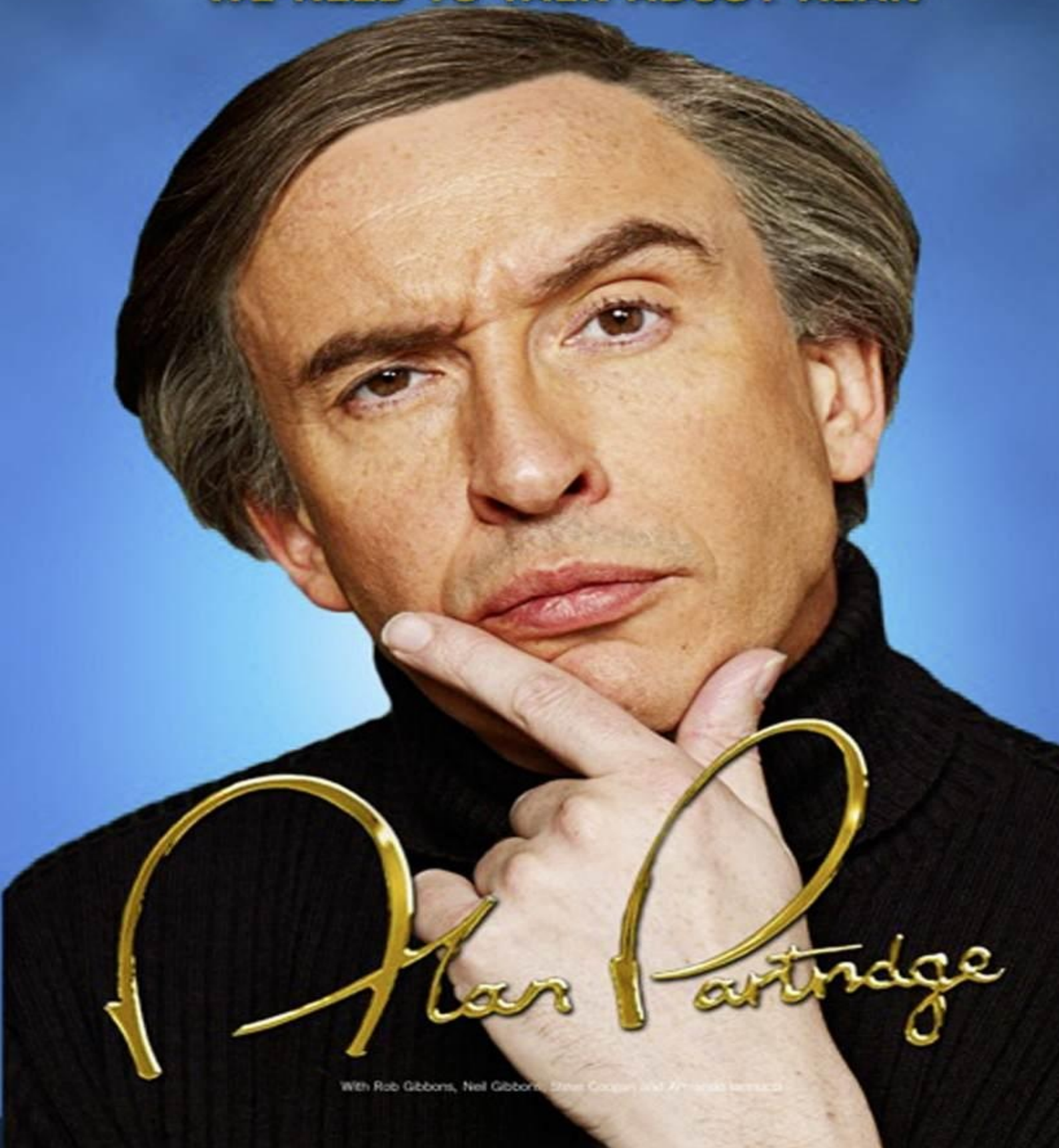


I, PARTRIDGE

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT ALAN



With Rob Gibbons, Neil Gibbons, Steve Cooper and Amanda Leighton

I, PARTRIDGE:

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT ALAN

Alan Partridge

With Rob Gibbons, Neil Gibbons, Armando Iannucci and Steve Coogan



HarperCollins *Publishers*

Dedication

For Fernando. And Denise.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introducing What Follows](#)

[Chapter 1. Beginnings](#)

[Chapter 2. Scouts and Schooling](#)

[Chapter 3. East Anglia Polytechnic](#)

[Chapter 4. Carol](#)

[Chapter 5. Hospital Radio](#)

[Chapter 6. Local/Commercial Radio](#)

[Chapter 7. Joining the BBC](#)

[Chapter 8. A Mighty Big Fish for a Pond This Size](#)

[Chapter 9. The Move to TV](#)

[Chapter 10. My Own Show](#)

[Chapter 11. Radio's Loss](#)

[Chapter 12. Glen Ponder, Musician](#)

[Chapter 13. Lift Off, Show-Wise](#)

[Chapter 14. The Death of Forbes McAllister](#)

[Chapter 15. Splitting from Carol](#)

[Chapter 16. Yule Be Sorry!](#)

[Chapter 17. Return to Norwich](#)

[Chapter 18. Linton Travel Tavern](#)

[Chapter 19. Me v Hayers](#)

[Chapter 20. Proof That the Public Loved Me](#)

[Chapter 21. Hayers: Dead](#)

[Chapter 22. Homeslessnessness](#)

[Chapter 23. Swallow](#)

[Chapter 24. Other, Better TV Work](#)

[Chapter 25. Marching On: Skirmish](#)

[Chapter 26. My Drink and Drugs Heck](#)

[Chapter 27. Chin Up](#)

[Chapter 28. Bouncing Back](#)

[Chapter 29. Good Grief](#)

[Chapter 30. Classic House](#)

[Chapter 31. Forward Solutions™](#)

[Chapter 32. North Norfolk Digital](#)

[Chapter 33. A Sidekick](#)

[Tracklisting](#)

[Index](#)

[Photo Insert](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Foreword

ALAN PARTRIDGE IS A DJ who presents *Mid-Morning Matters*. He is hard-working and enthusiastic, with a broad appeal to our regional listenership. He has worked at the station since 2009 and was previously employed by its sister station Radio Norwich.

