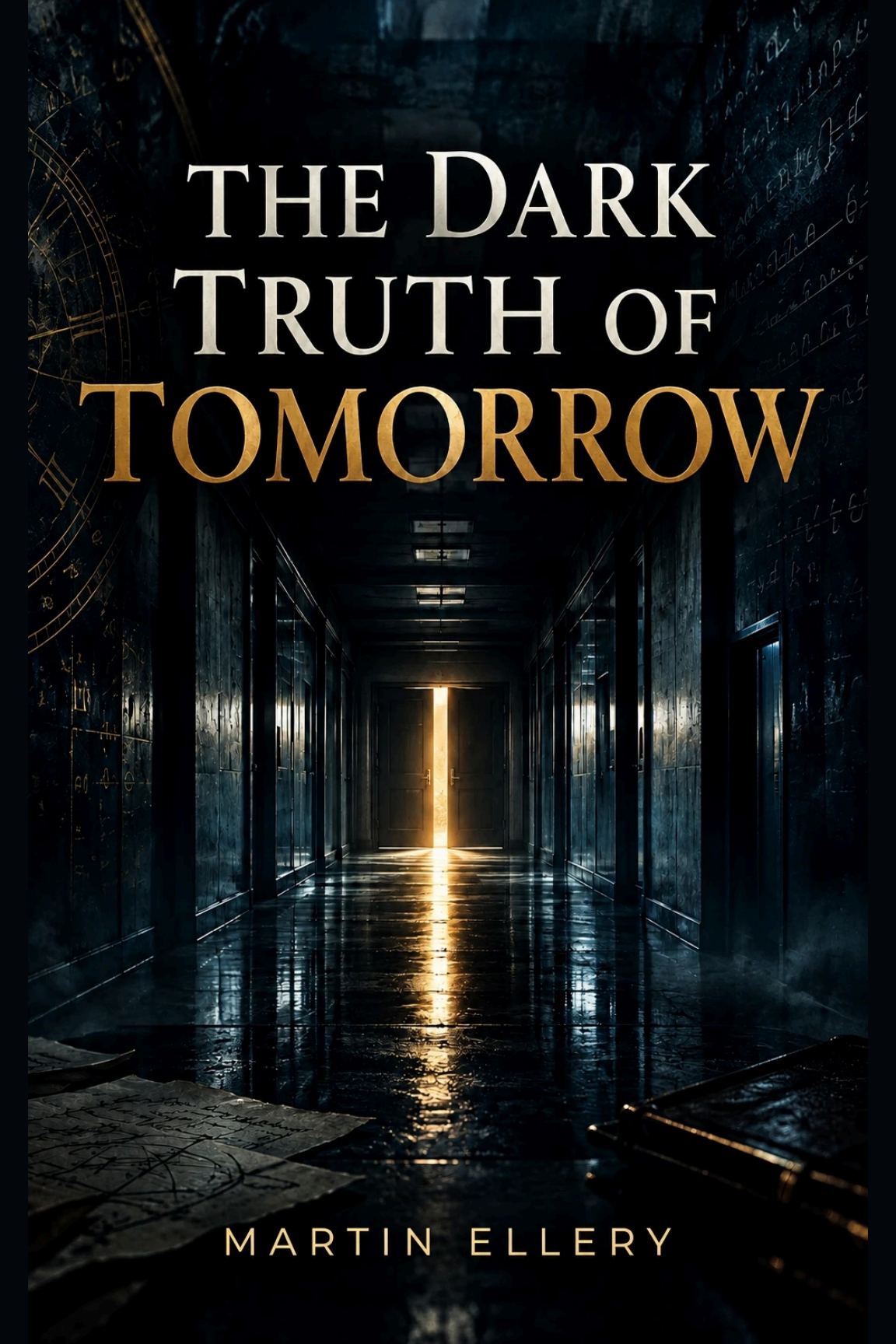




THE DARK TRUTH OF TOMORROW

MARTIN ELLERY

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The Dark Truth of Tomorrow

Sample edition

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This book is intended for general information and personal reflection. It is not a substitute for medical, psychological, financial or legal advice. Readers experiencing persistent anxiety, low mood or other mental-health difficulties should consult a qualified professional.

