WHAT I LEARNT

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What My Listeners Say –
and Why We Should Take Notice

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In memory of my mother-in-law Margaret Schofield
(1948–2015), who would have disagreed with half of this,
and still encouraged me

Contents

Before We Start

One of my dearest friends had a terrible fear. Reaching fifty-seven, and loving red wine, he realised that he had got to the birthday his father never saw. The friend – let's call him Austin – had taken his dad's place running the family business. His responsibilities had been handed to him prematurely, and in tragic circumstances. Austin's father died suddenly from a massive heart attack. He was fifty-six.

These days everyone knows that family history is a vital indicator of good health. Strengths and weaknesses are bequeathed in our genes. News items carry stories about 'genetic splicing', the first attempts by scientists to edit those genes. But they are in their infancy.

My friend is perceptive and thoughtful. He celebrated his fifty-seventh without joy. In the work he does, and which his father did, he cannot avoid stress. He must see many clients and all must feel they have his undivided attention. I see him juggling fifteen different projects and wonder how he does it. Thinking of his father, Austin began to wonder too. He started to avoid starch, eat raw nuts and cut desserts. There was an increase in exercise. But you cannot outrun your own DNA.

However, Austin is successful – his father's business has bloomed under his watch – and thus he has two great advantages: money and information. He went to see his GP.

'I want treatment for a heart attack.'

'You have had one?' The doctor looked astonished.

'No. I want treatment before I have it.'

The doctor was puzzled. 'What are your symptoms?'

'I have no symptoms.'

'Breathlessness, shooting pain in your arm?'

'No.'

'In that case you are not ill. Why have you come to me?'

'Because,' replied Austin, 'I have just passed the age at which my father died of heart failure. He and I lived the same life. We run the same business and we drink the same wine. So I know I will have a heart attack, and I want you to treat me for it.'

The GP laughed. 'That is rather putting the cart before the horse! A doctor can only treat you for an illness you have.'

Austin was not thrown. *'I want you to treat me for my father's heart attack.'*

Eventually the physician was persuaded to refer Austin to one of the finest cardiologists in Harley Street. But the referral must have been lukewarm, because once again my friend found himself having to argue for attention.

'I really don't know why you're here,' said the eminent cardiologist.

'I would like the gold standard heart tests. Cameras, dye, everything.'

'We don't do that without some cause.'

'Never?'

Possibly deciding an examination would be less exhausting than the argument, the cardiologist finally agreed. A camera was inserted into Austin's right wrist and fed upwards through a major artery to his chest. Dye illuminated the chambers of the heart.

Waking from the anaesthesia, Austin saw a change in the cardiologist's expression.

'I'm glad you came. Your vessels are unusually narrow. Your heart may tick reliably for five years but I doubt it would last longer. Cardiac arrest could be in years or months. Or it could be in weeks.'

'So treat me now,' insisted Austin. 'I want the operation you would normally give a patient the day after their heart attack, except I want it before.'

I visited him in hospital. The triple bypass took five hours. When he arrived for the operation, Austin heard the surgeon joke

that he was the first heart patient to arrive in the hospital carrying his own suitcases. His private insurers had needed a little – shall we say – persuasion to fund the procedure. But Austin was now sitting up in bed, happily talking to me. The vivid wound down the centre of his chest seemed like a detail. Successful surgery had saved the life his father lost.

The most surprising part of the story is not that Austin asked for an operation the doctor thought he didn't need. To me, the most surprising part is the astonishment of the doctors – do they not know their patients are arriving in consulting rooms armed to the teeth, tooled up with information like Jason Bourne carries guns?

A year after his heart was repaired, Austin's radical approach was vindicated in the worst way possible. A heart attack claimed the life of his elder brother, who died in his sleep.

Austin had shocked the physicians because he inverted the normal relationship. Their patient was now the expert. The medics protested because they were no longer in charge. But they should get used to the creak of the tables turning. Others will follow.

All around us, power balances are shifting. 2016 and 2017 were years of similar inversions. The winners were Brexit, Corbyn, Leicester's football team. Plus Trump and very nearly Ed Balls.

But this story is more personal to me. It starts the year before.