I have always found Alan to be honest and trustworthy and a relatively good ambassador for the station and for Gordale Media as a whole.

Alan is smart, punctual and his attendance record is very good, with an average of 1.5 sick days taken per year of employment.

I would have no hesitation in recommending him.

Regards,

Andy Powell

MD, Gordale Media

Introducing What Follows

Hi, Alan. Tell me – what is this page?

It's the introduction to my book.

Written as a short interview with yourself?

Yes.

That's brave and unusual. Why?

Well, questions and answers are my bread and butter; my meat and drink; my sausage, beans and chips. I'm an accomplished broadcaster, presenter and interviewer. Chat is what I do.

You're not going to write the whole book like this, are you?

No.

What do you want the book to say?

That I am Alan Gordon Partridge, a respected broadcaster, but also so much *more* than that. Son to a dead father, father to a living son, TV personality, businessman, brand, rambler, writer, thinker, saye doer. I think that's everything.¹

And today?

Today, I'm the presenter of *Mid-Morning Matters*, an award-worthy weekday morning-thru-lunchtime radio show on North Norfolk Digital – North Norfolk's best music mix. In fact, you join me in my studio, as I scribble these opening thoughts in the 3 minutes 36 seconds of downtime I enjoy as record plays.²

So what can people expect from the book?

They can expect quality throughout and excellence in places. These memoirs are a serious, thoughtful and grammatically sound body of work, a welcome antidote to the kind of crank 'em out, pile 'em high shit-lit that passes for most modern autobiographies.

Examples?

Well, put it this way. In terms of craftsmanship, it's less Bewes, Madeley, Parsons and more Clancey Archer, Rushdie. What's more, it's accessible enough to capture a market as wide as that of Rowling, Brown, Smith, McNab, Lama^{3,4}

Is there anything in the book that 'breaks the mould'?

Yes, a soundtrack. I spent three days with my 'iPod' creating a list of tracks that would provide the perfect mood music to accompany my life.

My publishers HarperCollins said that this wasn't necessary. In fact they specifically told me not to bother, as they weren't willing to pay for the production or dispatch of a CD and certainly weren't going to seek clearance from, or pay royalties to, the artists I'd chosen.

But they can't stop me providing you, the reader, with a list of songs plus directions as to where the book they should be played. You'll find the tracklist on page 311. My instructions can be found within the text. Please note: the soundtrack is mandatory.

What kind of research did the book involve?

Content: six consecutive afternoons of remembering. Style: reading ten pages from each of the writers mentioned above.

And have you been honest?

Searingly honest. Brutally honest. Painfully honest. Needlessly honest. Distressingly honest. HarperCollins asked for full disclosure and that's what I delivered. I've opened myself up (not literally), put my balls on the line (not literally) and written it all down (literally).

Having read your book, I see you've had your fair share of run-ins. Indeed, Phil Wiley's behaviour at school and in Scouts seems particularly sickening. Do you agree with those people who say that he's proven himself to be a pretty scummy human?

Phil Wiley. [Chuckles] In all honesty? I don't give the guy a second thought. I just let bygones be bygones.

And what about Nick Peacock and his cowardly refusal to give you the Radio Norwich breakfast show, even though it leaves a sour taste in the mouth of even the most casual observer? That must rankle?

Look, Nick did what he did. I'm fairly zen about the whole episode.

Given the success of this book, there'll be a pretty loud clamour for a follow-up. Are you ready for that?

I take whatever comes my way. I roll with the punches and I ride the tsunami of life.

Does the book have an ISBN number?

Yes, I insisted on it.

What is it?

You'll find it on the back of the book. But for ease of reference it's ISBN-10: 0007449178 and ISBN-13: 978-0007449170

Thanks, Alan.

Goodbye and God bless.

[1](#) I also have a daughter.

[2](#) Hue & Cry's 'Labour of Love'. I thought I'd choose a song from their debut album as it's one I've heard of, something I can't say about any of the songs from their subsequent 15 albums.

[3](#) Rodney. Richard. Tony. Tom. Jeffrey. Salman. Joanna. Dan. Wilbur. Andrew. Dalai.

[4](#) This is a footnote, by the way. I'll be using these to pepper and garnish the body copy, so keep an eye out for them. Or as I say: If you see a number, look down under! Which either rhymes or near-rhymes.

Chapter 1

Beginnings

WHEN I WAS EIGHT years old, I suffered a nose bleed so profuse and generous, I bolted from the schoolyard and sought solace in the first-class countryside of Norfolk.

Nose bleeds were a pretty common feature of my childhood, caused variously by physical exercise, spicy food, bright sunlight, embarrassment, dairy, shouting (hearing or doing) and fiddling with my nose. And my school friends were wise to it. More impressively, they'd worked out that they could induce a haemorrhage themselves, by tethering me to the roundabout with the strap of my own school bag and letting the centrifugal force do the rest. (Unbowed, I refused to accept this affliction and would sneak into the yard alone after school and subject myself to a few turns of the ride once or twice a week. This went on until I developed enough tolerance to prevent the bleeding, at the age of about 16.)

But this nose bleed was hefty, brought on by a perfect storm of country dancing, hot weather and the high pollen count. As it spread and dried on my face and neck, I knew I couldn't face the juvenile tittering of my class colleagues.

Which is how I came to wander the leafy idylls on the outskirts of Norwich.⁵ Had this been 2010, I'd have probably returned to the school with some Uzis to give my classmates something to really laugh about, but this was a different – and better – time. So I walked though the countryside, and bathed in the majesty of nature in quite a mature way for an eight-year-old.

