TWENTY-ONE BELLS

A Psychological Journey Through Awareness, Influence and Self-Mastery

DAVID JAMES HANDS

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The City, its characters and events are fictional devices used to explore ideas drawn from psychology, behavioural science, sociology and organisational research. Research sources and cautions are set out in the Evidence Notes.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I've spent years coming across ideas that made perfect sense, then finding they weren't there when I needed them. I could understand something while reading it and still react in the same old way when I was tired, angry or under pressure. That gap bothered me. It's where this book began.

I built the City to give those ideas somewhere to live. A station, a forge, a bridge, a conversation with someone who gets under your skin. My hope is that a place or a person might come back to you when an explanation on its own wouldn't. You may remember something quite different from what I expected. I'd be interested to know what stays with you.

The City and its people are fictional. The ideas draw on psychology, behavioural science and research into how we live and work together. I've included the sources and their limits in the Evidence Notes, if you'd like to follow them further. The scenes are my way of exploring those ideas, rather than proof of them.

You'll probably recognise yourself in places. I do. I haven't written this from the far side of having it all worked out. I'm still catching myself, sometimes rather late.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You can find your own way through this book.

If you enjoy a story, start with the train and see where it takes you. The encounters build on one another, and later scenes often call back to earlier ones, so reading in order lets you get to know the City and its people as you go. You can leave the exercises for later, or simply keep reading.

You might prefer to flick through, find a chapter that catches your attention and spend some time there. That works, with one caution: some chapters lean on scenes from earlier ones, and Returning to the City at the back gives you the lesson and the question from every place, which is usually enough to follow a reference back. You might want to make notes, try things out or learn the whole work by heart. If that's how you enjoy a book, there's room for that too. The contents give you a map of the five gates.

Each chapter gives you a scene, an idea to explore, some research and a few ways to bring it into ordinary life. The questions, exercises and physical cues are there to help. Use what speaks to you, adapt it to your circumstances and return to the rest whenever you like.

You'll see me refer to a bell. I mean a moment when something you've read might become useful: your temper rising, the relief of putting something off, or the sudden certainty that your side must be right. Perhaps a place in the City will come to mind and give you a question worth asking before you carry on.

The places are there for a reason. People have used imagined places to hold ideas for thousands of years, in a memory technique sometimes called the method of loci or a memory palace: you walk through somewhere familiar in your mind

and find what you left in each room. Each location in the City, with its small physical cue, is intended to give an idea somewhere memorable to live. My hope is that, when your temper rises or your hand reaches for the phone, a place and a question might come back to you. I can't promise it will work for you, and this approach hasn't been tested as a way of changing behaviour. The research behind each chapter is a separate matter, and the Evidence Notes keep the two apart.

You won't notice every time. I certainly don't. If something in these pages helps you pause a little sooner, understand someone differently or make a choice you're happier with, that's a good place to begin.

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THE TRAIN

Someone says your name. Quietly, close enough that you turn towards the voice before you're awake. Your cheek catches against rough fabric. You lift it, feeling the little ridges the seat has pressed into your skin. There's a pain beneath one ear and a warm, damp patch where your shirt has stuck to your back.

For a few seconds you keep your eyes shut. Somewhere familiar, surely. Somewhere you meant to be. Then the floor moves beneath your feet. A loose panel chatters beside your knee, answered by the heavier sound of wheels striking joints in the track. Each blow travels through the seat into your spine.

You're on a train.

You open your eyes. Your face looks back from a black window, pale beneath the carriage lights. For a moment you study it as though it belongs to another passenger. Then you close your mouth and wipe one corner with your thumb. Beyond your reflection there's nothing: no houses, no road keeping pace with the railway, no lights on a distant hill. You lean towards the glass and shield your eyes with one hand. The window is cold enough to ache against your fingertips, but you still can't see through it.

When you sit back, the cushion gives beneath you. Heat pours from underneath it, warming your shins while a thin draught works around one ankle. The air smells of wet coats and old coffee, with the sourness of sweat worked deep into the seats. Someone's deodorant hangs on underneath it, sweet and

slightly sickening. You swallow, trying to clear the stale taste from your mouth.

Then you catch the burnt plastic.

You take another breath to be sure. There it is, that sharp electrical smell at the back of your throat. Your eyes go to the heater. Dust has gathered along its grille, and behind the slats a grey tangle trembles with the movement of the train. You listen for a change in the sound and look for smoke. Nothing. You know that smell, though. Something running hot.

