Thanks for Nothing

Jack Dee

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Extract

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To me,
without whom none of this would have been possible

Preface

I don't read prefaces. They make me suspicious. I always think it looks like the book was handed in with a sick-note.

It's as if the author has got to the end, then suddenly realized that he forgot all sorts of things, so he's stuck in an extra chapter at the beginning just to cover his mistakes.

Well, that's not the case here. Everything I wanted to say, and was legally allowed to, is in the book itself. So why don't you read that instead? Everyone else is on page five by now and here you are, dutifully wasting your time on the preface.

Anyway, because this bit has to have something in it, I might as well give you the basic facts of my early life.

By the way, all this stuff is as I remember it. If I was at school with you or something, and I got the year wrong, then I'm sorry.

Actually, having said that, I'm not sorry. Also, don't try to get in touch.

So, here it is.

1961: Born in Petts Wood, Kent. My mum and dad are Rosemary and Geoff and I have a brother, David, and sister,

Joanna, who are five and eight years older than me respectively. We live in Orpington until I am four.

1965: Move to Easton, a village near Winchester. Attend Itchen Abbas Primary School until age seven.

1966: England win World Cup. Like I cared. Or care now.

1968: Start at Pilgrims' School in Winchester.

1969: Moon Landing. Overrated.

1973: Go to Montgomery of Alamein, a local comprehensive.

1977: Attend Peter Symonds sixth-form college.

1981: Start a career in the restaurant trade but, disillusioned, experiment with many other jobs.

1984: Decide to become a priest.

1984: Decide not to.

1986: First step on stage at the Comedy Store as a try-out. Meet Jane.

1989: Give up the day job and turn professional comedian. Marry Jane.

1999: Arndale Centre in Wandsworth demolished.

And that's about it. If that's all you wanted to know, then feel free to put this back on the shelf and walk out of the bookshop without having to part with your money.

But if you're still curious and want to find out more about what shaped me in the past and what makes me tick now, then take it up to the till and pay for it like a man.

Unless you're a woman, in which case pay for it like a woman. Then take it home, decide you don't really like it and put it in your wardrobe, where it will stay for the next seven years.

Contains strong opinions from the outset.

1

I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE how cheap some things are when everything else is so expensive. Not long ago, I bought an alarm clock, a known brand, £2.95, battery included, and it works perfectly. Or rather it did until my daughter borrowed it from my bedside table to take on a school trip. She had a great time. She sailed, trekked, climbed and lost my alarm clock.

But who cares? Certainly not me. It was a pleasure to return to the shop where I got it and just buy another one. I almost felt like buying two and throwing one of them away. Two pounds ninety-five; and I'm pretty sure I've seen ones just like it for £14.95 at an airport shop.

Then, I needed to replace a short piece of piping that had burst between my boiler and the hot-water cylinder. It was that kind of rubberized piping that's coated in a wire mesh to make it stronger while still enabling it to bend into awkward positions. About ten inches of it, I needed. How much do you think that would be?

Sixty-five pounds, not including labour.

The plumber reasoned that it was very good quality,

hence the price. 'Hence the previous identical one bursting,' I suggested.

Then the plumber took offence in the way that only somebody who is desperately, vitally needed can afford to do. In other words, he wasn't really offended at all, but he recognized his opportunity to act offended and was going to take full advantage of it.

'Yeah, alright, don't have a go at me, I'm only saying that's how much it cost.'

He knows I need him too much to say, 'Actually I *am* going to have a go at you. I think you are a bastard. Take your grubby bag of spanners and sod off out of my house, I'll fix the boiler myself,' because if I did, he would, and I couldn't.

I don't know what happened in our development as a species, what unfortunate glitch it was in our anthropological journey that led us all to this dependency on stroppy tradesmen for a continued supply of hot water.

I wonder how soon after the discovery of fire, a particularly devious caveman, who by extraordinary coincidence was called The Plumber, started telling everyone that if they didn't boil their water a certain way, on a fire started with a certain twig that only he was qualified to supply, it would blow up and kill them. I imagine it was quite soon, knowing human nature.

I expect that's why there are cave-paintings. It was something to do while they waited in all day Wednesday for The Plumber to turn up with his special CORGI-registered twigs that cost 65 pebbles a go.

In the interests of balance, I can see it must be difficult,

if you are a plumber, to gauge your own popularity.

Most reasonable people have a natural sense of how well liked they are.