It was quiet, peaceful. The only soul I encountered was a lady rambler, who literally ran when I smiled at her. (The bleeding was *very* profuse.)

Eventually, I found myself stood at the verge of a copse, directly in front of a tree. I didn't remember approaching it, but there I was, standing and gawping at a single tree. Why, I thought? Why this tree? What is it about this simple field maple that makes it stand out from the others? It's not the biggest, the strongest, the coolest, the best at PE. Why am I being hauled into the tractor beam of this tree over and above the millions of other ordinary trees? I guess it had a certain something. At ease with itself and blessed with a gentle authority, it had class and spunk.⁶

Then it hit me (the thought). It's me, I exclaimed. I am that tree. I personify its stand-out qualities. Some people might say that's arrogant. Arrogant? Actually, accurate.

What's made me different from the others? How – and these were pretty much my exact words – even at the age of eight – did I come to be born with this aura of otherness, this *je ne sais quoi*?⁷

I stood and looked at the tree, and thoughts tumbled around my head like trainers in a washing machine. What made me thus? What made me thus? What made me thus?

And as the memories swirled around like the trainers I mentioned in the previous paragraph, all that could be heard was the pitter-patter of blood – my nose was still *piddling* the stuff – as it dripped from my nose and chin and on to my shoes. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, pitter-patter ...

Pitter-patter goes the rain on the window. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, and outside cars zoom up and

down the road, some of them dropping down to second to turn right into Gayton Road. On the pavement, people hurry and scurry, both to and fro. A clap of thunder – BAM! – and some really gusty wind. Everyone agrees it's a pretty dramatic evening all round.

Pan right. It's a hospital room. A clammy pregnant woman lies spread-eagled on the bed and is about to produce pitter-patter of her own. She's not going to wet herself – although that's often a distressing side effect of childbirth. I'm referring to the pitter-patter of children's feet. 'Stand back,' says the midwife. 'Her contraptions are *massive*. Get ready!'

'Looks like Anthony Eden's about to be named Prime Minister,' mutters a nurse as she strolls past the door. 'And Chelsea are about to win the First Division title!' replies an orderly, almost certainly not educated enough to follow politics. In the corner of the room, 'Rock Around the Clock' by Bill Haley blasts from the radio quietly.

You see, this wasn't now. It's then. The present tense used in this passage is just a literary device so that this next bit comes as a surprise. The scene is actually unfurling in 1955! The hospital? The Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn. The sweaty woman? Mrs Dorothy Partridge, my mother. And the child's head slithering from her legs? It belongs to me. The child was I, Partridge.

'You've done it! Brilliant pushing!' says the midwife. She holds the newborn aloft like a captain lifting a fleshy World Cup. And then the child throws his head back and roars the roar of freedom. The noise is relatively nonsensical but no less intelligent than most babies would produce. In fact, probably a bit more switched on than average.

In many ways, the proud wail that burst from my lungs was my first broadcast. Delivered to an audience of no more than eight, that still equated to an audience share – in the delivery room at least – of a cool 100%. Not bad, I probably thought. Not bad at all.

As I write these words I'm noisily chomping away on not one, but two Murray Mints. I've a powerful suck and soon they'll be whittled away to nothing. But for the time being at least they have each other. For the time being, they are brothers. Which is more than could be said for me, for I was an only child. I will now talk more about being an only child.⁸

Why my parents never had more kids I don't know, though as a youngster I'd often lie in bed wondering. Maybe it was financial reasons. Maybe I'd bust Mum's cervix. Maybe Dad had just perfected the withdrawal method.

But I would have loved a little brother to play football with or bully. I'd rush downstairs every Christmas morning and rip open my presents, hoping against hope that one of the boxes contained a human baby. It rarely did. In fact it never did.

The sad fact was, my parents (although *not* Communists) were unconsciously adhering to the same one-child-only policy espoused by the People's Republic of China. And, like billions of Chinese children, I consequently had to endure a home life of intense loneliness.

This meant there was extra pressure on me to be sociable. I didn't have a motto growing up, but had I done it would almost certainly have been 'I'd love some friends, please'. But maybe in Latin.

I'd look on with longing as I saw my fellow children greedily enjoying their friendships. I remember being especially jealous of a lad called Graham Rigg. Graham was too cool for school (though he did still attend). He'd not only been the winner of the sports day slow bicycle race for three straight years, he was also the first boy in our class to properly kiss a girl. There'd been cheek pecks before, not to mention inter-sex handshakes, but he was the first kid in the playground to 'go French'. None of the rest of us could figure out where he'd learnt to do this, but the general consensus was 'from porno films'.

Eight-year-old Jennie Lancashire was the cock-a-hoop recipient, and she was rightly grateful.⁹ B

when I look back I often think how fortunate it was that Graham was the same age as her, because he'd been 20 years older he would have been up in Crown Court. And quite right too!

I bumped into him for the first time in decades the other week. It was at the returns desk in my local Homebase. We were both taking back kettles (him – faulty filament; me – didn't like colour).

'Still French-kissing eight-year-olds?' I said, pointing an accusing finger at his potential paedophilic mouth.

'No,' he replied.

'Good,' I said. Then for extra emphasis I said it again, but slightly more slowly. 'Gooood.'

I'd made my point. Anyway, after that, talk naturally turned to motor vehicles and I was bowled over to learn that Graham had been the first person in Norwich to own a car with a catalytic converter. From playground lothario to environmental trailblazer in under 50 years. It quickly dawned on me that here was a man whose number I needed to take, but before I had the chance he'd collected his refund, mimed taking his hat off to me and disappeared off into the sunset/down the paint aisle.