You ought to mention it to someone. You turn towards the aisle, looking for a face to catch, and realise that nobody is looking back.

There are perhaps thirty people in the carriage. Every one of them appears to be asleep.

Across the aisle, a woman has her forehead against the window. Each time the carriage sways, her skin shifts against a cloudy patch on the glass, but she doesn't wake. A cardboard coffee cup rests between her fingers, its lid split beside the drinking hole. You watch a brown bead gather there, swell, then run down towards her hand. She doesn't notice.

Beside her, a teenage boy sits inside a grey hood, his phone upright against his chest. His eyes are closed, but his thumb moves. It slides up the screen and waits. A little light changes beneath his chin. Then the thumb slides again.

You watch for longer than you mean to. Perhaps he's just fallen asleep. You've done something like it yourself: kept your eyes moving over words when you were too tired to take them in. But his thumb goes on. Another picture appears, then another. Beside him, the coffee cup creaks in the woman's hand.

Further down, a man in a navy suit sleeps with a briefcase trapped between his knees. His head rests awkwardly above

his tie. He looks as though he'll wake with the same pain in his neck that you have. His lips move.

"Monday."

You turn your head to hear. The loose panel rattles and the wheels strike another joint.

"Monday."

You look away. There's something private about it, something you feel you shouldn't have heard. Then you remember why you woke.

Someone said your name.

A man is sitting opposite you.

You draw your foot back, sending a sting of pins and needles through your toes. You're sure the seat was empty. Yet you haven't been awake long enough to trust that, and he's sitting there with the ease of someone who has already settled in for a long journey.

His charcoal suit was expensive once. One elbow has worn shiny, and a few careful stitches close a tear beside the cuff. You can't place his age. There's grey at his temples and a tiredness around his eyes. An old black umbrella stands between his knees, one hand resting on its wooden handle.

"You said my name."

"Good morning."

His voice is ordinary. You could have heard it over a counter, asking for a newspaper.

"Where am I?"

"On the train into the City."

"What city?"

"One you've spent most of your life in."

You rub your neck. "I've never been there."

He studies you without answering.

You try to straighten your numb leg without knocking his umbrella. He notices and moves it aside, making room for your foot. You stretch it out, grateful despite yourself. The black cloth passes close to your knee. It's perfectly dry.

A small sound reaches you.

Tick.

A silver watch shows beneath his repaired cuff: brushed steel, an ivory face, plain black markers. A hairline crack runs across the glass between eleven and twelve. The second hand is red.

It moves, and you hear it again. The wheels are still hammering beneath you; the panel is still loose. Yet that tiny movement sounds as though the watch were beside your ear. You look for the crown, the little knob that ought to wind it. There isn't one.

"Where did I get on?" you ask.

"You don't remember?"

"No."

He nods. "Neither do most people."

You try to remember a ticket barrier, a platform, your shoes on a flight of stairs. There ought to be a moment when you decided to make this journey. You can picture all those things, but you can't remember doing them.

"Why's everyone asleep?"

He looks across the aisle. The boy's thumb moves again.

"They're tired. But some things carry on."

"What things?"

"The things they've practised."

You watch the screen change beneath the boy's closed eyes.

"So they're doing them in their sleep?"

"Apparently."

The answer irritates you, partly because you can see it happening.

“What the hell is this place?”

His eyes return to you. “You’re frightened.”

“I’m asking a question.”

“I know.”

You reach for your phone. Right trouser pocket. Your fingers find its familiar edge, then your wallet, then your keys. You press the teeth of one key against your thumb. There. Your things. Your life. You hadn’t realised how badly you needed to feel them.

You unlock the screen. There’s no signal and no Wi-Fi. The battery is at seventy-eight per cent, but the time has been replaced by two pairs of dashes. You open the clock. Blank. The calendar has nothing in it either. You press harder than necessary, as though the screen might respond to being made aware of the urgency.

“Come on.”

You try the maps, and the screen goes black. Your face appears faintly in the glass. Beyond its edge, the man lowers his head towards his watch. When you look up, he’s watching you. You glance down again. The phone is working.

“Did you see that?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

You can’t tell whether you believe him. You push the phone back into your pocket, where it catches against something flat. Reaching behind it, you draw out a small black notebook.

