old story evidence: *See? I can't do this*. The fall itself is usually small. The story about the fall is what turns it into quitting.

The what-the-hell effect

Psychologists Janet Polivy and C. Peter Herman described a pattern they called the *what-the-hell effect*, first seen in dieters. In a classic 1975 experiment by Herman and Deborah Mack, people on diets who were given a milkshake, and believed they had already "blown" their diet for the day, went on to eat more ice cream afterward than dieters who hadn't had the milkshake. The logic of the slip was: the day is ruined anyway, so what the hell.

The same pattern shows up everywhere. Missed one workout, so the week is ruined. Missed four classes, so the semester is ruined. Broke the streak, so the habit is dead. The slip itself costs a little. The what-the-hell response costs everything.

One miss doesn't break a habit

Here's the data that should calm you down. In a 2010 study of how habits form, Phillippa Lally and her colleagues at University College London followed people trying to build a new daily habit, like eating fruit at lunch or going for a run. It took a median of 66 days for the behavior to become automatic, with wide variation between people, from 18 days to an estimated 254. And missing a single day didn't materially affect the process. What mattered was coming back.

James Clear turned this into a simple rule: **never miss twice.** Missing once is an accident. Missing twice is the start of a new pattern. The goal isn't perfection. It's a short gap.

And recall chapter 16: self-compassion after a failure makes people more likely to try again, not less. The kindest thing you can do after a fall is also the most effective one.

The re-entry protocol

1. **Name it as a fall, not a verdict.** "I fell off for three weeks because my mother was in the hospital." That's an event, not a statement about who you are.
2. **Don't try to catch up.** Catching up means doing three weeks of work at once, which is so heavy you'll avoid it. Forget the backlog. Restart from today.
3. **Do the minimum version, today.** One line. One sentence. One phone call. The smallest action that counts as a vote for your identity (chapter 31).
4. **Tell your rope team.** Say "I fell off. I'm back." That's all. Let them catch you.
5. **Run a quick postmortem later.** Once you're back in motion, use chapter 37 to ask what would make the next fall shorter. Not to avoid falling, which is impossible, but to recover faster.

Lena drank the coffee. Then, with Ruth sitting there, she emailed her drafting instructor, explained what had happened, and asked if she could still finish the course. The instructor replied within an hour: *Of course. Come Thursday. We'll work out the assignments.*

That night, in the car, Lena drew one line. Then a window.

Field test: Write your re-entry protocol now, before you need it. Decide in advance what your minimum version is, who you'll tell, and what "never miss twice" means for your project. If you've already fallen off something, do the minimum version today.

CHAPTER 39

Know When to Quit

Theo's demo had 340 downloads in its first month. That was more than he'd hoped. The problem was in the data. Before uploading, Ruth had made him set a test: *If at least 20 percent of players reach level 3, keep building the full game as planned. If not, rethink.* The actual number was 9 percent. Players liked the first two levels and drifted away during the third, which was the beginning of the long, complicated story Theo had been most excited about.

The old Theo would have quit the game entirely and started something new. The older-old Theo would have ignored the data and spent two more years building the story nobody was finishing. Instead he looked at what players did like: the short, funny puzzle levels, the ones his eight-year-old neighbor had picked. He cut the story. He kept the puzzles. He quit the game he had imagined to finish the game people wanted.

Priya quit something too. For three years she had sat on the board of a professional engineering association, a role she'd accepted mostly because her father was so proud of it. It took eight hours a month and gave her nothing she wanted. In October she resigned. She gave the eight hours to the novel.

The other half of hope addiction

Here's the twist this book has been building toward. Hope addiction doesn't only stop you from starting. It also stops you from stopping.

The same brain that gets paid for anticipation keeps paying for it on projects that have stopped working. The dead startup you keep reviving because the dream version still glows. The relationship, job, or project that hasn't moved in years but might, someday. The hope addict doesn't just collect unstarted dreams. They also collect zombies: projects that are neither alive nor allowed to die.

Sunk costs

In a 1985 field study, Hal Arkes and Catherine Blumer sold season tickets for a university theater series at three prices: full price, a small discount, and a larger discount, assigned at random. Over the first half of the season, the people who had paid full price attended more plays than the people who got discounts. The money was already spent either way. It shouldn't have mattered. But having paid more, people felt more need to "get their money's worth."

That's the sunk cost effect: we keep investing in something because of what we've already put in, not because of what we'll get out. Marcus felt it about his four-month scheduling module. Priya felt it about three years on the board. Every hope addict feels it about the folder.