Without love (parental or matey) to sustain me, I turned to myself, Alan Partridge, for comfort. Eager to keep myself occupied, I was from a young age deeply inquisitive. Learning was my friend, knowledge, my bosom buddy. Indeed, in my quest for self-education, I once put a bumblebee in the freezer. It was to see if I could freeze it and then bring it back to life. I couldn't. Of course I couldn't, it was dead.¹⁰ (I put it in a matchbox, like a biodegradable bee casket. Then just chucked it in the bin. I never told my mother.)

And so, this young, neglected but resourceful young man would guzzle down knowledge like other kids would guzzle down fizzy pop. Or full-cream milk. Either works. For a time, I was fixated with butterflies – an interest that my father did much to encourage. We'd go into the garden on a summer evening and when we saw the gentle flutter-flutter of a butterfly, he'd smash it to the ground with his tennis racket.

'Fifteen love!' he'd roar. Either that or some other tennis-related phrase. ('Advantage, Dad' was my favourite.) 'You know what you need to do now, Alan,' he'd continue.

'Yes, father. I'm to collect the remains, piece them back together and do my utmost to identify the genus.'

Sometimes I could actually do it too, but more often than not (particularly when Dad used his textbook backhand slice), you would have needed dental records to identify the dead. Still, world-class interactive learning.

But don't be deceived by this seemingly intimate tale of fatherliness. (In fact, I probably shouldn't even have put that bit in.) No, above all else, overriding everything, was the dark heart at the core of my parents' parenting which meant that, as I think I've said, my home life was one of neglect and sadness.

Mother was cold, distant. After school, between the ages of 13 and 14, I would routinely have to lock myself into the house, where I'd be on my own, unfended for, for a minimum of 45 minutes, before she came home from working in a shoe shop. She'd console me by gifting me the latest shoe-cleaning merchandise, and to this day I've always had an affection for shoe trees and shoe horns.¹¹

And then there was Father. Like most men of his generation he'd returned from war a changed man. He signed up on the day of his 17th birthday. 'Mum,' he'd said chirpily, 'I'm off to save a Jew or two.'

It was April 1943 and he'd had quite enough of the idiots with the swastikas (and they *were* idiots). I remember asking him once over breakfast what it had been like. But his eyes glazed over and he just took another bite of his boiled egg. It was a bite that seemed to say, 'Son, I don't want to talk about

war, because I've seen soldiers decapitated like in *Saving Private Ryan*.'

'The only soldiers I want to talk about are the ones I dip in my boiled egg, which coincidentally has also been decapitated!' his next bite seemed to add. This was typical of my dad – or would have been if he'd said it – because he'd often have dark thoughts rounded off with a little joke.

He wasn't an easy man, though. Mum said he came back from the war with a rage that never went away. She said he was still just very angry with Mr Hitler. Yet it was me that suffered the consequences. Let's just say Poppa had a hand like a leather shovel.

What made it all the more galling was that it wasn't even me that had carried out the Final Solution. The closest I'd ever got to the extermination of the Jewish race was teasing Jon Malin about his big nose. But (a) I didn't even know he was Jewish. And (b) it was pretty massive. You could have hung your washing off it. They say your nose is one of the few things that keeps growing throughout your life. Jon will now be 56. Good god.

The only thing that softened the blow (metaphor) was that I was at least being beaten with a degree of excellence. My father was a naturally gifted corporal punisher. The quality of the blows was always the same, whether administering them with his right hand or his left, whether he was alone or had Mum screaming at him to stop, whether we were in the privacy of the home or out at a charity treasure hunt organised by Round Table.

I couldn't wait for the day when I was big enough to turn round and thump him in the tummy or set fire to an Airfix Messerschmitt and put it behind his bedroom door so he'd be intoxicated by the burning plastic.

You see, it wasn't just physical abuse. The torment was sometimes psychological. I still bear mental scars from him trimming our privet hedge and then making me go and collect the cuttings under the rain. Well, I've got a saying: 'Be careful what you do, because some day something similar might happen to you.'

And you know what? It did, because financial difficulties in later life meant he ended up as a casual labourer in his 60s. I allowed myself a wry smile at that. You may think it's cold of me to be glad of his occupational misfortune just because he had me collecting privets, but let me tell you this: he made me do it *four times*, in as many years. On another occasion, he made me clear out the garage on a sunny day.

But I never have turned round and thumped him in the tummy or set fire to an Airfix Messerschmitt before putting it behind his bedroom door so he'd be intoxicated by the burning plastic. Why? Well, I guess resentment fades with time. Also he's now dead. And the last thing I've got time to do is exhume, and subsequently duff up, the cadaver of a loved one. There'd be a heck of a lot of paperwork, for one. Plus I really need to take the car in for a service. Must do that next week.¹²

'Ah, but at least your parents didn't split up,' you might be crowing. 'You're lucky in that respect, Alan!'

I shake my head slowly and smile. You see, my parents' marriage wasn't as stable as their long list of wedding anniversaries might suggest. And that in itself was unusual and upsetting.

Of course, these days the institution of marriage is in crisis. It's crumbling like an Oxo cube. I don't have the exact figures to hand,¹³ but it's probably correct to say that half of all marriages end in separation. Take the royal family. Elizabeth and Phillip – solid as a rock; Charles and Diana – crumbled like an Oxo cube. Charles and Camilla – rock; Andrew and Fergie – Oxo. Edward and his wife¹⁴ – rock; Anne and Mark Phillips – Oxo. You see, exactly one in two.

'Marriage is dead!' I shouted to the listeners of *Mid-Morning Matters*, not six weeks ago.¹⁵ Then I paused for dramatic effect and to finish my mouthful of sandwich. 'Someone inform the relative

Time of death: 2011. Cause of death ... well, why don't you play Quincy? Get in touch and let us know why you think marriage passed away.'