Part One

1. The 25,000th Call

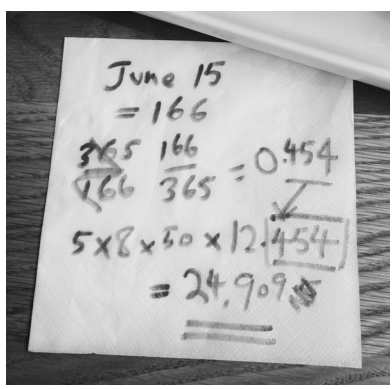
During the summer of 2015 I was sitting outside a café in hesitant London sunshine when something happened that made me think. I saw a tweet saying we were nearly at 21 June – the 172nd day of the year, and also the longest.

Now, if you are not a fan of Twitter, the news that people use it to announce the date to strangers probably confirms your worst fears. But it made me curious.

Working back from 172 showed me that this particular day was 166, and I scrawled the following formula on a napkin:

$$\mathbf{n = d \times c \times w \times (12 + 166/365)}$$

where 'd' is the number of Radio 2 programmes I present in a week, 'c' is the number of callers we take per day, 'w' is the number of broadcast weeks in the year – and 'n' is the total number of listeners who have been put through on air to my show. I then took a second napkin and wrote numbers where the letters had been, which gave me this:



where the last number is the most significant.

I had taken 24,909 calls.

Yep. Really.

I looked at the napkin again and again and eventually realised it should say 24,908.

But still. This was dramatic.

Since starting on Radio 2 in January 2003, taking over from the indefatigable Sir Jimmy Young, an 82-year-old household name who famously had his higher-quality 'toupée for special occasions' packed into an airtight box and couriered by motorbike to a last-minute interview with Prince Charles, I had spoken live on air to that truly humungous number of listeners. 12.45 years and 24,908 on-air conversations.

People often say: 'How does the delay work?'

I reply: 'Delay? There isn't one. We just have to trust the caller not to shout SHAT MYSELF IN MY WAGON or BIG BOSOMS.'

(Someone did once pull the 'shat myself in my wagon' line on us actually, a lorry driver who rang during a discussion about indigestion, but at least it was well meant.)

Now, only ninety-two calls short of the magic 25k, I became more than a little excited. Occasionally in the days that followed I would say to myself, 'Ah, that was call number 24,930', or 'Now we only have fifty to go', or maybe, 'I really am glad *that* wasn't call 25,000.' Chris Evans, you were wondering why a mug in your studio was marked with

like the wall above a prison bunk? I was counting to 25,000.

And so it came to pass that on 26 June 2015 I worked out that Jane in Leigh, near Wigan, was caller 24,994. She rang us to complain about migrants.

'We had a nightmare last year. We brought two of them back in with us on the axle of our motorhome. They were risking their lives because I was driving at seventy miles an hour down the M20 with two Somalian lads hanging from my back axle.'

The item focused on the drama in Calais caused by thousands of African migrants trying to enter Britain. Call 24,995 was Trevor Hope in Crook: 'The French, if they had their way, would move the border to Carlisle.'

Caller 24,996 was Linda Shawcross in Glasgow, a well-spoken lady who launched an attack on the UK benefits system while throwing in a stray fact about her own situation that was completely distracting: 'We have to be hard line. When I claimed benefits in Belgium I had to prove exactly who I was.'

(In radio this is known as a Witch's Post – later I will explain what exactly this is, and soon you'll be hearing them everywhere.)

We changed the subject. News had emerged that London Pride, not the beer but the parade, had banned UKIP's gay chapter from marching. Again, the power of the stray fact – *UKIP has a gay chapter?* UKIP seem about as likely to have a gay chapter as Robbie Fowler's autobiography. But they do. Campaigner Peter Tatchell agreed UKIP should be banned until they 'apologise for past homophobic statements'. London Pride had made the excuse – I'm calling it one; it certainly sounded like one – that someone on Twitter had threatened to spray urine at the UKippers from a water pistol, which had unsettled the volunteer stewards, which made the ban inevitable. Thus Richard Moyes in Glastonbury became caller 24,997.