The examples in this book are illustrative scenarios and do not describe real individuals. References to published research are listed in the Notes and Bibliography.

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INTRODUCTION

THE PROMISE OF TOMORROW

It usually happens at an unremarkable moment. You are writing the date on a form, or scrolling past a photograph from a few years ago, or hearing that a child you remember as a toddler has started secondary school. And you notice, with a small jolt, that another year has gone. Not dramatically. It simply went, the way the previous one did, while you were busy with something else.

The jolt is followed, for many people, by a quiet audit. Is my life where I thought it would be by now? Have I done the things I said I would do? When, exactly, is the part where it all comes together supposed to begin?

That last question is the one this book is about.

Most of us carry a picture of a better life that sits a little way ahead of the one we are living. In that picture, the money is less tight, the work is more satisfying, the body is healthier, the relationships are settled, the anxieties have been dealt with, and there is finally time to enjoy things. We work towards that picture. Often we work very hard. And while we work, we tend to treat the present as a corridor leading to it: a place to get through, rather than a place to be.

There is nothing foolish about wanting a better future. The capacity to imagine tomorrow and act on behalf of it is one of the most useful things a human mind can do. It is why we save

money, study for exams, plant trees, look after our health and stay with difficult projects long after the excitement has worn off. A person who never thought about the future would not be admirably present. They would simply be unprepared, and often in trouble.

But that same capacity has a shadow, and the shadow is what this book calls the dark truth of tomorrow. Tomorrow never actually arrives as tomorrow. It only ever arrives as another today, with its own dishes and emails and weather, and it brings with it the same mind that spent the previous day waiting for it. If that mind has learned to treat every present moment as a waiting room, it will treat the next one the same way. The future we were working towards turns up, and we are not there to meet it, because we have already moved on to the next one.

The question that runs underneath every chapter is uncomfortable, and I want to state it plainly once, here, so that it does not need to be repeated: what if the greatest mistake is not failing to build the future you want, but losing the life you already have while trying to reach it?

WHAT TOMORROW IS FOR

It helps, from the start, to be precise about what thinking about the future is actually good for, because the aim of this book is not to make you think about it less. The aim is to help you use it for the right jobs.

As I see it, thinking about tomorrow has three honest jobs.

The first is choosing a direction. Imagining possible futures lets us decide which ones are worth moving towards, and which we would rather avoid. Without that, we would drift.

The second is preparation. Once a direction is chosen, imagining what lies ahead lets us anticipate obstacles, gather resources and take sensible precautions. This is the work of plans, savings, rehearsals and contingencies.

The third is hope. Looking forward to good things is itself a source of pleasure and meaning. Anticipating a holiday, a reunion or the end of a hard project can make the present more bearable and more alive.

But the same faculty is very good at three other jobs, which look similar from the outside and are quite different underneath.

It can be used as an escape: a pleasant daydream about a future in which our problems have been solved, which we visit instead of dealing with the present ones.

It can be used as an anaesthetic for uncertainty: the endless rehearsal of what might go wrong, which feels like preparation but mainly serves to relieve, briefly, the discomfort of not knowing.

And it can be used to postpone permission: the habit of deciding that we are not allowed to enjoy, rest, feel confident or be content until some future condition has been met.

Much of what follows is about learning to tell the honest jobs from the counterfeit ones, in your own life, while they are happening. That is harder than it sounds, because the counterfeits are convincing. Worry feels responsible. Fantasy feels motivating. Postponement feels mature. Each of them has a reasonable voice.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS AND IS NOT

This is a book about the psychology of time, attention, uncertainty and ambition, written for people who suspect that they spend too much of their lives somewhere other than where they are. It draws on research in psychology and behavioural science where that research is relevant and reasonably solid, and it says so when it does. It also draws on philosophy, on careful observation of ordinary life, and on reasoning that is my own. I have tried throughout to make clear which is which. Where a finding is well established, I say so. Where it comes from a single study or

is still debated, I say that too. Where I am offering an interpretation or a suggestion, I present it as one.