The corners are soft with wear. There’s no title or maker’s name, and the cover gives beneath your thumb with the

suppleness of something handled for years. You've never seen it before.

It's warm. You turn it over, and the heat remains against your palm after you shift your grip. Too warm to have come from your body. More like something lifted from a radiator.

"Is this yours?"

"No."

"Then whose is it?"

He looks at the notebook. "Try opening it."

You keep it closed for another moment. His watch ticks while you decide.

The paper is thick and cream-coloured, with a slight roughness beneath your finger. You flick through the pages. Empty, all of them. But when you turn back to the beginning, five words occupy the first page.

YOU HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE.

You tilt it towards the light. There's no ink sitting on the paper. The letters seem to have been drawn out of its colour, leaving the fibres pale. You run a finger across them and feel nothing.

"I haven't."

The man waits.

"I'd remember."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

He rests both hands on the umbrella. "Tell me what you were doing last Tuesday at nine in the morning."

"What?"

"Last Tuesday. Nine o'clock."

You try to find it. Probably working. A screen in front of you. Someone asking something. You can imagine the room, the clothes you might have worn, the sort of problem you'd have been dealing with. It all sounds right. None of it feels remembered.

"That proves nothing."

"No."

You'd been ready to defend yourself. His agreement leaves you sitting forward with nothing to say.

You close the notebook.

Outside, a light passes through the darkness. You turn towards it, grateful for somewhere else to look. Another appears, then several, spreading beneath the railway. You lean close enough for the cold window to touch your forehead.

The City opens out below you.

Red-brick factories stand beneath glass towers. Streets climb hills crowded with houses. Church spires rise between office blocks, and a crane turns above a hospital, its red warning light blinking through the dark. You shift along the seat to follow the view. There's a stadium under floodlights, a strip of river catching white and gold from the buildings along its bank. Beyond it, a cathedral dome holds the light of a moon you couldn't see a moment ago.

In one house, a kitchen glows yellow. You glimpse a figure standing at a sink before the house slips away. Another window passes, its curtains drawn, a television flickering blue against the ceiling. You wonder whether anyone in those rooms can see the train, whether you're just another lit window passing through their evening.

A terrace catches your eye. Three shallow steps, a narrow front door, a low wall. You turn your head to follow it. For a moment you're certain you know that house.

Then a wall rises between you and the City.

Black stone, higher than the railway. It swallows the houses first, then the streets, until only the tallest buildings remain.

“Why’s that there?”

The man looks out beside you. “I’ve wondered how long people can live behind something like that before they stop seeing it.”

Writing covers the stone. Some painted, some glowing, some so large that you can only take in a word before it passes.

BE MORE.

You’re still reading it when another message arrives.

STAY SAFE.

YOU DESERVE THIS.

PEOPLE LIKE YOU CHOOSE—

You twist towards the window, trying to catch the rest, but it has already been replaced.

DON’T FALL BEHIND.

EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT—

The train begins to slow. Your weight shifts forward. A cup rolls somewhere beneath the seats, tapping against metal before it settles. Nobody wakes. The woman’s fingers still hold her coffee. The boy’s screen changes. Further down, the man murmurs “Monday” into his tie.

The man opposite checks his watch.

“What’s the time?”

He turns his wrist towards you. You can see the hands and the markers, but when you try to read their position, you lose it. Your attention slips at precisely the point where it ought to settle.

You blink and lean closer. He holds his arm still for you.

“I can’t read it.”

“I know.”

You look up at him. He lowers his wrist.

Something shines briefly in his other hand. A coin travels across his knuckles, catching the carriage lights on its smooth surfaces. No head, no writing, no value stamped into it. The woman’s sleeping face passes across one side, then your own eye, briefly stretched along the edge.

Before you can ask about it, the wheels shriek.

The sound goes through your teeth. Lights sweep across the ceiling, and the window fills with pillars, benches, people passing too quickly to distinguish. You brace your foot against the floor. The carriage shudders, knocking your knee against the seat ahead.

Somewhere outside, a bell rings. Another answers, lower and further away. More join them, their notes carrying beneath the station roof. At first you can’t separate them. Then a high, thin tone returns above the others, and you begin listening for each voice as it comes round again.

You catch yourself counting. Twenty-one different bells, some clear, some almost buried in the echo.

The doors open with a tired hiss.

Cold air reaches your face. You breathe it in. Rain on stone, oil from the track, and somewhere beyond the platform, onions frying. The fresh air makes you notice how much of the carriage is still in your mouth.