'I couldn't be more – probably what Peter Tatchell doesn't like. Having said that, I'm extremely liberal. I don't have a racist, sexist, ageist bone in my body. But this is gross hypocrisy.'

Richard's first line, 'I couldn't be more what Peter Tatchell doesn't like' . . . er, right, what does that mean? *I spend eight*

hours a day in the gym, and the other four having sex with busty women, reading Russian motorbike magazines and bringing up phlegm in theatres? I guess we may never get to the bottom of it. And it doesn't matter. Callers are hand-picked by the twenty-somethings on our switchboard simply for passion. They may create more questions than they answer, and crucially *they may be wrong* . . . but once in a while they give you a precious fact that can be recalled and reused for ever.

So it was with caller 24,998. Louise Morales in Woking rang after we began discussing the death of a young gardener in Hertfordshire who had brushed his hand against the poisonous flower Devil's Helmet. Five days later the poor man succumbed to multiple organ failure. Louise, herself a professional gardener, had a customer who wanted the same flower planted.

'He called it Monkshood. I said you do realise this is very poisonous? We mustn't let children near it. So we put it at the back of the border where it won't get brushed by anybody. There are no children, and the clients never go to the back of the border.'

I love the simple wisdom of that: if you grow a poisonous plant, put it at the back of the flowerbed. The same with poisonous colleagues, I guess. Louise brought us one inch closer to the magic 25,000, albeit via a story of personal tragedy. Migrants . . . Marchers . . . Monkshood . . . I was going to say 'all human life is here', but it turns out we seem to restrict ourselves to stories that start with the letter M. The item was only slightly spoilt for me when I saw the Radio 2 homepage, which underneath a large picture of me had placed the words

JEREMY VINE:
Devil's Helmet.

It hardly mattered. Because now my own butterflies were starting to flutter. A forester in Richmond, North Yorkshire, was put through.

'I've come out in a rash gathering ragwort. The sap gets into your skin, and affects your liver and kidneys. And when you

crush or burn cherry laurel it gives off cyanide gas. That's why you don't find laurel plants being eaten by rabbits.'

Dave the Forester was 24,999. A little dour, but never mind. I liked the line about the rabbits.

The next call would be the watershed moment for my show.

I had visions of champagne suddenly being produced by managers jumping out of cupboards, bunting hung above the checkout like they used to do in American supermarkets: YOU ARE OUR MILLIONTH CUSTOMER. Except you don't have cash registers on a radio show, just a mixing desk crammed with faders. I slid one upwards and there was Nick Brown, business guru, talking about what to do if the bank won't lend you money. We gave out the number and waited for calls. '0500 288 291,' I kept saying urgently.

It seemed to take a very long time. The editor shook his head on the other side of the glass: 'Nothing yet.' We played a record. Sister Sledge. Then the producer brought through a piece of paper saying *STUART BRUCE IN NEWBURY. Wants to ask about where he can borrow money as bank said no*.

Perfect. So here we go.

'We have Stuart in Newbury on the line,' I announced, just seeing the figure *twenty-five thousand* swim into my field of vision, imagining a queue of zeros bouncing like beans, fluorescent pennants sagging from the ceiling, managers offering me a huge rise in salar– no. That last part was pure fantasy.

'Go ahead Stuart.'

On he came, the historic caller, our 25k-man.

Maybe this would be the moment I became a legend in the same league as Sir Jimmy Young. The caller began to speak, slowly at first.

'I am a small franchise. I went to a bank for a loan. I got turned down, so I managed to go to the sperm bank. TO GET LOTS OF SPERM.' (*Loud laughter, caller hangs up*.)

I looked at Nick Brown. He looked at me. His eyebrows went up. Mine went up higher. You went to a *sperm bank*? Of course, the silly man was messing around. My 25,000th call was a joke.

Had it been a good hoax – and we have only had two of them over the last decade – then it might have been worth celebrating. Had Stuart said, 'My business idea is to paint ferrets bright red and use them to search for Viking treasure', then he probably would have got ten minutes of airtime while presenter and expert unpacked the idea with boggle-eyed fascination. But just to shout SPERM BANK! and hang up . . .