It is not a book that will tell you to stop caring about the future, quit your job and live in the moment. That advice is easy to give and, for most people, impossible or unwise to follow. Bills arrive. Children need feeding. Careers are built over decades. Health has to be protected. The aim is not to abandon tomorrow but to stop sacrificing the whole of today to it.

Nor is it a substitute for professional help. Some of the patterns described here (persistent worry, intrusive fear about the future, an inability to stop replaying the past) can be signs of anxiety or depression that deserve proper treatment. If anything in these pages feels less like an everyday habit and more like something that is making daily life hard to manage, a doctor or a qualified therapist is the right place to start. There is no weakness in going, and effective help exists.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANISED

The twenty chapters move in a deliberate arc.

The first part looks at the problem itself: how the mind leaves the present for an imagined future, why that future can feel safer than today, and the particular trap of telling ourselves that life will begin once something has been achieved.

The second part examines the mental habits that keep us there: mistaking the vividness of a fear for its likelihood, mistaking worry for preparation, and mistaking effort for control. It also looks at why time itself seems to speed up, and at the borrowed timelines many of us measure our lives against.

The third part turns to the present: what we lose by waiting to feel ready, what it means to stop treating the present as a waiting room, how to carry regret without punishing ourselves, and why attention, more than circumstance, shapes the texture of a life. It

also examines the loop of distraction we fall into when the present feels uncomfortable.

The final part is about building. It considers how to pursue goals without worshipping them, how to act without certainty, how our surroundings quietly shape our futures, how small actions compound, what to do when life refuses to follow the plan, and how to build a life you do not need to escape from. The last chapter brings these together into a practical thirty-day plan.

Most chapters end with an exercise. Some are short enough to try immediately; others ask for a little time with a pen and paper. None of them will work for everyone, and none of them needs to be done perfectly. They are tools, offered in the hope that one or two will prove useful enough to keep.

A NOTE ON TONE

Some of what follows may be uncomfortable to read. It is not pleasant to recognise how much of your life has been spent waiting, or how often a conversation, a meal or an afternoon has passed without you really being present for it. I have tried not to soften that discomfort, because it is often where change begins. But I have also tried not to inflate it. Nobody lives entirely in the present, and nobody should. The goal is not perfection. It is a slightly larger share of your own life, lived while it is actually happening.

The future will still be there when you finish this book. It always is. The question is whether you will be there too.

CHAPTER 1

THE FUTURE IS STEALING YOUR LIFE

Consider a few ordinary scenes.

A woman is reading her daughter a bedtime story. Her voice is doing the work, rising and falling at the right places, but her mind is in tomorrow morning's meeting, rehearsing what she will say if her manager raises the missed deadline. When the story ends, her daughter asks a question about one of the characters, and she realises she has no idea what happened in the last three pages.

A man is on holiday by the sea, the first proper holiday he has taken in two years. He is lying on a sun lounger, and he is thinking about the emails that will be waiting for him when he gets back, and about whether he should have taken the holiday at all, given the state of the project.

A student is eating lunch with friends. She is laughing at the right moments. She is also calculating, in the background, how many hours she has left before an essay is due, and whether she can afford to stay for coffee.

None of these people is doing anything wrong. They are not neglectful, or lazy, or unusually anxious. They are doing something so common that it barely registers as a choice: they are

physically in one place and mentally in another, and the other place is a future that has not yet arrived.

This chapter is about that habit: how widespread it is, what it costs, and how to start noticing it.

WHERE THE MIND GOES

The human mind does not stay put. That much is obvious to anyone who has tried to concentrate on a dull document or meditate for five minutes. What is less obvious is how much of the time it wanders, and where it tends to go.