It turned out to be a really insightful phone-in. Dealing with unemployed listeners five days a week, I'm still sometimes pleasantly surprised that they can be brainy. Regular caller Ralph laid the blame at the door of the Mormons. Other less angry listeners put it down to the rise of contraceptive E-numbers giving us attention deficit, and tax law, while my assistant texted in to say it was a symptom of terrible ungodliness.¹⁶

Me? I put it down to a combination of all these factors. Apart from the one about ungodliness. And the one about Mormons. Whatever your view, in the last hundred years there must have been more divorces than marriages.

Fifty years ago things were kinda different though. It was as rare to see a divorce as it was to see a four-leaf clover or a black chap in a position of authority. If only things had stayed that way.¹⁷

Now, I'd thought my parents' union was in the rock-solid camp. But I was wrong. Because one night something happened that threatened to turn my world upside down like one of those paperweights with fake snow inside. It was an incident that made me have a terrible, terrible thought. What if the rock of their marriage was actually a rock made ... of Oxo?

I woke with a start. At first I assumed I'd trumped myself awake again – it was summer time so there were lots of fresh vegetables in our diet. But as I listened through the darkness, I realised that something far worse was going on. My mother and father were having the row to end all rows.

A sudden shot of fear ripped through my pre-pubic body. And now I did do a trump. The noise fizzed out of my back passage like a child calling for help. That child was me. I cupped my hands behind my ears creating a sort of makeshift amplifier. *Look and Learn Magazine* was right – it really did work.¹⁸ But still I couldn't quite hear everything. I shut my eyes in the hope it might make me hear better, like they say it does for blind people.

'I've told you, there's no point keeping those. They're not tax-deductible,' my dad thundered.

'I think you'll find they are,' raged my mum like some sort of feral animal (a badger with T-shirts perhaps).

'They're not. You only get VAT back on lunches outside of a 50-mile radius from your place of residence. You effing bitch,' he seemed to add, with his eyes, I imagined.

'Alright, fine, I'll get rid of them then,' sobbed my mum, her fight gone, her spirit crushed like a St. Francis grape.

Then the door was shut. Or was it slammed? It was hard to know for sure as I'd now opened my eyes, thus depriving myself of the hearing boost conferred on me by blindness. I curled up on my back like a foetus (though admittedly, quite a large one) and cried like a baby (again, large). 'Please Lord, make it stop,' I snivelled. 'I'll do anything you ask of me (within reason and subject to getting your permission from my mum). Just don't let them break up.' Like an Oxo cube, I could have added.

And with that, I went off to the bathroom to clear my head, not to mention my nose.

Yet miraculously, when I went down to breakfast the next morning, there was no mention of the bitter war of words that had waged so fiercely just hours before. The nightmare that had threatened to rip my world apart like an experienced chef portioning up a ball of mozzarella had somehow been averted.

It was 25 October 1962, and on the other side of the Atlantic, President 'JFK' Kennedy had just pulled the world back from the brink of nuclear war. Could I just have experienced my own personal Cuban Missile Crisis?

Yes, I could have.

And so, in summary, mine was a childhood of undeniable hardship – a chilling and far-from-delicious cocktail of neglect, solitude, domestic strife, and abuse.¹⁹

I was, if you like, A Child Called It. This was Alan's Ashes. A protagonist dealt a really shoddy hand by hard-hearted parents. (They're dead now and my mum's sister Valerie, who disputes my version of events pretty vociferously, has gone medically demented so I'm really the gospel here.)

But it wasn't all foul-tasting. For example, I remember the intense joy I felt when my father slipped on some cake and cracked his head open. It was the day of my ninth birthday, and as I sat effortlessly reading a book aimed at 11–12-year-olds, I heard a commotion. It was my father.

'Delivery for Mr Partridge! Delivery for Mr Partridge!' he was saying.

He meant me, rather than himself, and although he could have eliminated the obvious ambiguity by saying 'Alan Partridge' or 'Master Partridge', my instincts told me that he was using the third person so probably did mean me.

I ran into the kitchen. And there was my father – normally so cruel, as I think I've made abundantly clear – holding a cake. It was a ruby red birthday cake, with my name piped on to it in reasonably accomplished joined-up writing. I could barely contain my excitement – more at the cake than the writing. I adored cakes, but was only allowed to eat any on special occasions such as after meals. I began to run over, licking my lips as I sprinted.

Although blessed with cat-like co-ordination, something made me lose my bearings. Perhaps I'd been pushing myself too hard with the book for 11–12-year-olds and my brain was scrambled. Whatever it was, I misjudged my proximity to the table and clattered against it. The cake fell from the table and smashed on to the floor in a hail of crumbs and redness and cream.

My father surveyed the scene, his face slowly crumpling with anger. He crouched down, taking the weight of his body on his two haunches and then he addressed me: 'You'll never amount to anything' he said. 'You're that to me.'²⁰

On the word 'that', he held his finger and thumb one, maybe two, centimetres apart as if to say 'not very much'.

I didn't know what to say, my mind blasted by the twin concerns of spilt cake and parental cruelty. He turned to go and put one of his angry feet on to the remains of the cake. This acted as a lubricant, destroying any traction his foot might have had with the floor. It shot forward and, with his balance now a distant memory, he came crashing to the floor. His back took the first hit, smashing against linoleum and cake with a bang – 'bang'. His rump was next – 'doof' – followed by his skull – 'crack'. And for a second he was motionless, before blood began to spill from the back of his head.

As my father lay on the ground, the tension – much like the physical integrity of Dad's skull – was broken. Suddenly, all the years of neglect, which could easily make a book in its own right and definitely a film, were lifted. The hardship, the loneliness, the disappointment squeezed out of my eyes in the form of hot salt tears. Was I crying or laughing? I didn't know. All I knew was that these tears felt like a monsoon on a parched African savannah to the delight of a proud but easy-going black farmer. Pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

Pitter-patter. Pitter-patter. I'm back at that tree as an eight-year-old child, my nose still bleeding (but it should scab up in a few minutes). All those childhood thoughts are racing through my mind, even though some of the incidents above haven't yet happened, so would have only raced through my mind in a very vague form.