So now I got a little cross. What a buffoon, I thought, with a restrained internal *grrrrrrrrr*. What a – Devil's Helmet. My watershed moment was ruined.

But actually the Sperm Banker did me a favour. He forced me to take stock. No modest way to say this: if my show were a news programme, it would be the number one in the country. It regularly beats Radio 4's *Today* programme, the nearest competition. The problem is that we aren't really news. They announce stuff; we discuss it. Even 'current affairs' puts it a bit too strongly. And it is more than a phone-in. Perhaps we could just call it 'water cooler radio', and settle for that. A place where people gather to laugh or chat, to hear things, and mainly to get entertained.

In the nineties I interviewed the prisons campaigner Lord Longford. 'And what is your autobiography about?' I asked him.

'Me,' he said. One word.

And then he laughed.

That was basically the start and the end of the conversation. *Private Eye* printed it as a Colemanball and I thought my career was over.

Well, this book is not about me. It is about them – my listeners, and all the surprises they spring, and what they tell us. Often they communicate pure joy. Just as often they are furious about something. A small number adopt the line taken in a letter published by the *Evening Standard* on 15 August 1979:

Dear Sir,

I wish to complain most strongly about everything.

Yours sincerely,

Henry Root

Root was a made-up person. My listeners are real and I love them. They are capable of great compassion but when they react with anger it blows every thermometer. Among subjects which have infuriated them in recent years are:

- Lollipop ladies
- Old people using buses
- Old people not using buses
- A vicar who complained about the amount of hardcore porn on battleships
- Tony Blair saying anything at all, even breathing
- Goldfish being given away as prizes at fairs
- Russell Brand
- Cellophane

But there are other, supremely tender, moments. I am writing this at five to three on a Wednesday afternoon. A little earlier – at ten past twelve – I welcomed to our Cardiff studio a Welsh listener, Rowena Kincaid, and wished her a happy fortieth live on air. Those birthday wishes took precedence even over an item on the previous day's House of Commons debate on the bombing of Syria. Why? Because two years earlier Rowena had been told her breast cancer meant she had no more than six months to live. We had spoken on the radio back then, and she had said her ambition was simply to get to forty. Now she had. Not cured, still terminal, but shining with a special kind of optimism. So we marked the day.

'Unfortunately my chemotherapy session falls on Christmas Eve – the next day I never feel like doing anything, so Christmas is a bit of a write-off this year,' she told me without a shred of resentment.

'But I think I was born happy. I stay positive. I am dealing with it head-on. It is really difficult because you always have to be prepared for the punch in the face and then the fall, then getting back up and dusting yourself down again. But it is just one of those things. You just have to keep on going. I enjoy my

life and I just want to keep it. Stay positive and keep on going. On days when I feel good, I can go out and have a drive and see my friends and have lunch, and just feel okay.'

I listened to her voice, and was transported. Maybe you thought there was nothing much dramatic in what Rowena said. Or maybe, like me, you saw those ten sentences and thought they told us almost everything we need to know about who we are and how precious our life should feel.

2. Horse Day Combat

I was wheel-clamped in Acton. I had parked perfectly properly overnight in a west London car park, then in the morning neglected to buy a ticket. At noon I suddenly remember the car and start looking for it.

Sure enough, the front wheel is visible from two hundred yards away because it is now luminous yellow. The man who applied the clamp is retreating hurriedly.

He is a strapping fellow with a West African accent and is still holding the key to the padlock when I catch up with him.

'You should have bought a ticket,' he insists.

As courteously as possible, I give him my answer. 'Forty-five minutes ago, behind the third-floor hospital window you can see up there, I became a father. My wife has been in labour for twenty-four hours. When dawn broke and I was supposed to be getting your pay-and-display sticker, I was instead having to accompany her up to the third floor in a wheelchair as she got ready to be – ' I paused, searching for the right phrase. 'Surgically encouraged.'

The car park attendant says: 'Oh my God. Please forgive me.'

I smile magnanimously, thinking: *Remain calm*. 'Listen, it doesn't matter at all. I am not even slightly upset. The wheel clamp cannot compete with these developments.'