For example, our postman is nice enough. We're not friends as such, but we are on weather-observing terms. We exchange a few words and that is that. He doesn't go on his way thinking that he is a genius or even especially well liked by me merely because he delivered the post to my house and I remarked on the rain we had at the weekend. He and I both know that talking about the weather is the smallest talk there is. It is a safe bet for anyone who wishes to have a quick, uninvolved chat with no risk of it turning into a proper conversation.

The window-cleaner is Polish. On his twice-yearly visits he likes to get on with his work without chatting, which is fine by me. He seems affable and if my Polish were up to it, I expect we could have a pleasant enough conversation about, I don't know, sponges or ladders or something.

My point here is this: neither the postman nor the window-cleaner leaves my house under the illusion that he is a really great bloke. Why? Two reasons:

1) The circumstances under which they execute their duties are never an emergency. Ever seen a postman or a window-cleaner in a hurry? Exactly. (Obviously the postman in a van, driving round side-streets like a glued-up teenage joy-rider is a different matter. I guarantee he's on his way home, so it doesn't count.)

2) Their jobs are not surrounded by mystery – it is quite easy to see exactly how they do them and they don't cloak them in obscure terminology to make what they do sound more

clever. For example, it would be highly unlikely that the postman would need to explain anything beyond the basic jargon of 'letter', 'postcard' and 'parcel'. Likewise nobody really quizzes their window-cleaner about buckets and J-cloths.

The plumber, however, is almost always called to your house when something isn't working properly, like a pipe that's spraying a jet of water all over the bathroom carpet or just leaking sewage into your sitting room. When he walks in and solves the problem, your gratitude is actually disproportionate to the task that he has completed. Which is why he then leaves your house thinking, 'I must be fantastic, because they said I was, just like the people in the last house did, even though I pitched up late there as well.'

'So what?' you may think. 'Don't be so harsh, he did a good job, he deserves praise.' Wrong. He did his job, not a good job. He shouldn't be praised. He should be thanked, of course, but no more than you would thank anybody else for doing the thing that you paid them to do.

But if it's truly deluded self-regard you're after, look no further than the so-called 'professional' whose trademark tools are carried in a briefcase.

When my wife Jane and I moved into our first, tiny house in Tooting, south-west London, we congratulated ourselves endlessly on living in such a rough pocket of town. We thought it was quite clever to live in a 'real' urban area, surrounded by people who spent much of their time leaning against things and shouting across the street to each other. All the females from the age of three up until they were grannies (at about thirty-two) had their hair

scraped back tightly over their skulls so that their bubble gum wouldn't get tangled in it. The menfolk always walked as if they had nowhere to go, a sort of listless meander that allowed for peering into parked cars and lazily gobbing on the pavement. It was great. We were really pleased that we'd bought there and as soon as we'd had Banham's round to fit collapsible gates on all the windows and a triple-locking deadbolt on the front door, we felt quite cosy.

We bought the house from a vicar and when we went to look around it we were struck by how chillingly breezy it was. I said to Jane that it was just because he was an ascetic who felt closer to God the colder he and his family became. Jane didn't agree and said that we should have a survey done. Once we'd completed and moved in, I realized that his penchant for draftiness was more to do with creating a constant flow of fresh air through the house that would mask the musty smell of damp.

And before you put your penny-worth in, yes we did employ a surveyor, that's my point. All he said in his ever-so-neatly typed report was that it was not possible to inspect under the carpets or wallpaper to check for dry rot and damp, so therefore he couldn't guarantee anything. Which is legalese for 'Sorry, guys, you're on your own.' There was no mention of the tell-tale mustiness. The vicar's little open-window trick had clearly worked on him as well.

Today I am an older and wiser man and know that surveyors are people who take a photograph of the roof of your prospective house, cut and paste a load of generic piffle that would apply to any house in the country and then charge you for their services. At the time, however, I was

still working on the premise that they were an essential link in the house-buying chain, or at least had enough basic curiosity to do a half-decent job. It just goes to show how wrong you can be.

Seven hundred pounds spent on a nicely bound document full of statements such as 'It was not possible to gain access to the loft space.' No, fair enough. How could anyone be expected to realize that the hatch in the ceiling was in fact a portal with a folding ladder tucked away inside it? You'd have to be some sort of house expert to spot that.

Wouldn't it be refreshing to get a survey that read 'It was not possible to inspect the condition of the floorboards because it was half past four by then and I was too lazy to get down on my hands and knees and lift the rug'?

