CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Bin Bag That Costs You a Week's Shopping

A black bin bag does not look like money. That is the trouble with it.

Mine goes out on a Thursday night, and for years I never looked inside before I tied the top. Then one week I did. Half a cabbage gone slimy at the cut edge. Four potatoes with green shoulders. A heel of bread, a pot of yoghurt three days past its date and never opened, the fatty end of a gammon joint, a bag of salad turned to brown soup. Two eggs I was frightened of. The stalks and stems from a week of vegetables, which I had cut off out of habit and never once questioned.

I stood in the yard with the bag open and did something I had avoided my whole life. I added it up.

What actually goes out on a Thursday night

Ask most women what they throw away and they will say **"hardly anything."** They mean it honestly. The bag lies because it accumulates in small, forgivable instalments. A tablespoon of rice on Monday. A carrot top on Tuesday. Half a tin of tomatoes left in the fridge on Wednesday with cling film over it, forgotten by Friday.

Nobody ever threw away a week's shopping. We throw away a teaspoon, sixty times.

There are four families of waste, and every kitchen in the country runs all four.

The forgotten. Food that went to the back of a shelf and was never seen again. It did not spoil because it was bad food. It spoiled because it was invisible.

The feared. Food thrown out on the authority of a printed date, without a single sense being used to check it. Yoghurt, eggs, hard cheese, tinned goods, dried beans. Most of this is still perfectly good and goes in the bag anyway.

The unskilled. The dish that came out wrong. Grey pork, watery potato, a sauce so thin nobody wanted seconds. It gets eaten reluctantly or not at all, and half the pan goes cold on the hob.

The unrecognised. Broccoli stems, cauliflower leaves, the tops off carrots, bacon rind, chicken bones, onion skins, parmesan rind, the water you boiled the pasta in. Food you never considered food, because nobody ever told you it was.

> You are not wasteful. You are running a kitchen with four leaks you were never taught to see, and each one is small enough to forgive on its own.

That last family is the biggest and the quietest. I will spend four chapters of this book on it alone.

Putting a price on the bag: the one-week tally

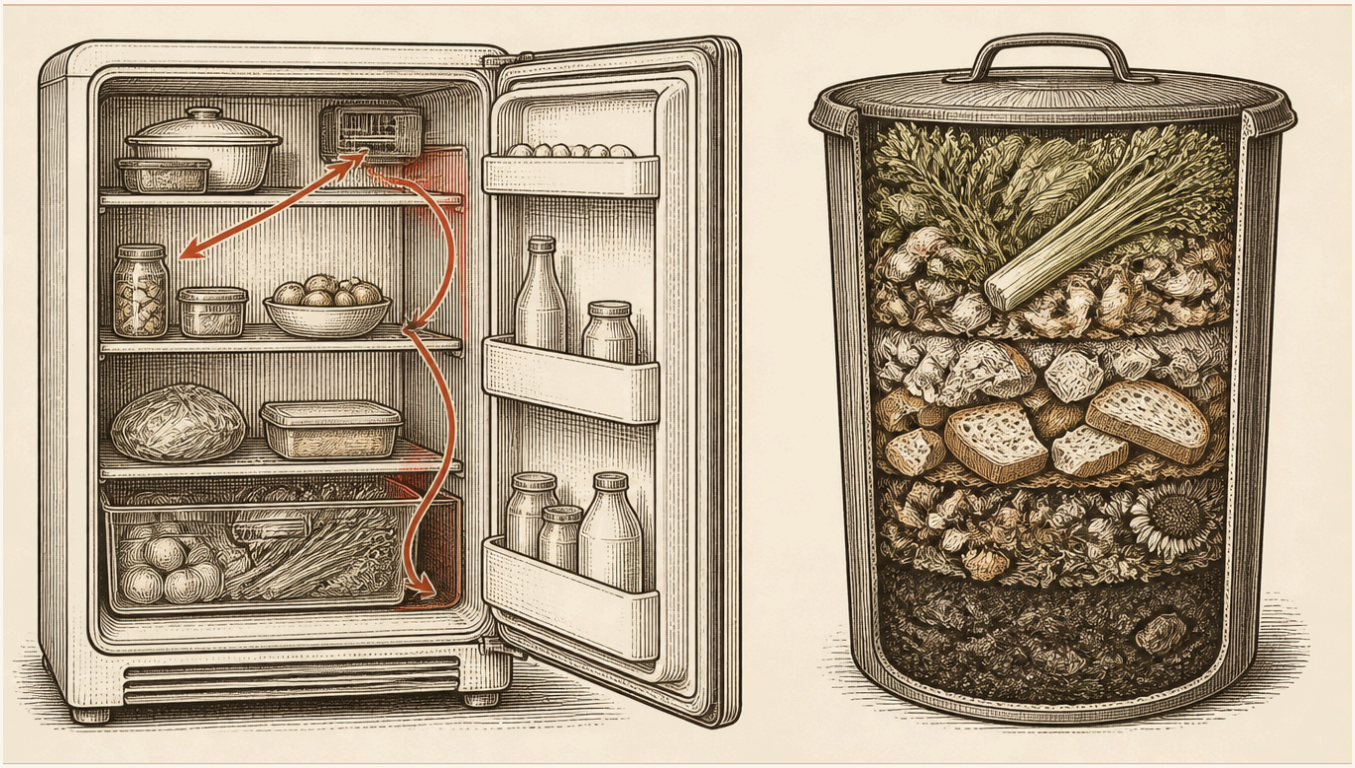
I am not going to quote you a national figure for household food waste. You do not need a statistic about the country. You need the number from your own bin, because that is the only one that will change your hands.