“Your stop,” the man says.

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re awake.”

People pass the open doorway. A suitcase wheel rattles over a joint in the platform. Nobody looks inside.

“I’m not getting off.”

“All right.”

You turn back. “You think I should.”

“Yes.”

“Then why aren’t you telling me?”

“I’ve told you it’s your stop.”

You look towards the doorway again. “What happens if I stay?”

He considers the question.

“You’ll probably be quite comfortable.”

You’re not comfortable. Your neck hurts, your shirt is damp, and the heater is still pushing its burnt smell around your legs. But the hollow in the seat fits you now. You know which panel rattles. You’ve stopped noticing the fluorescent buzz.

Out there, you don’t know where to put your feet.

The door warning begins. You stay seated, waiting for him to give you something else. A reason, an instruction, enough of an answer to make this his decision. He waits with you, his umbrella held clear of your leg.

The beeping quickens.

You stand. “Who are you?”

For a moment he looks tired enough to join the others.

“You’ll find out.”

You move into the aisle. Pins and needles still sting beneath one foot, and you catch a seat back to steady yourself.

“Are you coming?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He looks towards the sleeping passengers. “I have other work.”

The doors begin to close. You step through, and the cold catches your shirt against your back. Behind you, the doors meet with a rubber thud.

Immediately, you want to undo it.

You turn and pull the outside handle, but it's locked. The train starts moving.

The man remains in his seat. As his window passes, he raises one finger and points towards your hand. The notebook. Its cover is hot now. You open it by the edges, and beneath the first message, letters begin to appear. One stroke, then another. You watch the paper pale beneath an invisible hand.

BEFORE YOU LEARN HOW PEOPLE ARE INFLUENCED,

The train gathers speed.

LEARN WHAT ALREADY HAS POWER OVER YOU.

You look up. For an instant the station lights catch his watch: silver case, cracked glass, the red hand moving.

You hear its tick.

Then his window passes beyond the light.

The last carriage disappears into the tunnel. You stand holding the notebook while the wheels fade, leaving small sounds you hadn't heard beneath them: a trolley squeaking, shoes on stone, someone coughing.

Your phone vibrates. Relief comes before thought. Someone you know. Something you understand. Your hand moves towards your pocket.

A bell rings.

Your fingers stop against the fabric.

"Well," a woman says behind you.

You turn. She stands beside a cleaning trolley, leaning on a long-handled broom. Green overalls, a dark wool hat, grey

curls escaping around her ears. Her hands are red from the cold and thickened around the knuckles. A gold wedding ring has worn a pale groove into one finger. A dented steel thermos sits among the bottles and cloths on her trolley.

She looks at your hand, still resting against your pocket, then at your face.

“That’s interesting.”

“What is?”

“You heard it.”

“The bell?”

“No.”

She straightens and pushes the trolley past you.

“The gap.”

You watch her go. “Wait. Who are you?”

She raises one hand without turning. “Mara.”

“Mara what?”

“Just Mara will do.”

Her broom scrapes across the wet stone. You look down. Your shoes are standing inside two grooves worn into the platform. The hollows cradle your soles so neatly that you hadn’t noticed them. They lead towards the concourse, deepening where other routes join. People pass beside you, their feet settling into the channels.

Behind you, far down the tunnel, someone laughs.

You turn towards the sound, but there’s only darkness beyond the platform lights. When you look down again, your feet are still pointing towards the concourse.

You lift one. For a moment it hovers above the familiar hollow. Then you place it on the flat stone beside the groove and shift your weight. Your ankle adjusts to the different footing.

You bring the other foot across.

GATE ONE — NOTICE

CHAPTER ONE

THE STATION

Away from the grooves, you have to watch where you put your feet. A suitcase clips your heel. You stumble forward, and someone catches your elbow long enough to steady you.

“Sorry,” the suitcase’s owner calls, already turning towards the concourse.

You raise a hand, though they can no longer see it. Ahead, people pour between the platforms and the exits: nurses in winter coats, builders in high-visibility jackets, students shouldering bags. A young mother steers a pushchair through a gap you wouldn’t have thought wide enough.

You move closer to a pillar. From here, with nobody trying to get around you, the station is easier to take in. Warm air carries the smell of coffee across the colder draught from the platforms. Shoes squeak on wet stone. Above the ticket machines, a board clicks through departures, and several faces tilt towards it together.

