

CHRIS EVANS

Here's the thing...

Noah, our little two-and-a-half-year-old boy, The Chosen One, has reached a hilarious stage. He will now strike up conversations with anyone about things he has obviously recently been mulling over. After a brief silence in the car one morning this week, he piped up, 'Daddy, is everyone's birthday in February?'

Other favourites at the moment include him announcing that he's going to Scotland at every available opportunity; and, whenever you ask him when something happened, answering, 'Last Tuesday', with a sincere pointing of the finger for added emphasis.

After the February birthday exchange I had to tell him, 'I love you son.'

'I love lorries,' he replied simply. I'll happily take that. I'll take that forever.

Less innocently, I had a strange and awkward encounter last week. Apropos of nothing, two relatively good mates of mine started discussing their off-shore accounts over pre-dinner drinks. Now, I honestly had no idea they were part of that mob. But there they were, proudly – nay, triumphantly – comparing notes on how they had set up companies in Jersey to avoid HM Customs and Excise. Then they began swapping tips. Here's what I wanted to say to them both: 'Excuse me chaps, but all the doctors and nurses and the firemen and the policemen and the last soldier to lose his life in Helmand Province – how exactly do you think they get paid?'

And yet... for the sake of the evening, but to my infinite shame, I said nothing.

Then there was another guy who owes me some money and texted me a couple of weeks ago. 'I'd love to pay you but I just got a tax bill that's a million more than I expected.' A million more! Now you don't have to be Steve Jobs to figure out this means he's earned a truckload of cash in the first place.

That time I did say something, by the way – as a result, he became quickly embarrassed and moved the subject on. He still hasn't paid me.

We all know there are some big names who pay extremely little, if any, UK tax yet continue to be allowed to earn a vast income here. Why does this phenomenon still exist? Why don't the powers that be simply stop this nonsense from 9am tomorrow morning? When I was lucky enough to be swimming in cash, back in a former life, I couldn't count what I owned, let alone what I gave the taxman. So if you pay yourself a dividend of two billion (or your wife who happens to reside elsewhere, hardly ever enters the UK but apparently still runs the company), what difference does it make if you leave a billion in to pay the bills? You're still left with ONE THOUSAND MILLION POUNDS to keep your spare tyre in shape.

Even the phrase 'tax haven' sounds like paradise. But it bloom'n' well wouldn't be, because every street would be hidden under a sea of detritus and we would all be murdered because there would be no policemen, courts or prisons. If no one who did anything impor-

tant had to be paid, like defending our nation, keeping our kids in school books with decent teachers, ensuring road safety and the future of the NHS, or dishing out fuel rebates to those of our golden oldies who risk freezing to death every winter etc, and I was subsequently and legally given the choice not to pay tax, of course I would rather keep the cash. Who wouldn't? But that's the point – it's the law of the land. It's not a choice!

You'll have to forgive me. I have to stop on this now. The keys on my computer are beginning to melt.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to commemorate the one-week anniversary of Arsenal being trounced 8-2 at the merciless hands of Manchester United. When my pal told us the result over dinner on Sunday night, we absolutely did not believe that could happen. In fact, when we arrived home, Tash and I stayed up especially to watch *Match Of The Day* and witness this wanton destruction of a footballing institution first hand – and Tottenham being beaten 5-1. So hey – how about an extra game a year for Mr Murdoch to extract some extra box office from City United versus Arsenal Hotspur?

Whoever triumphs would then face the winners of Real Barcelona and Inter AC for a shot at the Who's Spent More Than Roman Abramovich This Week Memorial Trophy.

This time next week, I'll be on my way to host Radio 2's Live In Hyde Park festival. This year's top of the bill is Lionel Richie. I have a pal who once booked him for a private party (yeah, he's doing OK – keep at those studies kids). He says Lionel was the perfect gent and went above and beyond what was required of him to make sure the party went with a swing.

Personally, I want to reminisce with Lionel about swimming in his pool in LA. And playing basketball on his tennis court. Not that I've ever met the man before, but I did buy his old house in southern California. You could dive into the pool from his bedroom, swim across the garden against a backdrop of midtown LA and Malibu Beach, straight into the kitchen/bar where there were cocktails aplenty on offer. So hey kids, as well as keeping at those studies you might want to ask Mom and Pop to bankroll you a few piano lessons.

Some people call it hedging your bets. I call it increasing one's potential to earn potloads.

Talking of big houses... the problem with them is that, unless there are a good few of you, it's not fair on the house. I bought mine in the mid-Nineties. It had 17 bedrooms when I acquired it and only six (although admittedly all very big) a year later. It also had lights in the trees that lined the drive which, at night, illuminated automatically when the huge wooden gates swung open. There was a Japanese water garden, a cinema, a two-ton limestone bath, a replica of my local pub next to the games room and a waterfall in



the library. It was all very beautiful and rock 'n' roll but there was one gaping problem. There was only me in the middle of it all.

Soon after I bought the property, people began to send me things. One kind soul sent me some photos she'd discovered of the house on its opening week 100 years earlier. There had been a series of garden parties over a week with bands and performances and jugglers all over the grounds. People everywhere were bringing the house alive. And this is exactly what such a house needs.

Hats off, therefore, to Monsieur Raymond Blanc and his pile in Oxfordshire, Le Manoir Aux Quat' Saisons. He's nailed it. He's opened his house and gardens up for the rest of us to go and stay at and eat at and generally enjoy. Even I (not usually a fan of a photo frenzy) could not help snapping away furiously on my camera phone.

And then came dinner. Saturday night may have been the hungriest my wife and I ever felt before a meal together. And of course we expected something special. But when the waiter opened the show by offering us a choice of no less than nine homemade breads (I went for mash and beer!), we knew we were in for a treat on a whole different level.

Three hours later, completely sated and not to mention a little sozzled, we wandered, smiling gleefully, through to the cosy bar for an almost compulsory digestif. Following an equally almost compulsory second, we finally retired unharmed back to the Lace Suite.

As you might imagine, it's quite saucy. In fact I might go as far as to say it's quite racy. Merci encore Raymond! He's thought of everything... ■