So here is the first piece of work in this book, and it is genuinely the only one that matters at this stage.

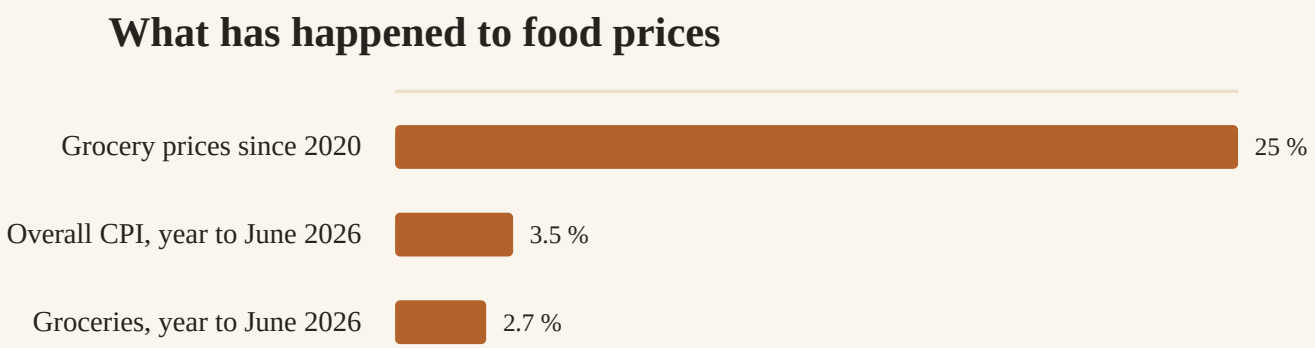
- ✓ Get a notebook and a pen. Keep them on top of the fridge, not in a drawer.
- ✓ For seven days, every time something goes in the bin or down the drain, write the item and what you paid for it. A guess is fine. Round up.
- ✓ Include liquids. Pasta water, stock from a tin, the fat from the grill pan.
- ✓ Include the parts you cut off before cooking, not just what survives the meal.
- ✓ On day eight, add the column up. Multiply by fifty-two.

That annual figure is the honest cost of the skills nobody handed down to you. In my own house, the first week's tally came to roughly the price of one full shop. I had to sit down.

