Save Me from the Waves

An adventure from sea to summit

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Overture

'I hope to become a better human being.
A kinder, wiser, funnier, more courageous human being.
For me.'

–Maya Angelou, *Desert Island Discs*, 1987

I've noticed that the older I get, the less I care about what other people think of me. Today, I said to a stranger sitting next to me on the Tube: '*Do you like lists?*' He looked at me as if I was mad and then went back to what he was doing on his phone. Undeterred, I turned to the woman on my right. '*Do you like lists?*' This time changing the intonation of my voice so it cadenced up and was softer, less interrogative.

'*What sort?*' she said. '*Shopping lists?*'

You see, I've been wondering whether the world is divided into people who like lists and people who don't. I thought I'd conduct some market research on my way home.

I love lists. Shopping lists – yes – especially ones with carbohydrates on them. To-do lists, although mainly if I've ticked everything off. I've got lists of all the books I've read; all the shows I've seen; and all the countries I've visited. I keep them in colourful notebooks by the side of my bed. There's also my 'Blessings Book' which lists the (mainly) little things

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that make life worth living each day, like a great cup of coffee and the first sight of spring blossom. There are my lists of 'New Year Resolutions' and my 'Bucket List' – which I'm starting to accept has one thing on it that will never happen . . . I also keep lists of people through history I admire (mainly women, sorry men) and lists of words that I like. Oh and a long list of reasons why I hate social media, and then another list about why I should still do it . . .

But there's one list that, for me, has always stood at the summit of all lists. My *Desert Island Discs* list, inspired by the UK's most beloved radio show. The programme (now also available as a podcast because everything's a podcast these days) was first created by Roy Plomley for the BBC in 1942 and recently celebrated its eightieth birthday. During all these years it has only had five presenters. Roy himself (1942–85), Michael Parkinson (1986–88), Sue Lawley (1988–2006), Kirsty Young (2006–18) and Lauren Laverne (2018–). Guests on the show are invited to pick eight music tracks which they would take to a desert island, plus one luxury and one book (along with the Bible and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* which are set text reading, although some people do refuse them). And at the end, they have to choose just one of their tracks to '*save from the waves*'.

For many people, being invited to be cast away is a lifetime ambition and the show is sometimes referred to as the UK's unofficial honours system. From pop stars to prime ministers, Oscar winners to Olympic athletes, it has become a kaleidoscope of British social history of the last hundred years. With credentials like that, who wouldn't want to have a go at composing their own list?

This story is a mountainous musical adventure for list lovers like me. But it's not your average adventure story, so the aim of this overture is to make sure you're not in the wrong place. Life's too short to read on if you are. It starts on

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the streets of London and finishes on top of the world – literally. It has inspired my new list book of all the mountains I've climbed: from Box Hill to Ben Nevis; Elbrus to Everest. There is disappointment, danger and derring-do like all good adventure stories should have – in fact it culminates with a series of horrible events which nearly ended everything for me . . . But what's different is that it is also a journey from sea to summit in song, after I made the decision to take on the challenge of listening to every episode of *Desert Island Discs* while walking up 8,848 metres (well, technically currently 8,848 metres and 86 centimetres high – Everest is growing – but most mountaineers still round the number down).

Why? You might ask. If I were a real mountaineer I might say: *'Because it's there.'* (in the legendary words of the real mountaineer George Mallory). Plus, the archive of *Desert Island Discs* is now freely available and, at over 3,000 episodes, it's an Everest of listening. But I'm not a real mountaineer. I'm a middle-aged, unlikely athlete who, in her forties, started taking on massive endurance challenges to try and exercise her way out of heartbreak.

In 2015, I swam the English Channel. In 2017, I ran the London Marathon. And in 2022, I summitted Mount Everest – although I call her *'Chomolungma'*, her original Tibetan Sherpa name. In fact, I am the first and (at the time of writing) only woman on the planet to have done all three of these things. I'm also possibly the first and only person to have ever listened to every available episode of *Desert Island Discs*. But that feat is impossible to certify.