One of the best-known attempts to measure this was a study published in 2010 by the psychologists Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert. They used a smartphone application to contact thousands of people at random moments during their waking hours and ask them three questions: how they were feeling, what they were doing, and whether they were thinking about something other than what they were doing. People reported that their minds were wandering in nearly half of the samples. The researchers also found that, on average, people reported feeling less happy when their minds were wandering than when they were not, and they were no happier even when their minds wandered to pleasant things.¹

That study has limits. Its participants volunteered to use an app, which is not the same as a random sample of humanity, and the relationship between wandering and mood almost certainly runs in both directions: unhappy people may wander more, as well as wandering making people unhappy. But the broad finding, that the mind spends a very large share of its time somewhere other than the present activity, has been echoed in many other studies and matches most people's experience of themselves.

Where does it go? Some of it goes to the past: replaying a conversation, revisiting an embarrassment. But a good deal goes for-

ward. Researchers who study mind-wandering have noted that wandering thoughts often turn towards the future, and that this kind of thinking can serve a real planning function: rehearsing, anticipating, preparing.² The mind, left to itself, is very often working on tomorrow.

That is not, in itself, a problem. It is how we notice that we need milk, that a friend's birthday is coming up, that the presentation needs another slide. The problem arises when the mind's trips into the future stop being visits and become a place of residence.

VISITING THE FUTURE AND LIVING THERE

There is a difference, easy to feel but harder to define, between making a plan and living in a future that has not arrived.

Making a plan is like visiting a place with a return ticket. You go to the future deliberately, for a purpose. You look around, notice what will be needed, decide what to do, and come back. The visit ends with something concrete: a note in a diary, a decision, a task, a change in what you do today. Then you return to the present, and the present receives your attention again.

Living in the future is a visit without a return ticket. You go there and stay. You rehearse the meeting for the fifth time. You imagine the conversation going badly, then well, then badly again. You picture the life you will have when the money comes in or the diagnosis is clear or the children are older. Nothing new is decided. No action results. But you are not here either. The bedtime story is being read by someone who is somewhere else.

A useful test, which I will return to in later chapters, is simply to ask of any stretch of future-oriented thinking: *what did that produce?* A visit produces something. Residence produces mostly a feeling: tension, relief, longing, dread. Sometimes the feeling is pleasant. It is rarely useful.

WHAT IT COSTS

The cost of living in the future is easy to underestimate, because each individual instance is small. A few minutes of distraction during a meal. A conversation half heard. An evening spent on the sofa with the television on and the mind in next week. None of these feels like a loss. But they add up, and they fall unevenly on particular parts of life.

Attention. The most direct cost is that whatever is happening now receives less of us. Tasks take longer and are done less well, because part of the mind's capacity is elsewhere. Chapter 12 looks at this in more detail; for now it is enough to notice that attention is finite, and that whatever goes to tomorrow is withdrawn from today.

Relationships. People notice when we are not with them, even when we are in the room. Children in particular are often acutely sensitive to a parent's absence of mind, and will work hard to call that attention back. Partners notice. Friends notice. Over time, a person who is habitually elsewhere can become someone others stop trying to reach.

Rest. Rest is supposed to restore us. But a body lying on a beach with a mind in the office is not resting in any meaningful sense. Many people return from holidays and weekends without feeling refreshed, and part of the reason is that they never really left.

Enjoyment. Pleasant experiences need attention to be fully experienced. A meal eaten while planning tomorrow is a meal half tasted. A walk taken while rehearsing an argument is a walk half seen. There is a particular sadness in realising that something good happened to you and you were not there for it.

Decisions. Paradoxically, living in the future can make decisions about the future worse. A mind that is constantly rehearsing possible outcomes tends to become anxious, tired and nar-

row. It sees risks more vividly than opportunities, and it loses the calm needed to weigh options well.

RECOGNISING YOUR OWN PATTERNS

People drift into the future in different ways, and it helps to know your own.

Some people are **rehearsers**. They prepare for conversations, meetings and confrontations by running them repeatedly in their heads, often far more times than any preparation requires.

Some are **forecasters**. They are constantly estimating what will happen next: whether the train will be late, whether the plan will work, how the evening will go.

Some are **waiters**. They hold a picture of a future in which life will be better, and they experience the present mainly as the time that must pass before that future arrives.