Do not skip this. Reading about waste changes nothing. Watching yourself write **"half a cabbage"** four Thursdays running changes everything.



The reason the number bites now, and did not bite so hard a decade ago, is simple arithmetic. Grocery prices in the United States have risen roughly 25% since 2020, with eggs, cooking oils and red meat climbing steepest (AmericanInflationCalculator.com, 2026-08). Food-at-home prices rose another 2.7% over the year ended June 2026[22]. Every item in your bin costs a quarter more than the same item did when you last felt comfortable at the till.



What has happened to food prices

And for a great many households, there is no slack to absorb it. More than 12 million older adults in the United States experience food insecurity, including an estimated 7.4 million people aged sixty and over[8]. The average SNAP benefit in fiscal year 2026 works out at about $6.17 per person per day[6]. At that rate, a bin bag is not an embarrassment. It is a meal that did not happen.

> **$6.17 a day.** That is the practical per-person food budget behind the average 2026 SNAP benefit (CBPP, 2026-02). A spoiled cabbage is most of a day.

Why this is a skills problem, not a willpower problem

Here is where I part company with most of what you will have read on this subject.

Almost every article on food waste treats it as a moral failing. Be more organised. Be less lazy. Plan better, care more, try harder. That advice has been circulating for thirty years and the bins are still full, which tells you it is the wrong diagnosis.

You already care. You already try. What you are missing is a body of practical knowledge that used to pass from mother to daughter at the stove and stopped passing somewhere around 1960.

The food historian Laura Shapiro documented that break directly. Writing about postwar America, she put it plainly:

> "The postwar food industry stood at the ready, promising to minimize a housewife's time at the stove."

That promise was kept, and it cost us something. Shapiro's work traces how the processed-food industry pushed to take over home cooking between the end of the war and the mid-1960s (Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 2004). When the packet took over the job, the knowledge behind the job stopped being rehearsed. Two generations later, it is simply not in the house.

I see the hunger for it plainly in the way people talk online. On a long-running homesteading forum thread devoted to Depression-era recipes, home cooks trade water pie, vinegar pie, eggless cake and bean soups, and argue honestly about which ones genuinely hold up at a modern table and which were pure survival food (BackYard Chickens forum). That is not nostalgia. That is people reconstructing a lost manual from fragments, in public, because nobody left them a copy.

The same instinct has gone mainstream. Depression-era and recession-era cooking became a genuine social-media movement in 2025 as food costs climbed[16]. Millions of people are looking for exactly the skills your mother's mother took for granted.

> **Case:** The dish behind much of that revival is the Poor Man's Meal — potatoes, onions and sausage, three ingredients, one pan. It is a documented Depression-era supper that came back into circulation among budget cooks in 2025[18]. Nothing in it is clever. Everything in it is technique.

What this book will and will not ask of you

Let me be direct about the bargain, because I dislike books that hide their terms.

This book will not ask you to buy anything. No vacuum sealer, no food processor, no set of matching containers. You need a knife, a pan, a pot, a fridge and a freezer. If you have those, you have everything.

It will not ask you to eat worse. Making do and going without are two different things, and I will come back to that difference at the very end. Nothing here is punishment food.

It will not ask you to spend your evenings meal-prepping. The habits in this book take two minutes a day, not two hours a Sunday.

It will ask you to learn about fifteen techniques. How to boil a potato so it holds together. How to read a fridge instead of a printed date. How to turn pasta water into sauce. How to get two meals from one chop. Each one is small. Together, they close every leak we just named.

It will ask you to do the tally. Seven days, one notebook, honest numbers.

Start it tonight. Not Monday, not after the weekend. Tonight, with whatever is already in the bin.

Because the first thing you will find when you look properly is a pile of packaging with dates printed on it, all of it discarded on trust. And that raises an uncomfortable question. Who decided those dates, what do they actually mean, and how much perfectly good food have you thrown away on the word of a printer?