

The speech template

1. Open on them, about 30 seconds

Straight in, no throat-clearing.

"[Name] is forty today, which [he/she/they] has been describing as 'just a number' to anyone who'll listen, and to several people who won't."

Don't open by introducing yourself at length. One clause is plenty, because the room mostly knows who you are.

2. The roast, about two minutes

The heart of the funny part, and where the material has to be specific.

The rule: mock the pattern, not the person. A joke about a thing they reliably do is affectionate. A joke about who they are is a criticism with a laugh on it. The difference is obvious in the room and invisible on the page, so test it on someone.

Good territory: their known obsessions, the thing they always say, the way they drive, their relationship with technology, their confidence in areas where it isn't warranted, the running joke that's followed them for a decade.

"[Name] has, over twenty years, developed an unshakeable belief that [he/she/they] knows a shortcut. There is no evidence for this. There has never been evidence. We have been late to four weddings."

Three or four beats, not one long story. Milestone birthday rooms are standing, drinking and chatty. A story with a ninety-second setup will lose them; four short specific hits won't.

Ageing jokes: one, at most, and it should be about a specific behaviour rather than about being old. "He now owns a coat specifically for the garden" beats "he's ancient".

3. The turn, about 15 seconds

The join. Don't announce it, don't say "but seriously", don't change your voice.

"All of which makes it sound like I don't like him, and I've realised I should probably correct that before the end."

4. The real thing, about 60 seconds

One thing that's true, specific, and slightly more than you'd normally say out loud.

Not a list of qualities. One piece of evidence.

"Four years ago I had a fairly bad year. [Name] rang me every Sunday. Not to talk about it, just rang. I never asked him to and he never mentioned it, and I've never told him I noticed."

That's the line people repeat in the car home. Everything before it existed to earn it.

One sentence, not five. The power is in the restraint. A minute of sincerity after three minutes of jokes lands enormously; three minutes of sincerity is a different speech and the room will feel the switch.

5. The toast, about 20 seconds

"Right, glasses up, please. To [name]. Forty years old and still convinced he knows a shortcut."

Landing on a callback to the roast is the strongest available ending. It's funny, it's warm, and it closes the loop.