Quitting is a skill

In *Quit*, Annie Duke argues that most of us quit too late far more often than too early. The signals that something isn't working usually arrive long before we act on them, and we explain them away because quitting feels like failure.

Her most practical tool is *kill criteria*: conditions, set in advance, that will trigger quitting or a major change. Duke describes them as a state and a date. "If I don't have X by Y, I'll stop." Set them while you're clear-headed, before you're emotionally invested in the outcome.

Marcus had set his in March, when he wrote the start date on the spec: *By October 1, at least 25 paying plumbers, or I archive QuoteKit with a postmortem and move on.* On October 1, he had 34. He kept going, and for the first time he knew it wasn't hope keeping him there. It was evidence.

The quitting protocol

1. **Set kill criteria at the start.** A state and a date. "If [measurable condition] by [date], then I [stop / pivot / continue]." Write them down where you'll see them.
2. **Separate the mountain from the route.** Often the goal is right and the approach is wrong. Theo didn't quit making games. He quit one design. Ask: should I quit this, or change how I'm doing it?
3. **Audit your zombies.** List every project, commitment, and obligation that takes time and hasn't moved in six months. For each, ask: if I weren't already doing this, would I start it today?
4. **Quit cleanly.** Write a short postmortem, keep what you learned, and close it. Archive the files. Cancel the domain. Tell anyone who needs to know.
5. **Reinvest the time immediately.** Freed-up hours drift into nothing unless you assign them. Priya gave hers to the novel the same week.

Quitting the wrong mountain isn't failure. It frees your time for the right one. Going for it means going for something real, not going down with an imaginary ship.

Field test: Write kill criteria, a state and a date, for your main project. Then do a zombie audit and quit one thing that no longer deserves your time. Reassign those hours this week.

CHAPTER 40

Protect the Build Time

Priya's writing hour almost died in its third week. Not from lack of motivation. From email.

She'd sit down at 5:30 with coffee and open the manuscript. Then, just to make sure nothing urgent had happened overnight at the plant, she'd glance at her phone. There was always something. A supplier delay in Germany. A test result from the night shift. She'd answer one message "quickly," and then another, and when she looked back at the manuscript at 6:10 her head was full of turbine blade tolerances and she couldn't find her grandmother's voice anywhere.

At Shop Night, Ruth asked where her phone slept.

"On the nightstand."

"Move it."

Priya bought a $9 alarm clock and started leaving her phone in the car overnight. It felt ridiculous for two days. On the third day she wrote 900 words before 6:30, the most she'd ever written in a single session.

Your attention is under attack

Every dream you have is competing with an industry built to capture your attention. Every scroll is a small dose of someone else's highlights, and every notification is a cue that promises

something might be waiting (chapter 2). These tools are designed by very smart people to be hard to put down. Willpower is not a fair fight.

There's also a hidden cost to even brief interruptions. Management researcher Sophie Leroy described what she called *attention residue*: when you switch from one task to another, part of your attention stays stuck on the first task, and performance on the second suffers. Priya's one quick email didn't take one minute. It took the rest of the hour, because her mind was still at the plant.

Deep work

Cal Newport, a computer science professor, calls focused, uninterrupted work on a demanding task *deep work*. His argument is that this kind of work is becoming both rarer and more valuable, because so much of modern work is fragmented into shallow tasks: email, messages, meetings, quick replies.

Most meaningful projects, the ones in your folder, require deep work. You can't write a novel, design a product, or learn a craft in five-minute fragments between notifications. You need blocks of time where the only thing available is the work.

Environment beats willpower

The most reliable way to protect build time isn't to resist distractions. It's to remove them before you start.

1. **Set a build window.** The same time, as often as possible. Early morning works for many people because nobody else is awake to need anything.
2. **Move the phone.** Not face down. Another room, the car, a drawer. If it's within reach, it's in the session.

3. **Block the sites.** Use a blocker during build time for email, news, and social media. Decide once, so you don't have to decide every morning.
4. **Make the space single-purpose.** If possible, one place where you only do the work. A desk, a corner, a garage. Over time, the place itself becomes a start trigger (chapter 34).
5. **Defend the calendar.** Put build time on your calendar as a meeting. Tell the people you live with. Marcus and his wife agreed that Friday evenings from 7 to 10 were QuoteKit time, and Saturday mornings were hers.

Put your daydreaming on a budget

There's one more distraction this book has to name, because it's the one we started with: your own imagination.