There are signs everywhere. Yellow arrows on the floor, painted lines, instructions hung from the roof. Your eyes travel from one to the next, looking for something that might apply to you.

WAY OUT.

PLATFORMS 1–8.

FOOD.

WORK.

You look back at the last one. It says EAST CONCOURSE.

A bell rings, bright and close. Around you, hands move towards pockets. Not everyone’s, but enough for the

movement to catch your eye: a row of small screens waking beneath the departure board.

Beside the pillar, a man in a blue shirt unlocks his phone, glances at it and puts it away. His tie has worked loose, and there are dark hollows beneath his eyes.

“Was that yours?” you ask.

He looks up. “What?”

“The bell. I thought it might have been a message.”

“Oh.” He pats his pocket. “No. Just checking.”

“Anything there?”

He starts to answer, then frowns. “Don’t think so.”

Another bell sounds. His hand goes back to his pocket, and he catches himself with his fingers still hooked inside it. For a moment you both look down.

“I’m waiting to hear whether they need me in early,” he says.

You nod. He seems about to say something else, but the departure board clicks and he looks towards it instead.

“Better go.”

He joins the people heading for the platforms. You almost call after him. Then you realise you have no idea what you would ask, or why he should spend his morning answering.

The grooves continue into the concourse. Some are so shallow you can only see them where the stone catches a reflection; others run deep enough to hold a little water. You follow one with your eyes until a shoe comes down in it and the sole settles neatly against the worn edges. You crouch beside the pillar and touch the stone. Along the bottom of the channel it feels smooth as glass.

“Mind your hand.”

You draw it back. A man in a grey coat has stopped with his laptop bag lifted clear of your head.

“Sorry.”

“You’re all right.”

He steps around you, then pauses to adjust the strap on his shoulder.

“Do you come through here every day?” you ask.

“Most days.”

“Work?”

“Accounts.” He gives a small, tired smile. “Twenty-six years.”

“Always what you wanted to do?”

He looks towards the escalator. You wish you’d asked something less personal.

“Was meant to be for the summer,” he says.

A bell rings. He glances up at the board, shifts the bag again and wishes you a good day. You watch him go, one shoe following the other along the channel.

“He’ll miss his train if you keep him talking.”

Mara is emptying a bin a few yards away. Her woollen hat lies on the trolley now, beside the thermos. A black elastic band holds back most of her grey hair; a few strands have escaped across her cheek.

“You know him?”

“No. But I’ve worked this platform twenty-three years. I know that walk.”

“Doing this?”

She looks at the broom. “No. Brain surgery. I sweep up as a hobby.”

You smile. She knots the bin bag, lifts it onto the trolley and reaches for a clean one. You lift the bin’s lid while she fits the clean bag.

“Thanks.”

You follow as she wheels the trolley towards the concourse. One wheel catches in a groove. She lifts that corner by its handle, clears the edge and carries on.

“Do the bells bother you?” you ask.

“What bells?”

You stop. She looks back, and you catch the small smile before she can hide it.

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

She parks the trolley beside a bench and unscrews her thermos. Steam rises past her face.

“Every time one rings, people do something,” you say. “Check a phone. Buy coffee. Go somewhere.”

“Some people.”

“Lots of them.”

She takes a sip. “What were you doing before you got here?”

“Sleeping.”

“Before that.”

You try again to find the beginning of the journey. A platform. A ticket in your hand. Nothing you can be sure of.

“I don’t remember.”

Mara lowers the thermos. “Was there a man on your train? Grey suit?”

You turn towards the platforms before you can help it.

“You know him?”

“I’ve seen him. He comes through here.”

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know his name.”

“He knew mine.”

She looks at you for a moment. Then she screws the lid back onto the thermos.

“Did he tell you anything useful?”

You think of the notebook. “I’m still trying to work that out.”

“Take your time.”

“He had an umbrella.”

Her hand pauses on the lid.

“Black? Wooden handle?”

“Yes. What does that mean?”

“I’ve seen him with it before.” She puts the thermos away. “That’s all I can tell you.”

You wait, hoping there’s more. A bell sounds, and your phone vibrates against your leg.

You have it in your hand before you’ve decided to take it out.

The screen is blank. No message, no alert, still no signal. You turn it slightly, shielding it from the light, as though that might reveal something.