I toyed with the idea of tracking the vicar down to his new parish and leafleting the area so that everybody there would know that, despite all his fête-opening and tea-drinking, the man charged with the care of their spiritual needs was a lousy con artist. Perhaps I would sit at the back of his church, wait until he was in the middle of his sermon (hopefully something about honesty or kindness) and then jump up and denounce him and his scone-baking wife as charlatans.

For a while I fancied that this quest would put me into the league of Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal. I liked the idea of monitoring the vicar's movements, letting him go about his daily business not knowing that he was being watched. As he left his new, no doubt damp-free house each morning, he would be unaware of the bronchitic man sitting in the parked car outside, waiting, taking notes, comparing

the confident, strolling vicar with a crumply black-and-white photo of a uniformed Waffen SS vicar, younger but unmistakably the same man. Very soon my contacts in Mossad would arrive in Tooting. I'd meet up with them at a safe house, brief them, hand them a dossier of recent photos and leave them to their work.

Some weeks later, I would buy a newspaper from the corner shop and read that the vicar had disappeared from his new parish near Reading. There had been sightings of him being bundled into a black car, flown to Israel, tried and hanged. That's quite a sighting, I would wryly remark to myself. Tough justice but, sadly, no less than he deserved. Who knows how many problematic houses he had sold to unsuspecting first-time buyers?

Anyway, the house needed some work to undampen it. Conveniently the source of the problem lay under the hall floorboards, so once they had been pulled up nobody could enter or leave without walking along the edge of a joist. If you opened the front door in the dark you could quite easily step in and fall two feet on to the earth that the house had originally been built on at the end of the nineteenth century.

Evidently some remedial work had been attempted since that construction. I know this from the presence of builders' rubbish. An empty and very dusty box of Mr Kipling's individual apple pies. The late Victorians enjoyed no such packaged fancies and yet nor was the artwork contemporary, dating the artefact, in my humble opinion, circa 1970. Likewise the discarded box of Swan Vesta matches had a quaintly anachronistic air about them.

How do I know that the culprit was a builder? Do pay

attention, Lewis. The chap was a smoker who preferred matches to the elegance of a Ronson or Dunhill lighter and he ate pies by the half-dozen. The bugger may as well have left behind his cloth-cap and trowel. Case closed. Pass me my crossword.

So, to recap, when I was nine years old, some builder was leaving a time capsule of litter under the floorboards of a house that I didn't know existed but which I would one day regret buying. Funny old thing, life.

I had a couple of quotes to deal with the damp, but it appeared to be more difficult to solve than I had hoped, so the boards were hammered back down and the windows opened until eventually we sold. It seemed the only sensible thing to do.

2

THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE who, from an early age, know exactly what they want to be when they grow up. Usually the career path that they assign themselves is a vocational one such as doctor, astronaut or ballerina.

One of my daughters was set on being a traffic warden from about the age of five. She liked the gadgets they have on their belts and the fact that you spend most of the day wandering around, window-shopping and, of course, penalizing drivers for the slightest infringement of our parking laws. She saw that bit as the best part of the job and at the time demonstrated an alarmingly fascistic attitude towards anyone who overstayed their time on a meter or dared to pull up on a double yellow line. It was a day of enormous excitement for her when a Red Route was introduced on the main road near our house. She wrote a poem about it.

As proud, caring – oh, alright then, snobbish – parents, Jane and I were relieved when this desire to ticket people for a living gave way to the far more suitable ambition of opening a five-star hotel just for dogs. You may be thinking,

'Well, she was only five. Why get stressed about it?' Frankly, if you think that, then you deserve to have a child who grows up to be a traffic warden.

I had good reason to be stressed about it. I imagined at the time spending my latter years in the absurd position of defending traffic wardens at dinner parties. 'They really are petty-minded retards, aren't they?' someone might say as he poured me some more wine, regaling me with the details of his latest minor violation that had resulted in a penalty. Whilst agreeing wholeheartedly, I would at the same time have to say, out of parental loyalty, 'Actually, I've found that some of them are very bright and charming.' And everyone at the table would laugh, thinking that I was being humorously sarcastic. Then I'd probably shut up and go home resenting everyone there, and myself even more for not standing up and tipping the table on its side and storming out shouting that some traffic wardens are wonderful people.

Being a train-driver always used to be a perfectly respectable playground ambition. But I suspect that it is a job that has lost its appeal over the years. Long gone are the days when you could make toast on the burning coals and wave to people as you chugged through the rolling countryside, leaving plumes of billowing nostalgia in your wake.