Ten minutes of WOOP before you work is useful (chapter 24). A five-minute process simulation is useful (chapter 25). But two hours of imagining the launch party, redesigning the logo in your head, or reading about other people's success is a relapse, even if it feels like work. Give yourself a daydream budget: a few minutes before the session, as fuel. Then close it and build.

Field test: Choose your build window for the coming week and put it on your calendar. Decide where your phone will be during that time and which sites you'll block. Then tell one person in your household about it.

PART VI

The Climb

CHAPTER 41

The Joy Is in the Doing

Ruth died in February, on a Sunday, in her sleep. She was 82.

The last Shop Night she ran was the Tuesday before. She dropped a washer in the coffee can, the way she always did. She asked everyone what they'd done that week. She told Theo his new puzzle level was "not terrible, which from me is a compliment." She told Priya to stop apologizing for chapter nine. When everyone left, she was sweeping up metal shavings, humming.

When Marcus and Lena cleared out the workshop a few weeks later, they counted the washers left in the jar. There were 304. She had expected far more Tuesdays than she got. Nobody does get them all. That was the whole point of the jar.

Her will was two pages long and very practical. The house went to a nephew. The garage, the lathe, and "all tools, so long as they keep being used," went to the Tuesday group. And there was one line for Lena: *The chuck drawing is yours. Don't keep it in a drawer.*

Where they ended up

Not at a summit. The summit, as chapter 8 warned, is just a place. They ended up somewhere better: in the middle of the climb, moving.

Marcus has 61 paying plumbers and a part-time developer who handles the quotes he used to do by hand at the kitchen table. QuoteKit is a small, profitable business, not a unicorn. He moved

to a four-day week at his job and hasn't quit, and doesn't feel he has to. He told his mother about QuoteKit after it already had 30 customers. She cried, said, "Your father would have loved this," and then asked, "Are you sure it's safe?" He laughed, and found it didn't land on him anymore.

Priya finished the first draft of the novel in January: 94,000 words, terrible in places, alive in most. Her father is reading it, slowly, with a pencil. So far, his notes are mostly about dates. On page 211, next to the scene in the Nairobi market, he wrote only one word: *Yes*.

Theo released his puzzle game in December. It has sold about 2,000 copies, mostly to parents looking for something their kids can play on a rainy Sunday. One review says, *My daughter made me buy it so she could beat me at it*. Theo has not started anything new. He's working on version 1.1. He has never been prouder of anything in his life.

Lena passed the drafting course with the highest marks in her class and started the next one. For her final project, she redrew Ruth's 1974 chuck in CAD, every dimension, and built a working model with the help of an instructor in the college machine shop. It's on a shelf in the garage now, next to the jar, with the original drawing framed above it. In the spring she applied for a part-time CAD technician job. She told the rope team only after she'd sent the application, which Ruth would have approved of.

On Tuesdays they still meet in the garage. The whiteboard still says WHAT DID YOU DO THIS WEEK? Every week, before they start, one of them drops a washer from Ruth's jar into the coffee can. *Clink*. It's a reminder that each week is spent, not saved.

Flow

I started this book believing dreaming was more joyful than doing. For a long time, for me, it was. But I had been measuring unfairly. I was comparing the dream at its best with the doing at its worst: the perfect launch in my head against the bug at 11 p.m.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi spent his career studying the moments when people feel most alive. He called the state *flow*: total absorption in a challenging task, where time disappears and the self goes quiet. In *Flow*, he wrote that the best moments in our lives aren't the passive, relaxing times. They usually happen when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

That's the answer to the puzzle in the title. Dreaming feels better than doing only until you've done enough of the doing to reach the good part. The dream gives you a trailer. The climb gives you the movie. And nobody remembers a trailer on their deathbed.

The last field test

You've reached the end of the book. If this book worked, you didn't need to; you were too busy. If you're here, here's what's left.

You are going to die. Nobody will remember most of what you do, and nobody is grading it. Your mind builds your world from what you rehearse, believe, and repeat. Your starting point shaped you but doesn't sentence you. Shame grows in silence and dies in company. The tools work: WOOP, process simulation, two-way doors, good-enough specs, identity votes, prototypes, volume, if-then handlers, feedback loops, rope teams, postmortems, kill criteria, protected time.

None of that matters unless you move.

You won't remember the plans you made. You'll remember the things you did. Close the folder. Pick a mountain. Cast one vote today for the person you're becoming.