While an adventure about music and mountains might be unusual, what is true is that music and movement are closely associated and you can't get up a mountain without moving. However, before you make your final decision about whether

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to read on, let me say that this is also a story about music and memory which I think is the essence of *Desert Island Discs* and why it has and will always endure. And like so many memories, at its heart it's about family and friends. The ones we have and find, but also the ones we've lost or will never have; all of whom make us who we are. Everyone has ghosts in their lives and, like ghosts, they can surprise you, especially when you find them in the most unexpected places. Sometimes you find them in music on a mountain. I did.

What I hope above all is that this story will encourage you to go on your own adventure – whether that's high and far away or closer to home and in your head. Because sometimes we all need to be saved from the waves, and an adventure – whatever it looks like, wherever it is – will always change your life for the better.

So, are you coming along? If you are, read on.

– Jessica Hepburn #livebigandbrave

PS. A footnote on the endnotes. Firstly, apologies for them. I hate footnotes and endnotes myself. This is formal permission from the author to do any one of these three things. 1: Read them as you go along. 2: Read them at the end if you don't want to interrupt the flow of the story. And 3: Don't read them at all. They're not essential – even though they are an important part of this adventure for me. If you're a list lover yourself, you might even enjoy them. But now we've got to begin – so tie up your reading shoes and let's get started.

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Songs of Childhood

1. Diana Ross and the Supremes: 'Baby Love'
2. Joe Jackson: 'Is She Really Going Out With Him?'
3. The Style Council: 'My Ever Changing Moods'
4. Gilbert & Sullivan: 'Pour, Oh Pour the Pirate Sherry', from *The Pirates of Penzance*
5. Tracy Chapman: 'Fast Car'
6. Frank Loesser: 'Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat', from *Guys and Dolls*
7. The Lord's Prayer
8. Alan Parker and Paul Williams: 'You Give a Little Love', from *Bugsy Malone*

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'What do you want? That strikes me as the most important question in life. What do you want? Finding out how to get it is comparatively easy.'

–Jimmy Carr, 2017

If you'd told me that Jimmy Carr would change the trajectory of my life on Sunday 19 March 2017, I wouldn't have believed you. I would have said: 'Who's Jimmy Carr?' No. That's not quite true. I did know who he was. At least, I knew what he looked like. In fact, I once saw him on Regent Street with his Christmas shopping. Obviously I don't know for sure it was his Christmas shopping. But it was just before Christmas. It was dark, there were twinkling lights, the evening was dry but biting and he was carrying a Hamleys bag. I suppose he could have been in to buy something for himself. He might like train sets or model aeroplanes or have been lured by those colourful boomerang toys they're always demonstrating at the entrance to entice you in. But I think it's fair to assume that he'd probably been in to buy presents: for a niece or nephew; a godchild; maybe his own kids if he has them. After all, why else would you brave Hamleys at Christmas? So, yes, I did know who Jimmy Carr was. The tall, dark, slightly toffy-looking comedian off the telly. But I don't watch his show and

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I've never been to one of his gigs. I don't think I'd get his jokes. He seems too clever for me. So . . . if you'd told me that he would change the trajectory of my life on Sunday 19 March 2017, well, I wouldn't have believed you. But life's funny like that.

I was running down Sloane Street at the time. I say running because it's not cool to use the word 'jogging' any more, but the truth is my body was not built for speed. In fact, a week or so before this a stranger had shouted out at me: '*You must be exhausted running like that.*' At first, I thought he was being kind. I *was* exhausted. Then I thought, how rude. I can't help it that small dogs and toddling children overtake me. At least I'm giving it a go. I'm doing my *best*.

Anyway. I was moving somewhere between a walk and a run down Sloane Street. I'd already done nearly six miles but still had twelve to go. I was in training for the London Marathon, and was trying to put in enough work not to have to face the ignominy of reaching the finishing line at the same time as the rhinoceroses. Or should that be rhinoceri? What is the plural of rhinoceros? I've never had much use for the word before. The point is I'd given up on the thought of 'sub four' and even 'sub five' was looking dodgy; but please, let it not be 'plus six' – Save the Rhinoceros and me.