These hard hardships, testing trials and tricky tribulations are the things that have made me who I am. Like this tree, I am different. I have staying power, strength, nobility, staying power and the ability to 'branch' out.

I wait for the bleeding to stop. It has done ... now. The cathartic, cleansing effect of rapid blood loss has made me feel elated.²¹ And I return to school to face what proved to be a pretty massive bollocking. I didn't care. Something had been ignited in me.²²

I still return to that tree once a year. It's been bulldozed now to make the car park of Morrison's. I like to think it was pulped to make the very pages you're reading now (a huge long shot, admittedly).

But still I stand there each year, smack bang in the middle of a disabled parking bay, and remember its leafy majesty. We've both had our knocks (my TV career was bulldozed by a short-sighted commissioner who I'm *delighted* to say is now dead), but we retain that indefinable quality of excellence. And I think back to that turning point, that fulcrum of my early years when I first fully realised what I had, where I was going, and who I was. I was Alan Partridge.

[5](#) *Press play on Track 1 of the soundtrack.*

[6](#) In more ways than one, as it transpired. Years later, I took a walk to this place at dusk and saw a teenage couple sully my memory of that tree with some pretty vigorous frottage. I was going to rub it at them with a stick, but in the end I didn't.

[7](#) 'I do not know what'.

[8](#) *Press play on Track 2.*

[9](#) By the way, update on the Murray Mints: one's already gone, the other is a shadow of its former self.

[10](#) Bear in mind, this was the late 60s. Everyone was experimenting. We'd just put a man on the moon, anything seemed possible. In this case, of course, it wasn't. But then we didn't have Google. If you wanted to find out if something was possible you had to try it for yourself. Terrible business.

[11](#) Of which more later! (possibly)

[12](#) *Press play on Track 3.*

[13](#) Internet's down.

[14](#) Internet's still down.

[15](#) Time of me writing, not time of you reading.

[16](#) Didn't read it out.

[17](#) Divorces.

[18](#) It's a technique I still use to this day when talking to quiet people at cocktail parties.

[19](#) Naysayers have suggested that I'm dramatising details of my early years because my publishers were concerned that my childhood was boring. How wrong they are. If anything I'm bravely playing down some of the hardships I faced in a way that critics might choose to describe as 'stoical'.

[20](#) Auntie Valerie, who was there that day, is adamant that Dad said absolutely nothing of the sort. But, like I say, this is a woman who often forgets her own address, so you can strike her testimony from the record.

[21](#) This was a feeling I would come to know well in later years. Major blood loss has been a close friend of mine – be it the kind I've endured (impaling my foot on a spike before a sales presentation, sneezing blood over a nun's wimple) or the kind I've inflicted (punching a commissioning editor, shooting a guest). And on each occasion, the initial regret has been swiftly replaced by a joyous high brought on by relief, defiance or morphine. In this case: it was a brand new sense of purpose.

[22](#) Metaphor.

Chapter 2

Scouts and Schooling

I JOINED LORD BADEN Powell's army of pre-pubescent – and it is an army – in the heyday of the British Scouts. In those days we were truly legion. Some say there were close to a million UK scouts in the early 1960s, a terrifying proposition if you imagine them all running at you across a field or chanting 'Ging Gang Goolie' again and again and again and again, but slightly louder each time.

Even among such a vast number, I stood out as a quite outstanding officer in the North Norwich district, (HQ'd in Costessey). I excelled at outdoor tasks, mastering knots that could (theoretically) lash a small boat to a jetty or splice together a child's shattered leg; identifying clues to help me track a stricken comrade; spotting dock leaves from 50 paces. But I was even more adept at the domestic chores that Scouting taught. I could embroider badges on to the shirts of every scout who asked and was an absolute whizz at buffing shoes, tying neckerchiefs and adjusting woggles.²³

I might as well admit now, before any member of my troop publishes a counter-memoir, that I never mastered fire-lighting. I admit that – I couldn't do fires. I could build them into sturdy wigwags of sticks and newspaper, no problem. But I found it very, very hard to make them catch fire. In fact, I still can't, which is why gas BBQs are such a blessed relief.

I'm often asked, what do Scouts *do*? Well, although highly trained and physically fit, Scouts are not invited to defend Britain in international conflict. Instead, much of our effort went into the production of our annual Gang Show – my first taste of showbiz.

My aptitude for knot-tying meant that I was called into action as a stage-hand, hoiking up scene panels and then lowering them down again. I was good at it and felt no real calling to be on stage until the night of our first show.

Scout Leader Dave Millicent was MC. Smartly dressed and with his hair parted to one side, he worked the crowd beautifully and introduced each turn with real panache. He was, in a very real sense, a presenter that night. And it was at the show's pinnacle – as he cued up the backing track to 'Crest of a Wave' and told them to 'take it away' – that I think I first knew what I wanted to be. I wanted to *present*.

Many years later, I contacted Dave and asked him to co-present my show on hospital radio, but he said he didn't want to do it and didn't remember who I was. Still, he was a good man and a very talented Scout.

What most appealed to me about the Scouts was that it was a true meritocracy. If you were diligent and resourceful and attended each week, you could orienteer your way to the very top. I'm proud to say I achieved the rank of Patrol Leader in no time, with six good Scouts under my command.

You'd think that this would automatically confer on me a bit of respect and obedience from others in the patrol. Sadly, many in the troop felt the Scouting hierarchy only applied during our weekly meetings. One member of the troop, Phil Wiley, was in my class at school – and his behaviour towards me, a superior officer, was quite, quite shameful.

On one occasion, he stole my swimming trunks, dropped them in a urinal and laughed. This was in front of the whole class, many of who(m) were in my troop. Of course, I couldn't let this slide, and I ordered him to rescue and wash them. He sniggered. I took a breath.

'Do as I say,' I said calmly.

He began to walk away.

'Do as I say, Scout Wiley,' I boomed.