Go for it.

Field test: Find someone who is still sitting at base camp, holding a dream in a drawer. Ask them the question Ruth asked every Tuesday: *What did you do this week?* Then tell them what you did.

APPENDIX

The Field Guide

Every tool in the book, on one page. If you only keep one page, keep this one.

Find your base camp

If your first reaction to failure is...	Your base camp	You need more of	Chapter
Worry about disappointing someone	The loving parent who feared the fall	Push; permission to fail in public	11
Numbness, "why bother"	The parent who made the world feel dangerous	Safety first, then tiny stretches	12
Disgust at yourself	The drill sergeant	Warmth, rest, beginner projects	13
"Maybe this isn't my thing"	The parent who said you could be anything	Honest friction, deadlines, someone who checks	14

For everyone: **warmth + high standards + belief = movement** (chapter 16).

The tools

Ch.	Tool	How to use it
1	Folder audit	Idea age, hours planning, hours of real contact. Look at the ratio.
2	Move the payout	No cue purchases until you've used the thing. Earn the daydream with work.

Ch.	Tool	How to use it
3	Catch the fantasy	When you're in the trophy scene, name tomorrow's first obstacle.
4	No future tense	Talk only about what you did, never what you'll do.
5	Decision protocol	Must-haves first, timebox research, take the first option that clears the bar.
6	Not-now list	Write every idea down, close the tabs, test one.
7	One-star reviews	Read competitors' complaints. That's your opening.
8	Measure the climb	Track inputs and name what you enjoy about the process.
9	Regret audit	Which future still hurts in 20 years: tried and failed, or never tried?
10	Ruth's question	Who taught you what happens when you fail?
11	Planned small failures	Do something you expect to be refused. Record what actually happened.
12	Control log	Each night, one thing you chose and did.
13	Standard vs. sentence	Keep the standard. Strike the judgment about yourself.
14	90-day commitment	One project, fixed time box, expect the plateau.
15	Shame into light	"I am" becomes "I did." Tell one safe person.
16	Coach's note	What you expect, why it matters, why you believe you can.
17	Find your jar	Count something real. Put a start date on the dream.
18	Legacy is local	Name three people your project could help this year.
19	Embarrassment estimate	Audience, attention, memory, consequence. Check after.
20	Simulation audit	Log trophy, disaster, and process rehearsals. Switch disasters to the next action.
21	Belief code review	Source, evidence, test, rewrite.
22	Relabel the signal	"My body is getting ready."
23	Permission slip	What you're allowed to do, imperfectly, starting when.
24	WOOP	Wish, Outcome, inner Obstacle, if-then Plan.

Ch.	Tool	How to use it
25	Process simulation and premortem	Rehearse the hard moment and the recovery. Imagine failure, list why.
26	Letter from 80	Ten minutes, no editing. Then make the downside survivable.
27	Door audit	Label one-way vs. two-way. Decide two-way doors fast. Shrink one-way doors.
28	Mountain picking	Three short real experiments. Track energy, traction, pull. Commit 90 days.
29	Definition of done	One user, one problem. Everything else goes in LATER.
30	Lower activation energy	First step under two minutes. Set up the night before.
31	Identity votes	“I’m someone who [behavior].” Smallest proof, daily tally, “I don’t” not “I can’t.”
32	Prototype	Fake the backend. Ship to three real people within two weeks.
33	Volume run	Fixed number of small units. Judge only at the end.
34	If-then handlers	Start triggers, obstacle handlers, exception handlers.
35	Feedback loop	One number, weekly review, two conversations about past behavior.
36	Rope team	Two to five people, weekly, report what you did. Add a commitment device.
37	Blameless postmortem	What happened, timeline, causes, changes, decision quality.
38	Re-entry protocol	Never miss twice. Restart from today with the minimum version.
39	Kill criteria	A state and a date, set in advance. Audit your zombies.
40	Build window	Calendar it, move the phone, block the sites, budget the daydreams.
41	Ruth’s question, again	What did you do this week?

Notes

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About the Author

Arkvital is Vitalijs Arkulinskis, a mechanical and software engineer turned project and people leader. Over more than twelve years, across more than ten industries, he has coached managers, built tools for teams, and learned to look for the real cause of a problem before choosing the fix.

He writes about people, progress and the quiet work beneath good work at arkvital.com, and builds small, useful apps through Addanapp.

If something in this book landed for you, or missed, he'd like to hear about it. You can book a short call at tidycal.com/arkvital.

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