The attendant smiles. 'Was it a boy or a girl?'

'A girl. And they're both doing fine.'

'Here is your ticket,' he says in broken English. 'I am sorry for my part in this.'

I wave the piece of paper. 'I shall pay it – with elation.'

He replies: 'You must pay it with cash.'

You have to laugh. The conversation came back to me when

I forgot to send a cheque to the VAT people and within days got a letter from the taxman entirely in red, written in the style vigilantes use when they spray-paint the front door of the neighbourhood paedophile. The letter did not contain the phrase DIE BASTARD DIE but it came close. I showed it to my wife. 'All red ink, all capital letters. They even wrote their own address in red. You have to laugh,' I said.

She pointed out that people only say *You have to laugh* when they are almost speechless with fury. There is a British laugh that is exactly the same as the noise chimpanzees make before they attack. The laugh is just diverted anger. It might explain why so much of the tragedy on my radio show seems to release itself as comedy. During an item about vehicles catching fire while being driven, Ian from Oxford left this message.

'I was in an ambulance. Being rushed to hospital after a suspected heart attack. Drivers were sounding their horns and pointing at the bottom of the ambulance. It was on fire. The driver pulled in at the next opportunity – BUT IT WAS A PETROL STATION. They all got out and forgot about me, lying in the back.'

Fortunately someone saw Ian, raised the alarm and pulled him clear before the vehicle was consumed. 'The ambulance was burnt out,' he concluded with an impressive lack of emotion.

Patricia rang from Ryde to complain about loft extensions. 'I have a bungalow and my neighbours have very tall houses and have extended their lofts towards the sky,' said Christine. 'Now I can't see anything. They have left me in darkness. And this is the second time I have called you, Jeremy.'

'Oh, when was the first time you called?'

'A year ago.'

'And the subject that time was loft extensions?'

'No, it was when your children are murdered by their father.'

At some point the penny quietly drops for us all, and we learn that life is precious. You might be listening to the radio and make the sudden switch between loft extension and murder. Or you are with the abandoned man in the burning ambulance. Or you hear

Rowena. Or you wheel-clamp a guy who just became a father. Or maybe it was in the moment that you became a parent yourself that the truth suddenly dawned:

So many important-seeming things are not very important at all.

I always think there are two ways of getting a sense of how brief life is. One is to study history and philosophy, not just modern history but ancient and medieval too. Cicero and the Tudors. The philosophy should encompass different cultures; for example, the Chinese teaching of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. That is the first way.

The other is to cycle in London. I started when I hit forty-five, shocked by the speed at which my natural gawkiness deserted me. But I got a greater shock from the way teams of trained assassins, disguised as ordinary motorists but actually working in well-organised hit squads, would converge at particular junctions to kill me. Most mornings on my bike I feel like Yasser Arafat cornered by Mossad. I tell friends that cycling in our capital city either lengthens your life by ten years or shortens it by twenty.

A doctor responded: 'But Jeremy, you do need your exercise. You are in sniper's alley right now.'

'Sniper's – what?' I asked.

He put the pen down on his desk as if this was serious. Sniper's alley, he explained, starts when a person turns forty-seven.

'At that point the bullets start flying. People get taken out by all kinds of illnesses between forty-seven and fifty-two. It's a dark and scary five-year corridor where, if a person is still behaving like they're twenty-five, all the wear and tear, all the stress and strain suddenly catch up with them. But get through the alley without being hit,' he went on confidently, 'and you're good for two or three more decades.'

At Radio 2, we are often reminded of our mortality. The station has a commendable approach to ageing presenters – it seems to feel the added years somehow make them more valuable.

Gloriously, that means we have some of the oldest working broadcasters (Alan Keith set a UK record: born in 1908, still on Radio 2 when I arrived, finally died aged 94 without ever actually having retired). The sadness is that some DJs pass away with their headphones on.

In 2017 we lost both Desmond Carrington and then Brian Matthew, whose relationship with the Beatles meant he could genuinely claim to be a part of their story. Just before noon on 5 April 2017, various senior people rushed into my studio to give me the news that Brian had lost his fight against a short illness.