'What did you call me? Scout Wiley?'

He laughed again and indicated to the rest of the class that I was mentally defective, by twirling my index finger by the side of his head. Well, this was rank insubordination.

'Do as I say. I'm your Patrol Leader!'

'Oh my god ...' he attempted, weakly.

'I *am* your Patrol Leader.'

'You are such a tit.'

'I *am* your Patrol Leader!'

'Fuck off.' He *actually* said that to me.

'I *am* your Patrol Leader! I *am* your Patrol Leader! I *am* your Patrol Leader! I *am* your Patrol Leader!'

I continued to shout this until I was the only person left in the changing rooms, and then I fished my trunks from the well of piss with a fountain pen, and showered them off for a few minutes before repeatedly hurling them against a wall to release the excess liquid. Yes, I'd had to save my trunks from someone else's urine, but I'd left my class colleagues certain of one thing: I was the Patrol Leader.

The following week, I reported Wiley to Scout Leader Dave and was told not to tell tales, which didn't really bother me much at all. (Wiley left the troop shortly after and his school work began to decline markedly. Without the discipline and brotherhood of the Scouting Movement, he drifted into a spiral of underachievement, culminating in his having sex with a lab technician. Because of the pregnancy, she gave birth to a child, although Wiley has as close a relationship with it as you or I do.)

I treasured my involvement with the Scouts – of course I did. But it didn't compensate for the absence of love and affection I received in my home life. That is a fact.

Do you believe in guardian angels? I do.²⁴ Not the winged ones you see in films. As I've often explained to my assistant (a Christian female), as well as being aerodynamically unfeasible, wings sprouting from the shoulder blades would pull the ribcage backwards and gradually suffocate the angel – a cause of death that's similar, ironically, to that of crucifixion.

No, by guardian angels I mean 'nice people'. And I do believe in them. (Although I reserve the right to be deeply suspicious of anyone who is unilaterally kind to me.)

My guardian angels were the Lambert family. They took me in when I had nowhere to go. They gave me food and shelter and love when my own parents had deserted me. I remain forever in their debt.²⁵

I was temporarily fostered by this kindly family in 1961. As family friends who were friends with our family, theirs was a loving home and I stayed for more than three weeks, returning home only because Mum and Dad had come back from their holiday in Brittany and it was time to go.

This was the first time I'd experienced the warmth of a caring family. Not for them the bickering over VAT receipts or making their children pick up privet cuttings in the rain. Instead, I was treated like a human being.

The father, Trevor, was an asthmatic, but what he lacked in being able to breathe quietly, he more

than made up for with his parental skills. He always found time to not hit his children and I remember thinking that was tremendous.

‘Got to say, Trevor,’ I remember announcing, on my second day there, ‘you have a wonderful way with your kids. You’re a credit to yourself. I for one am impressed.’

‘Thanks, Alan,’ he said.

‘Yes, that’s lovely of you, Alan.’

I turned to see Mother Lambert, better known as Fran, handing out fresh milk and cooked cookies to her three children: Kenneth, Emma and Sheila. The children were marginally older than I was (and remain so to this day) but they reached across the age divide to show me friendship and good will.

But it was Fran who was the chief supplier of love. From day one, I was clasped to her bosom – not literally. Not literally at all. There was no suggestion of any sordid behaviour. Please don’t think there was, just because I’ve created the image of my face being pulled towards an older woman’s breasts. No, I don’t want you to take away even a residual inkling that this was a family marred by a proclivity for child molestation. I’m in two minds now whether to keep this paragraph in at all, in case the denial of any wrongdoing makes you think there’s something that needs denying. There isn’t. They were a lovely family. Kept themselves to themselves and neighbours have said they seemed perfectly normal. Actually, that makes them sound worse.

I was happy there and saw no reason why I couldn’t stay among the Lamberts for the rest of my life. But the nature and length of my stay there hadn’t been adequately explained to me. And so it was that one cold summer’s morning, I looked up from a genuinely difficult jigsaw puzzle to see my mother and father standing there, my coat in Mum’s hands. I burst into tears.

The Lamberts cried too (inwardly) as they waved me off. Mum and Dad thanked their counterparts. ‘Say thank you, Alan,’ Mum said.

‘Thank you,’ I snivelled.

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Trevor Lambert. ‘You can come and stay any time you like.’

I stopped crying. ‘Pardon?’

‘Come and stay any time you like.’

And with that, I was driven away. But my life had been touched by guardian angels – their kindness ringing in my ears like chronic tinnitus. I pressed my hand against the window like they do in film and at this point the director might like to do a slow fade to black.²⁶

‘Smelly Alan Fartridge! Smelly Alan Fartridge!’ The words spewed from my classmates’ mouths like invisible projectile sick, landing in my ears and ending up caked all over my shattered self-esteem. My inner confidence must have reeked.

Short of doing me in with a blade (it wasn’t that sort of school), there was nothing that the educationally slow children could have done to hurt me more. But still they shouted.

‘Smelly Alan Fartridge! Smelly Alan Fartridge! He loves his mum, he lives in her bum. You think that’s bad, you should smell his dad. Smelly Alan Fartridge!’

It was agony on so many levels. For starters, they were bellowing over the sound of English teacher Mr Bevin – academically suicidal given that mock exams were just weeks away, and a person in the affront of Mr Bevin who, although timid and stuttering, knew his onions, English-wise.

For mains, it was the dunderheaded wrongness of what they were saying: I did not smell. I was keen cleanser, diligently showering each day and making sure that my body, privates, face and mouth were stench- and stain-free. If I smelt of anything, it would have been Matey (now Radox) and Colgate.

And for afters, their catcalls were a depressing reminder of my own father’s suffering. Having signed up to the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Norfolk Regiment in World War II (for my money *the*

‘Great War’), he learned that a sloppy administrator had spelt his surname: PRATridge (my capitals). The consequent teasing and name-calling he received at the hands of his comPRATriates (my capitals) cut him deep. The horror of war. Up there with trench foot and being attacked with guns.