The modern counterpart is far less alluring. Train-drivers don't wave to the kiddies any more, presumably for Health and Safety reasons. Either that or they just hate kids. In fairness, if you'd had a workmate beheaded by a paving flag mischievously thrown from a bridge, it might colour your view of the little rascals.

Train-driving is no longer a rough, tough manual job

with elements of skill that could make a man proud of his profession. Nowadays a train-driver's day is a timetable of sandwiches and Sudoku. It's like being unemployed except you have to go to work. And even that's confusing because you never get there.

But if you still feel that train-driving is for you, I would at least urge you to think long and hard before working for London Underground. Driving a tube-train is one of the few jobs that you can apparently do without moving any of your limbs. I imagine that at the interview stage you could show promise by turning up late, slumping in the seat and not saying anything for eight hours.

I spent the first twenty-five years of my life not knowing what I wanted to do. As a small child, that is your right. Not knowing what you want to do is a strength and a blessing when you are a child; just as knowing becomes a strength and a blessing in your adult years. It's the transition between those two states that is problematic. If you are lucky, you will be struck with a Eureka moment in which your life is suddenly switched from murky home-video to professional High Definition. Unlucky, and life will play along, unfocused and pointless until the end of the reel. But most commonly, fate reveals itself lethargically, as if nothing can alter its decision anyway. Occasionally, the result is exciting and wonderful. But often it isn't anything more than a slowly emerging, manageable disappointment.

From my teens onwards, I wondered where and how I would fit into the scheme of things. I was obsessed with the notion that life was too extraordinary a fluke for it not to have purpose. Given this, it may seem odd to learn, as you

will if you continue reading, that I did remarkably little to ensure any aspect of my future. Perhaps I was a natural fatalist from the start, instinctively gambling that life's outcome was not the result of endeavour and effort. Or perhaps I was just lazy and a bit stupid.

I drifted from job to job. Some I liked, others I hated. At times I was content to go with whichever current seemed to take me. But more often, I was restless and euphorically impatient, gripped with the belief that, at any moment, some calling would make itself known to me and that my life would change for ever.

You can't have belief without doubt, though. They are two sides of the same coin. As my friends moved on to the universities that I had failed to get into, and as they began to graduate with degrees and get good jobs, I started to struggle with panic and depression. Hadn't I been foolish and arrogant to think that I could get by without qualifications? Why did I think that anyone, least of all me, could beat the system, could squander every opportunity to learn and improve myself and then, somehow, be rewarded with an enjoyable life?

Gradually, I suppose I adapted to the highs and lows of living like this. Tried to enjoy the ecstatic hope of being young and learned that it could quickly be followed by periods of despair. But it always felt like a journey, like moving forward. Sometimes, that feeling alone was the thing that kept me going.

It was a journey that was to lead me on to the stage for the first time ever at the Comedy Store in Leicester Square, London, in September 1986.

Until that precise point I had never thought of my sense of humour as anything but an unfortunate affliction. At school it prevented me from being able to concentrate and as an adult it would nag at me like an impossible toddler, constantly berating me for not paying it enough attention.

Although aware of comedians like Bob Newhart, Dave Allen and Peter Sellers, I didn't ever stop to think that comedy was their 'job' as such. I didn't wonder how they got to do what they now did, I just assumed that comedy had been their pre-ordained role, another of those things that happens to other people. But that was typical of my world view. My take on life was almost completely literal, as I think it is for most young children.

I'm in my classroom at primary school. A teacher is instructing us what to write on the front cover of our new exercise books. She tells us to copy the example that she has neatly chalked on the blackboard. I am proud of my effort. It looks exactly as she has written, but I still wonder why underneath 'Subject: SPELLING' I had to write the words: 'YOUR NAME'.

Lacking the perspective of experience or a scientific understanding of life, I was able to convince myself of the most improbable theories.

If my brother and sister and I pooled our pocket money, we could buy the latest single of our choice. And so a small collection of 45s began. Mostly, of course, we bought The Beatles, whom I idolized only slightly less than Pinky and Perky. For me, those two pigs were the real deal and when they covered a Beatles song in their speeded-up squeaky

voices, I reckoned it sounded better. We had one of those old Bush record-players that look like a hard square suitcase. You opened the lid and could put five or six records on top of the stem in the centre of the turntable. One by one, the discs would drop down, and the stylus arm would swing across and land carefully on its spinning ridge.