“I was checking whether the signal had come back,” you say.

Mara hasn’t asked.

You put the phone away. That may have been why you reached for it. You can’t quite remember wanting to know until it was already in your hand.

Someone shifts on the bench behind you. A young woman sits with her head tipped back against the wall, hospital scrubs visible beneath an open winter coat. One hand holds a paper cup. The other rests on a phone in her lap. An identification card has turned sideways against her chest.

LEAH.

Her eyes open at the next bell. She lifts the phone, checks it and lets it fall back onto her coat.

There's room at the far end of the bench. You gesture towards it, and she moves her bag without being asked.

"Long night?" you say as you sit.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Only because you look how I feel."

"That's reassuring."

"Are you waiting for someone?" you ask.

"A train. Supposedly." Leah looks up at the board, then down at the phone still in her hand. "And a call."

You nearly ask whether she checked because of the bell. Something in her face stops you.

"My dad's ill," she says.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine." She rubs one thumb along the edge of her cup. "No. It's not fine. We're waiting on results."

"Is someone with him?"

"My mum."

"I know they'll ring," Leah says. "I keep looking anyway."

She raises the phone a little.

"Stupid, isn't it?"

"No."

You can feel your own phone against your thigh. A few minutes ago you'd have been pleased to catch another person reaching for theirs.

"Waiting's horrible," you say.

She looks at you, then lets out a breath. "It really is."

For a while neither of you speaks. She drinks her coffee, makes a face and looks into the cup.

"Cold?"

"Wasn't much better hot."

You laugh, and she does too. When her platform appears on the board, she stands and gathers her bag. You move your feet to let her pass.

“I hope it’s good news,” you say.

“Thanks.”

She goes carefully at first, easing a stiff leg into motion, then disappears among the people heading for the stairs. You sit a little longer.

When you get up, you follow a channel towards the main concourse. Your shoe settles into it, and the next step comes easily. The shallow sides guide your soles. You fall into pace with the people ahead, leaving about the same distance between you as everyone else.

For a few moments it’s a relief. You don’t have to keep finding a gap or checking which way to turn. There is room in your head to think about Leah, and then about the man who had taken a summer job twenty-six years ago.

Someone brushes your arm. You look up. The channel has carried you towards the escalator, and your hand is already lifting towards the moving rail.

You stop beside it and laugh.

Mara is pushing her trolley towards a service door, and you walk back to her. As you do, a bell sounds. Your hand starts towards your pocket and stops halfway. The wish to check remains, oddly unfinished. You lower your hand, but you can still feel the phone there.

“Does that go away?” you ask.

“What?”

“Wanting to look.”

Mara stops beside the trolley. “Sometimes. Depends what I’m waiting for.”

“I thought noticing would help.”

“You noticed before you took it out.”

“I still want to.”

“Yes.” She gives you a moment. “You can want to and leave it there.”

You look towards the stairs Leah used. “Or take it out.”

“Or take it out.”

The notebook presses against your leg beside the phone. Learn what already has power over you. You had imagined something larger when you read it on the platform. Something you would recognise at once.

“Did he teach you that?” you ask.

“The man on the train? No.”

“Then how did you learn it?”

Mara takes the broom from the trolley and rests both hands on its handle.

“My daughter used to ring me when she’d had a bad day. Trouble at work, someone upsetting her. And I’d get straight in with what she ought to do.”

“Trying to help.”

“Oh, absolutely. I’d have three solutions ready before I knew what the problem was.”

She smiles, then looks down at her hands. “I didn’t like hearing her upset. You want to sort it out, don’t you? Especially when it’s your child. I thought if I could give her an answer, she’d feel better.”

“Did she?”

“Sometimes. Other times she went quiet, and I took that to mean I’d helped.”

A train moves somewhere beyond the wall. Mara waits for the noise to pass. “One evening she said, ‘Mum, can you let me finish? I haven’t even told you what happened yet.’”

“Was she angry?”

“More tired of it, I think. I was a bit hurt, if I’m honest. Then I realised I couldn’t have told you what she’d been trying to say. I’d been too busy working out my answer.”

She shifts the broom against her shoulder. “Next time she rang, I did it again. Got as far as ‘What you need to do—’ and caught myself.”

“What did you say?”

“‘Sorry, love. Go on.’”

“And you listened?”

“I tried. Had to keep putting my own answer down while she was talking. It wasn’t easy.”