You see, I've never been very good at sport – always one of the last to be picked for the rounders team at school – I've certainly never embraced my inner runner or even shaken her hand. But at least I looked the part. I was wearing a new pair of trainers. A group of friends – all real runners – had been aghast when I told them I was planning to do the marathon in ones that were several years old. I was a bit short of cash and hoped that I could avoid buying a new pair because I wasn't planning on running a marathon again. Why would you? But when I casually enquired whether they thought my trainers

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might be responsible for the fact that my little left toe felt like it's broken whenever I put them on, they immediately sent me off to a running shop near Victoria Station. A lovely shop assistant measured my feet and then brought out a pile of boxes. When I tried the first pair on, I felt like I was Cinderella. So even though she told me to break them in and not to do a long run in them the next day, I ignored her. My new trainers looked like jewels next to my old ones, which were muddy and falling apart at the vamp and (according to the shop assistant) half a size too small.

It was only because I went to buy trainers that I had also acquired an aquamarine armband thing. When I was paying, I noticed them hanging behind the cash tills like Christmas decorations. I'd seen other runners wearing them so I knew they were for encasing iPods and smartphones and had wondered what people listened to while they ran. Music, obviously, but I'd also considered whether some people multi-tasked and learnt a new language or finally got through Tolstoy or Proust. It would be quite good to do something constructive, and might take my mind off the pain. But I'm part of the 'didn't-grow-up-with-tech' generation and, back in 2017, I hadn't even mastered listening to music while running (not helped by the fact that running wasn't something I'd ever really done) so until then I had been training in 'let's-just-get-this-over-with silence'.

However, there in the shop, emboldened by a new pair of trainers, I recklessly decided to buy an armband thing. In my favourite colour: aquamarine. I thought I had a pair of old headphones somewhere. I'd recently moved back to my childhood home in north London and a lot of stuff was still in boxes. I couldn't bear to unpack them. Too many memories. I didn't want to remember. But if I could find some headphones, I could plug them into my phone and find something to

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listen to. The combination of this and wearing new trainers might help with the horror of the obligatory five-weeks-out, eighteen-mile-training-run.

I was just passing Harvey Nichols when Jimmy Carr changed the trajectory of my life. I had decided to listen to him being interviewed on *Desert Island Discs* – my all-time favourite radio show/podcast. For his fourth track, he picks Death Cab for Cutie's 'I Will Follow You Into the Dark'.[1] Such a weird name for a band. Just before it plays, Jimmy describes how he lost faith in religion – he'd been brought up as a strict Catholic but is now an atheist. He says: '*You've got this one life and we're so privileged to be alive and it's not going to last forever. Try and enjoy it, spend it with nice people and when it's over, this seems like a beautiful sentiment.*' At the end of the show, it's the track he chooses to save from the waves if he can take only one. I've always thought this a mean final twist to the show – as if choosing eight tracks isn't hard enough.

After the song plays, the presenter, Kirsty Young, enquires why Jimmy decided to upend his career working for the oil and gas company Shell to becoming a stand-up comedian. And Jimmy says it was because he was 'sad'. Not because he was depressed, he wants to make that clear. Depression is an illness, a chemical imbalance in the brain. Sadness is something else. It's circumstantial. He reckons you can more easily do something about it. So Jimmy did. And then, as if he were talking to me, he says through my headphones into my heart: '*What do you want? That strikes me as the most important question in life. What do you want? Finding out how to get it is comparatively easy.*'

His words made me think: *'What do I want?'*

My mind was blank.

'What do I want?' I asked myself again.

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Still nothing.

It was only then that I realised how sad life had got because in the past I'd always had a plan. I made myself focus on the question, hard. *'Jessica, what do you want with this one life of yours that is not going to last forever?'*

And the only answer I could find? *'I want to choose my list of eight tracks and leave everything behind for a desert island.'*

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