I still love the crackle you get on vinyl before the song starts. It makes you feel like you're entering a different reality. I was intrigued by the little holes on the side of the record-player and loved to spy into them. I could just make out the internal glow of its valves. With my face pressed against the case, I could close one eye, shutting out the real world, and almost feel that I was inside the record-player itself. It was like a vast power station but at the same time in miniature. I was desperate to be able to shrink to the size of a pinhead, climb in and have a good look around. If I could, I was in no doubt at all that I would encounter The Beatles. There they would be, tiny John, Paul, George and Ringo, with their little instruments, waiting to start whatever song the chosen record requested. I could stick around, hang out with them, maybe have a go on the drums if Ringo would let me. Of course he would.

Sometimes the frustration of not being able to climb inside my record-player was unbearable.

When I recall that vivid memory, the thing that interests me most is not the conviction that I was right, or even the very notion of microscopic people living inside appliances. What I am drawn to is how my theory was not threatened by its massive chasms of logic. Leaving aside the difficulties of living in a record-player, even if you were small enough,

how was it that my friends The Beatles could suddenly become the Dave Clark Five, Herman's Hermits, Tommy Steele (it was my mother's) or Petula Clark (my sister's), for that matter?

However, I never believed the same to be true of the television – that there were little people inside it. That would have been stupid.

The Virginian was my favourite programme. Most people seemed to prefer *The High Chaparral* but I knew where my loyalties lay. I always thought of myself as Trampas and could hardly watch an entire episode to the end, such was my need to dress up as a cowboy, go into the garden and act out that week's story. I particularly loved it when they made camp and slept by a fire underneath the stars. I liked nothing more than to put on my waistcoat, hat and gun, roll up a blanket and stomp off into the Wild West. Imagining I was on a horse never quite worked for me, but a garden table and chairs could easily be arranged to form a wagon. With a flick of the reins I was making my way through the same canyon that my heroes had just negotiated, Winchester rifle by my side to shoot any Indians who tried to attack. Sorry to sound racist, but they were a nuisance and they always attacked me first. It's not like I was some nut on a killing spree.

If it wasn't *The Virginian*, then it was *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

Do you know what U.N.C.L.E. stands for? No? Well, I do. It stands for United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. Try to remember that in future if you don't want to be thought of as completely sad.

I decided that I was Ilya Kuryakin. I liked his quiet, considered manner and cool Russian accent. Also, he was fair-haired as, at the time, was I. Yes, the similarities were endless. For this role I had a replica Luger – OK, a toy gun – which was similar in shape to the standard-issue U.N.C.L.E. P38 pistol. I lacked the accoutrements that could convert it into a rifle like Ilya and Napoleon Solo had and was desperate to acquire the authentic set.

I would dress in a white shirt and a tie with black trousers and jacket for my assignments, which invariably involved orders given on a self-destruct cassette that had somehow escaped from *Mission Impossible*. Then to the garden, where I would have a hand-to-hand fight with a tree before hiding in a bush to assassinate my target, the old lady next door, who I knew to be Agent Salamander. It was always the same tree that I fought. One that had sufficiently spongy bark to absorb my punches without it hurting too much.

The great thing about working for U.N.C.L.E. was that anything could be a gadget. A fountain pen, a Smartie tube, even your shoes could take on a double purpose.

Through all this, it never occurred to me that the characters on the screen were actors. Up until the age of ten or so, I don't remember ever questioning the reality of what I was watching. At least not until *Star Trek* came along. That I knew was made up and, love it as I did, it rarely featured in my games of make-believe. Granted, the uniform was fairly simple to replicate. Just a T-shirt and wellington boots would pretty well get you there, but for me the show had too many restrictions to allow total imaginary escapism.

For one thing, teleporting is hard to fake. Just standing there and pretending that you are in the transporter room one minute and on another planet the next was highly unsatisfactory. It wasn't going to fool anyone. I also discovered that friends were reluctant to acknowledge my Spock-like powers. I made it quite clear that if I squeezed them with my fingers and thumb at the base of the neck, they were expected to collapse unconscious. And yet time and time again this failed to happen. I hated that. Once one element of power has been undermined everything else becomes pointless. If you ignore my Vulcan neck pinch, why should I even acknowledge your phaser?

Whether it was *Star Trek*, *The Virginian*, *High Chaparral*, *Doctor Who*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* or any of the other programmes that I loved, they all had a common theme. Good prevails over evil: in the end the baddies get what's coming to them, and if man cannot intervene, then the universe itself ultimately delivers its own natural justice.

All of which helps to explain why the last thing you want is for your child to become a traffic warden.