You glance towards your pocket. “Does it get easier?”

“A bit. I still want to jump in. Especially if she’s crying. Sometimes I do, and she says, ‘Mum,’ in that voice.”

Mara gives a small laugh. “These days I ask if she wants me to help her think it through or just listen for a while.”

“What does she say?”

“Depends what’s happened. Sometimes she wants my advice. Sometimes she wants a moan while she makes her tea.”

She lowers the broom to the floor. “I like those calls. I hear more of her now.”

Your phone is still in your pocket. You can feel the wish to check it, though nothing has sounded. While Mara was speaking, you’d almost reached for it twice.

You leave your hand at your side. Across the concourse, a train is called, and for a moment you hope it’s Leah’s.

THE REVERSAL

At first, the bells seemed to explain everybody. Then Leah told you what she was waiting for, and the phone in her hand

meant something you couldn't have seen from across the concourse. Your explanation had arrived before her story. Meanwhile, your own hand kept finding your pocket, even while you were congratulating yourself on noticing the habit.

Mara brings the possibility of change down to an ordinary phone call. She still wants to help her daughter; asking what kind of help she wants simply gives that impulse somewhere different to go. You don't have to become a different person to try a different response. There is room inside what you've been calling 'just the way I am'.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

You wouldn't get much done if every movement needed a fresh decision. Think of typing, or steering through a bend you know well. Familiar places, feelings and sequences help bring familiar actions back, often without much conscious attention. Much of the time that serves you well. Sometimes the situation has changed and you're still doing what used to work.

You don't have to inspect every movement. You might begin with one routine that keeps taking you somewhere you no longer want to go, and ask:

WHICH OF MY BEHAVIOURS ARE MAKING DECISIONS BEFORE I NOTICE THERE WAS A DECISION TO MAKE?

THE EVIDENCE ROOM

Beside the service door, a flight of stairs leads down beneath the Station. Light spills up from a small cinema entrance. You would have taken it for another passage to the platforms if Mara hadn't pointed out the faded film posters along the wall.

"There's something down there you should see."

She leaves the trolley by the door and walks down with you. With each step, the announcements grow softer. By the bottom you can hear a projector running.

Inside, the room smells of butter and old upholstery. Mara switches on a row of wall lights. A cardboard box rests on a seat, and you lift it out of the way before sitting down. Popcorn. You take a piece while you look towards the screen.

It bends between your teeth. You stop chewing.

“How old is this?”

“Seven days.”

You find a paper napkin beside the box and spit the popcorn into it. Mara waits while you fold it closed.

“Did you have to let me eat it?”

“I was about to tell you.”

You glance at the box. You’d recognised what was in it. That had been enough.

Years before your journey through the City, researchers David Neal, Wendy Wood and colleagues studied people with strong and weak habits of eating popcorn at the cinema.

Some received fresh popcorn. Others got popcorn seven days old. The stale popcorn tasted bad, and people knew it.

Yet strong cinema-popcorn habit holders ate similar amounts of fresh and stale popcorn in the cinema. Move the same task to a meeting room, or disrupt the familiar action by making people use their non-dominant hand, and the habitual pull weakened.

The eaters hadn’t lost their taste buds. The familiar setting had helped get them eating before preference had much say. Change the setting or interrupt the action, and there’s more room to notice what you’re doing.

Mara takes a piece from the box and turns it between her fingers. Then she puts it back.

“I’m not that committed to the lesson.”

You laugh, still trying to clear the taste from your mouth. When you stand to leave, you turn sideways to squeeze along the narrow row.

You remember doing that on the platform. Lifting one foot clear of the groove. Finding somewhere else to put it. For that small movement, you had needed to pay attention again.

THE TRAP

Once you start noticing habits, every routine can begin to look suspicious. That would be an exhausting way to live. You need plenty of things to happen without a debate. A useful question is whether this particular routine still takes you somewhere you want to go.

On the stairs, you find your hand following the smooth rail. Mara sees you looking at it.

“If the groove’s taking you somewhere you still want to go, stop staring at your feet.”

A PERSONAL NOTE

That line takes me back to a karate class years ago. One of my students asked why we did something a particular way. I gave him the sort of answer instructors have probably been giving students forever.

“That’s how I was taught.”

He smiled and told me a story. He and his wife had been invited to dinner with friends. Their host was preparing a joint of beef and, before putting it in the oven, cut about an inch from each end.