'Am I announcing this myself?' I asked.

'The newsroom are being told now,' came the reply. 'They will do it.' For us it was on the level of a royal death.

At noon Ken Bruce handed over to me. I read the list of stories we would be covering and then said there was some sad additional news which the newsreader would now give us. She read the bulletin: 'Much-loved Radio 2 presenter Brian Matthew has died at the age of eighty-eight.' There would, she added, be a special programme tonight with tributes from people who had worked with Matthew during his illustrious career.

As listeners began to email and text emotional responses to the loss of their radio companion, the newsreader handed back to me. Asked by the producer to deliver a tribute myself, I said this was very upsetting news for the Radio 2 family, and talked a little more about Brian's career – the way he had championed the Fab Four at such a crucial early stage of their career, and his remarkable sixty-three years behind the microphone which brought us shows ranging from *Saturday Club* to *Round Midnight*, as well as the famously long-running *Sounds of the Sixties*.

'He will be much missed by all of us here,' I concluded, and played his theme tune.

A few minutes later there was a blur of activity on the other side of the studio glass. The editor Phil Jones came in during a record.

'Don't mention Brian Matthew again.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'I can't tell you.'

'He definitely is dead?'

'That's the point.'

'What do you mean?'

'He may not be.'

'HE MAY NOT BE?'

'We are hearing Brian is alive.'

So despite hundreds of tributes flooding into our various inboxes, there was, confusingly for the listeners, no further reference to my admirable colleague that lunchtime. Some hours later the BBC formally admitted that the announcement of Brian's death was the result of someone, somewhere, getting their wires crossed when speaking to the presenter's close relatives.

Unfortunately a similar misstep had occurred at the start of the year, when the BBC announced Brian Matthew had stepped down from *Sounds of the Sixties*. A newspaper contacted him in hospital and reported his answer: 'That's absolute balderdash. I was ready and willing and able to go back, and they've just said they are going to put the programme in the hands of other people.'

Social media was typically brutal when it emerged that we had botched the announcement of the presenter's death. One person tweeted –

'BBC: "Brian Matthew has retired." Brian Matthew: "No I haven't." BBC: "Brian Matthew is dead." Brian Matthew: "No I'm not."'

The following weekend, the presenter sadly passed away.

Of course the doctor who warned me about what he called 'sniper's alley' was referring to a younger generation – people in their late forties and early fifties. A glance at friends around me in the BBC suggests he may be right. Almost simultaneously, Andrew Marr had a stroke; Nick Robinson got a tumour on his lung; the newscaster George Alagiah had bowel cancer.

I heard gunshots myself, but got off lightly. In 2009 I suffered a dose of abject misery. An expert said it sounded like burnout. I didn't know whether it was burnout or Burnout, with a capital

B, so I decided to escalate experts and walked round the corner to Harley Street. A psychologist with kindly eyes that twinkled behind her spectacles said I might need time off work. I responded: 'No. Your job is to keep me working.' As a result of that kind of idiocy, I wandered around for a long time as if wearing a gigantic blob of freshly spun candyfloss on my head. Nothing, not even hearing The Smiths sing 'Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now', gave me pleasure. There is something powerfully comic about a radio presenter delivering a two-hour talk show to seven million, then leaving the office and paying one person £120 to listen to him for a further forty minutes.

In all I spoke to seven different professionals. 'I feel like Debenhams after a fire,' I told one. 'The entire store has burnt to the ground except the shop front. There's no stock, escalators, cash registers, staff. They're all just ashes. There are only the dummies in the shop window. That's the last bit of me that exists – the bit at the front.'

'The presenter,' he said.

It might have been a midlife crisis. It certainly doesn't compare to the brutal illnesses my friends suffered. But, to trouble you for an extra second on the subject, the whole business taught me a lesson. Which is that misery can be positive.

The French phrase *hors de combat* [pron.: 'or decomba'] was a favourite of my late mother-in-law, who made a joke of constantly mispronouncing it 'Horse Day Combat'. Her version meant the same thing: off the battlefield. I reckon burnout is the body's way of taking you Horse Day Combat before you suffer physical injury. In the instant that the evil gods of stroke and heart attack have decided you will be their next victim, you are suddenly forced into hibernation – crashed in bed and out of their clutches. Misery is a circuit-breaker. It may not be tidy, but I would rather lie under my duvet staring into my own heart than be opened up on a trolley with surgeons doing the staring instead.