Smelly Alan Fartridge. Say it to yourself a few times. Pretty annoying isn’t it? About 3% as clever as it thinks it is, it’s a piece of infantile wordplay that most right-minded abusers would dismiss as rubbish but which a small minority of backward Norfolk underachievers repeated again and again and again and again.

They were led by one child whose name I can barely even remember. In fact, his name was Steve McCombe. You won’t have been able to tell, but I had to think for ages then, between the words ‘name’ and ‘was’, so insignificant is he in the roll call of people I’ve encountered.

McCombe – let’s not bother with first names – was, and I’m sure is, a grade A dumbo. He couldn’t afford to lark around in class, so certain was his fate as a manual worker – the kind who’d never have the cause to rely on school teachings unless it’s for the tie-break round of a pub quiz (where the top prize is some meat).

McCombe didn’t just squawk ‘Smelly Alan Fartridge’ at me a few times. His was a campaign of petty abuse that was awesome in its length and breadth. Between 1962 and 1970, McCombe – and again these are events that bother me so little my brain has filed them under ‘Forget if you like’ – waged an impressively consistent war on me. This frenzied attack on me and my rights took several sickening forms: he stole, interfered with, and returned my sandwiches; he mimicked my voice when I effortlessly answered questions in class; he removed my shorts on a cross-country run and ran off fast; he reacted hysterically when I referred to a teacher as ‘mum’; he threw my bat and ball into a canal; he spat on my back; he daubed grotesque sexual images on my freshly wallpapered exercise book; and, in a sinister twist, he tracked the progress of my puberty, making unflattering comparisons to his own and the majority of my classmates’. This was psychological torment that few could have withstood. I withstood it.

One day, I decided enough was enough, so I plucked up the courage to confront him for an almighty showdown. It was 5pm on a wet Tuesday and I took a deep breath and went for it.

‘Oi,’ I said. ‘McCombe.’

He hesitated. ‘What?’

‘Watch it, mate.’

A pause. The guy was rattled. ‘What?’

‘I said watch it. Watch what you say and watch how you say it, you snivelling little goose. ²⁷ You might find you push someone too far one day and they unleash hell in your face.’

‘What?’

‘Stop saying “what”. Listen to me. You’re going to start showing me a bit of respect, buddy boy. Or you will reap a whirlwind. The days of infantile name-calling and sexually explicit graffiti are over. No more stops. *Right?*’

‘What? I can’t hear you, mate.’

‘I’m not your mate.’

‘What?’

This was infuriating. I unwrapped my jumper from the mouthpiece. Oh, I forgot to say, this was on the phone.

‘Just watch it, McCombe.’

‘Who is this?’

‘See you around.’

‘Is this Partridge?’

I hung up. My point made. My parting shot – ‘See you around’ – had sounded particularly

menacing. I would have said 'See you in school', but we'd both left a few years before. And 'around' sounded more threatening anyway.

McCombe had left school at the first opportunity, his mindless decision-making conducted almost entirely by a hormone-addled penis desperate to impregnate the first chubby cashier it could slip into. Sure enough, McCombe and Janice have a litter of four children, not much younger than they are. Well, to go, guys.

McCombe worked for several years in the warehouse of British Leyland before a back injury scuppered his forklift-truck driving. He now lives on disability allowance in Edgbaston and has gained a lot of weight. No prizes for guessing which of us is the 'Smelly' one now.

Interestingly, McCombe's career-ending back complaint is so cripplingly debilitating, he can only manage the three games of tenpin bowling per week, a fact that may or may not have been documented and photographed by my assistant.

The dossier may or may not have been passed on to Birmingham City Council. And I may or may not be waiting for a reply, although this is the public sector so I shan't be holding my breath!

The divergence between our two lives (mine: successful, his: pathetic) is best illustrated in our choice of garden furnishing. I've enhanced my lawn with a rockery. McCombe has chosen a broken washing machine.

And what a pair he and Janice make. I spoke with her once, when she asked me what I was doing outside their house,²⁸ and her language was *appalling*. Very aggressive woman.

McCombe rarely, if ever, strays into my consciousness now. But in some ways I thank him. The ribbing that he orchestrated – and to be fair there were probably others involved too²⁹ – has given me a thick skin that has served me well. I grew a teak-tough, metaphorically bullet-proof hide, essential in the very real warzone that is broadcasting.

I could give you three examples right now of times that the 'Smelly Alan Fartridge' barbs have stood me in good stead. When Bridie McMahon (failed TV presenter who you won't have heard of) pointed out on air that an anagram of Alan Partridge is Anal Dirge Prat, sure, I wanted to shove her in the face, but had the self-discipline not to. When formerly significant TV critic Victor Lewis-Smith described my military-based quiz show *Skirmish* as 'a thick man's *Takeshi's Castle*', I wanted to hurt him physically, but had the restraint not to. I just left 60 abusive voicemails on his mobile (plus 12 on Valerie Singleton's *for which I have apologised*. She's above him in my contacts list.) There's probably a third example too. But the point is, the inane taunts from my school days had given me strength and perspective.

An addendum: in 1994, I was named *TV Quick's* Man of the Moment. At the same time, McCombe contracted glandular fever. Needless to say, McCombe, I had the last laugh. And I'm still having it.

[23](#) Not racist.

[24](#) *Press play on Track 4.*

[25](#) Disclaimer: Not in any legal sense.

[26](#) *Press play on Track 5.*

[27](#) Not sure why I said goose or what I meant by it.

[28](#) I'd stopped to let the engine cool down when I was in the Birmingham area looking for Pebbles Mill, and coincidentally it happened to be on their street.

[29](#) Andy Bendell, Joe Cowes, Alan Holland, Richard Toms, Justin Parker, Noel Scott, Daniel Groves.

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