“Why do you do that?” they asked.

“My mum always did it that way.”

So they rang her mum. “Why did you cut the ends off the beef?”

“Because that’s how my mum did it.”

The grandmother was still around, so eventually they asked her too. Her answer was wonderfully ordinary.

“Because my oven was too small.”

A perfectly sensible solution had become a family tradition. The oven had changed. The behaviour hadn’t.

I’ve thought differently about “that’s how I was taught” ever since. It can explain where a habit came from. It doesn’t necessarily explain why it still deserves a place.

SOMETHING TO TRY

If you’d like to try this, choose one small action that sometimes seems to begin on its own: unlocking your phone, heading for the cupboard, saying yes before you’ve considered a request. When you notice it starting, see whether you can leave about five seconds before continuing. You can still check the phone, have something to eat or say yes. The pause gives you a chance to consider what you want now. One noticed moment is enough to begin with; you don’t need to monitor yourself all day.

THE BODY CUE

If it feels comfortable, stand and look down at your feet. Take one deliberate step sideways. Feel your weight move, and remember the grooves in the Station floor.

You can use that small movement when you want to interrupt an automatic sequence. If you’d rather stay seated, place one foot a little to the side and notice the new position.

Let it remind you:

I AM STEERING AGAIN.

THE SENTENCE

Mara takes hold of the trolley. At the edge of the concourse, she points you towards the eastern doors.

“That way gets you outside.”

You’re reluctant to let her go. There must be other things to ask her, but you can’t sort them into a question.

“If I only remember one thing from all this,” you say, “what should it be?”

She thinks for a few seconds.

“Don’t call everything you repeat your personality.”

You look down at the channels running past the trolley’s wheels.

“Thank you.”

Mara nods. Then someone calls to her from the service door, and she turns the trolley towards the voice. You watch her lift its awkward wheel across a groove.

The notebook has grown warm in your pocket. You open it beneath the departure board. After the messages from the train, a fresh page carries two lines:

IF YOU NEVER INSPECT YOUR PROGRAMMING,

IT EVENTUALLY FEELS LIKE PERSONALITY.

Underneath is a small drawing. Two parallel grooves. And one footprint stepping out.

MEMORY LOCK

If you’d like to keep the Station with you, pause here for a moment. You can close your eyes or leave them open.

Picture the grooves worn into the stone. Hear a bell, and feel your hand beginning to reach for your phone. Then picture your foot finding a place beside the groove, your weight settling onto it.

You don't need every detail. If that image comes back while your hand is reaching, your mouth is answering or your feet are carrying you somewhere, let it bring one question with it:

DID I CHOOSE THIS—

OR DID IT SIMPLY BEGIN?

You leave through the eastern doors. Rain drums on the awning, and a cold mist reaches beneath it whenever the wind shifts. You stop beside a woman shaking water from a folded newspaper.

Across the street stands the grey-suited man. His black umbrella is open. People hurry around him with their shoulders hunched and bags held over their heads, but his suit is dry.

You take a step towards the kerb. Then you see someone beside him: a young man in a soaked jacket, one hand raised towards the umbrella. You can't hear what he's saying over the rain. He points beneath the canopy, where there's easily room for both of them.

The man in the suit stays where he is.

You feel yourself stiffen. The young man's hair is plastered to his forehead; water runs from the end of his sleeve. You are about to call across when the umbrella closes.

Rain darkens the grey shoulders. The man holds out the wooden handle, and the younger man takes it. For a moment he struggles with the catch. Then the canopy springs open above him.

The man in the suit steps away. Water is already shining on his repaired cuff. He walks down the street without looking back.

The young man watches him go. He moves the umbrella slightly, as though making room for someone who is no longer there. Then he pulls it closer over his head.

You wait for him to follow. He stays where he is.

The notebook warms against your leg. Your hand touches its cover through your pocket, but you leave it closed. Across the street, the young man adjusts his grip on the handle.

Through the rain, you hear a small, familiar sound.

Tick.

Then the crowd closes around the grey suit.

Water spills from the edge of the awning. You watch for a gap in the traffic and step out.

WHEN THIS BELL RINGS

WHEN: Your hand, mouth or feet start doing something before you remember deciding.

SEE: The grooves in the station floor.

ASK: Did I choose this — or did it simply begin?

DO: Create five seconds. If useful, take one deliberate sideways step.