When I awoke one morning and knew I was better, I was overjoyed. I was through Sniper's Alley. But the trough made me reflect. I began to realise what was important. Gradually,

rediscovering elation, I decided I should do the oldest and simplest thing: count my blessings.

Some of them are obvious. Fronting a radio show in the UK is a great gig. If I did one in Wyoming, my audience would only be moose and bison. Wyoming is bigger than the UK if you count in square miles:

WYOMING	97,818 mi^2
UNITED KINGDOM	94,058 mi^2

but the population is just an eyelash over half a million, so there are fewer people in Wyoming than Bristol. I went to the state once, which is why I mention it. I only saw what wasn't there — the sheer space. An empty sky that moons at you like an inescapable blue buttock. All British men over forty secretly want to become cowboys and gallop into that Wild West horizon. But I ended up with a talk show in Britain and discovered it is the Wildest West of all – sixty-four million people jammed onto one tiny island, all waving their Colt 45s and yelling over their fences, me stuck in the middle. I feel lucky.

You are lucky if you can laugh at stuff. And I realised I am also lucky because I can still learn. Laughing and learning: the two most important things in a life. Oh, and love. Make that three. The third one is the biggest. Laughter and learning and love.

When my crisis was over I turned fifty. Years ago, the night before my youngest daughter's birthday, I sat on her bed and told her: 'Anna, isn't it amazing? You're four tomorrow.'

She replied, so sweetly: 'Yes daddy, I was surprised as well.'

I laughed as the doting father. But now, hitting my own half-century, I realised that although I could have written 'turn fifty' in my diary at any point since I learnt to hold a crayon . . . *I was surprised as well*.

We had a family get-together for the occasion. My brother gave me an Apple Watch. My mum wrote a fiftieth birthday poem. She tried to read it in front of the whole family and burst into tears halfway through the first line. Mum had a quick walk

round the block to compose herself, and I thought: life has come full circle. On 17 May 1965, it was me who got upset and popped out suddenly.

But fifty made me look back. I was born only two decades after Hitler's suicide. My brother – the comedian Tim Vine – arrived twenty-two months after me. When we played soldiers as kids, we called them German and British. We put the soldiers away and I grew up. Tim brilliantly refused to. He never wanted to get any closer to university than supportively watching me being awarded an honorary degree. He held out against adulthood all those years: I never realised you could do that.

It hit home when I went to see his most recent tour. My little brother's name in the huge lightbox above theatre entrances! As the 49-year-old me drew final breaths, I brought Anna to watch a show. She and I presented our complimentary tickets and slid past other knees to reach our seats. I held her hand – she is eight now – and wondered why the word *childishness* is always negative. Why does every parent say *Don't be silly*? The other day I heard one school mum sigh to another: 'Well, I'm afraid we had a slight outbreak of high spirits.' My brother's act is childish and silly and it makes your spirit soar.

Back when Anna was three or four, she only understood two professions — firefighter and comedian. So Uncle Tim was her hero from the start, because I have never driven a fire engine. That night at the theatre he unleashed a torrent of nonsense so overwhelming it almost washed us away. I whispered to Anna: 'Look, darling. The old guy in front of us is about to die laughing.' He was a sergeant-major type with broken veins in his cheeks who groaned and gasped and doubled up so violently in his cricket sweater that I honestly thought he would peg it right there in Row Q of the Fairfield Halls.

Afterwards I asked: 'What was your favourite joke tonight?'

Anna replied: 'I had a map of Italy tattooed on my chest, but I've got really sore Naples.'

A line purer than poetry. Yet I felt a sadness – I had robbed myself of the childhood Tim managed to continue. After my

birthday party I glanced at his gift on my wrist and reflected that if the Apple Watch was bought by comedy, perhaps every second of my life was now a joke.

Which was when I decided to go on *Strictly Come Dancing*.