Some are **list-keepers**. Their minds are occupied less with outcomes than with tasks: everything that needs doing, in order, with times attached.

Most people are some mixture. None of these patterns is a disorder or a character flaw. Each has its uses. Rehearsers are often well prepared; forecasters are rarely caught off guard; waiters can be highly motivated; list-keepers get things done. The point is not to stop being who you are. It is to notice when the pattern has taken over moments that did not need it.

WHEN THINKING AHEAD IS EXACTLY RIGHT

It would be a mistake to read this chapter as a case against thinking about the future. There are times when the present moment genuinely requires attention to what comes next. A surgeon planning an operation, a parent working out how to pay the rent next month, a student preparing for an exam the following day: these people should be thinking ahead, and thinking hard. Sometimes the future is the most urgent thing in the room.

Nor is all mind-wandering bad. Many people find that their best ideas arrive while they are doing something else, and allowing the mind to roam can be restful and creative. A walk with no particular purpose, during which the mind drifts pleasantly through possibilities, is not a failure of attention.

The distinction this book is interested in is not between thinking about the future and thinking about the present. It is between thinking about the future *on purpose*, in a way that serves you, and being pulled there by habit, in a way that takes you away from things you would rather have been present for.

AN EXERCISE: HERE, AHEAD, BEHIND

This exercise is designed to show you, with some precision, where your attention actually goes during an ordinary week. It takes very little time, but it needs to be done for several days to be useful.

Set five random reminders a day. Use your phone's alarm or a reminder app, and set five alerts at irregular times across your waking hours. Vary the times each day if you can, so that you cannot anticipate them.

When an alert sounds, answer one question in a single word. Where was my mind just now? Choose one of three answers:

- **Here**, if you were attending to what you were actually doing.
- **Ahead**, if you were thinking about something that has not yet happened.
- **Behind**, if you were thinking about something that has already happened.

Write the word down, along with a few words about what you were doing at the time. *Ahead*, eating lunch. *Here*, talking to my brother. *Behind*, in the shower. Do not try to change anything yet. Just record.

After five days, look at the pattern. You will have around twenty-five entries. Count how many were Here, Ahead and Behind. Then look more closely. Which activities were most often accompanied by Ahead? Meals, commutes, conversations, time with children, time in bed? Which were most often Here?

Choose one activity to reclaim. Pick a single activity that appeared frequently as Ahead and that you would genuinely like to be present for. A daily meal, a walk, a regular phone call, the half hour before bed. For the following week, make a small agreement with yourself: during that activity, when you notice your mind has gone ahead, you will gently bring it back.

Use a return ticket. If what pulled you ahead was something that genuinely needs attention (a task, a decision, a worry with an action attached), write it down in a few words on paper or in your phone, and tell yourself you will deal with it at a specific later time. Then return. Writing it down is what makes the return possible: the mind is often reluctant to let go of something it fears it will forget.

You will not be able to stay present all the time, and that is not the aim. The aim is to make the movement visible. Most people who try this are surprised, not by how often their minds wander, but by how rarely they had noticed.

WHERE THIS LEADS

The future steals life quietly, a few minutes at a time, usually without our noticing and almost always with good intentions. Recognising the habit is the first step. But it raises a deeper question, which the next chapter takes up. If the present is where life is actually happening, why is the future so attractive? Why, so often, does tomorrow feel safer than today?

NOTES

Full details of every work cited are given below, chapter by chapter, and again in the bibliography that follows.

Chapter 1: The Future Is Stealing Your Life

1. Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert, “A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind,” *Science* 330, no. 6006 (2010): 932.
2. See, for example, Benjamin Baird, Jonathan Smallwood and Jonathan W. Schooler, “Back to the Future: Autobiographical Planning and the Functionality of Mind-Wandering,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 20, no. 4 (2011): 1604–1611.

END OF SAMPLE

You have reached the end of this sample of *The Dark Truth of Tomorrow*. It contains the Introduction and Chapter 1.

The complete book continues with Chapter 2, “Why Tomorrow Feels Safer Than Today,” and contains all twenty chapters, the Conclusion, the Notes and the full Bibliography.