Black, White & Gold

My Autobiography

Kelly Holmes

With Fanny Blake

Published by Virgin Books

Extract

My Training Diary
1 January 2004

I have dreamed forever to be the best at what I do. Some dreams come true, but my biggest ones are still out there and I really want them to become reality. I have really gone through a lot to realise my dreams. I have the passion, dedication, willpower and heart to achieve my ultimate goals. I have put my life and soul into this, given up my life to pursue what I know is my destiny. I just pray that for once I can be given the lift to get through this year with no struggles, no injuries and a lighted spirit of guidance.

I hope 2004 can bring me more happiness, success, purpose than ever before.

9 MARCH 2005

The limousine swept towards the gates of Buckingham Palace. If only the people waiting outside could have seen through the blacked-out windows. Inside, my mum, dad, granddad and I were fighting for space with two TV crews who were covering the event for the BBC and *London Tonight*. I was on my way to the royal investiture where I would receive my Damehood from the Queen. I had to pinch myself just to make sure this was really happening.

My day had begun early. I had woken at 6.30 a.m., having had a disturbed night thanks to the snores of my mum, who was sharing my hotel room. She had been up early too, excited about the day ahead and already worrying about the time. I had told her I was going to breakfast and sneaked off to the gym instead. I felt much better when I got back an hour later in time for Patricia, my hairdresser, who had arrived to put my hair up. She had already sewn in the coppery red extensions the night before to give the length to create a spiky style that would stand in place of a hat. My Jasper Conran suit in cream silk crepe hung there, cool and sophisticated, with the matching Jimmy Choos waiting on the carpet below. I had

gazed at them with a big smile on my face – this was a million miles away from my more familiar tracksuit and trainers. On the side table were laid the diamonds brought to me the night before by James from Boodles – exquisitely simple teardrop earrings, a necklace with two matching teardrops and a ring.

My mum had gone for the whole shebang as well – an all-matching outfit, hat, shoes and bag in a pastel green with navy trim. Together we really looked the part and ready for my big day. My dad and granddad had arrived at the hotel in the limousine that had driven them from home in Hildenborough, Kent. They were spruced up in their top hats and tails hired specially for the occasion. The TV crews joined us and together we made our way to the Palace, very proud and excited.

We dropped off the TV crews near the gates and drove in through the majestic archway into the courtyard where the limo purred to a standstill. We emerged to walk past the guards, along the red carpet and up the stairs. My family were shown to the ballroom where the investiture ceremony was to take place, while I was directed to a room where I waited with the five men and one other woman who had come to be given their knighthoods or to be invested as Companions of the Bath: General Sir Kevin O'Donoghue; Professor Sir Clive Granger; Sir Alan Jones; Professor Basil Markesinis; Air Vice-Marshal Andrew Collier; and Naomi Eisenstadt. I felt nervous, anxious that I might trip in my Jimmy Choo heels and break my neck before I got as far as being made a Dame Commander. We introduced ourselves and chatted until the Lord Comptroller came in to tell us the protocol. When he explained how the men would kneel on a velvet stool to be knighted with a sword, I couldn't help piping up, 'Can't I kneel on the stool too when it's my turn?'

'Ladies don't normally receive their Damehood that way, Dame Kelly.' I think he was slightly taken aback.

'I really want to. Imagine what the Queen would say!' We all laughed at the thought.

'You can have a go now if you like,' he said.

So I did. 'Now I'm ready,' I announced. He just smiled.

The time came for us to walk to the front of the ballroom, where an orchestra high on a balcony at the other end was quietly playing.

As we walked down the corridor I joked with the officer, 'I really want to kneel, I'm going to do it.'

'I dare you then,' he said, smiling again.

'OK. I will.'

I was only winding him up but his face was a picture. He was obviously thinking, Oh my God. She's going to do it.

I spotted my family on the other side of the ballroom. They were beaming with pride. I felt really choked because I knew how proud they were of me, so I gave them a little wave. The atmosphere was hushed as we waited for the Queen to make her entrance escorted by the Lord Chamberlain and attended by two Gurkha Orderly Officers. The guards stood sharply to attention as the royal party made their way onto the dais. We remained standing as the orchestra played the National Anthem. I had tears in my eyes as it brought back the moment when, only six months earlier, I had stood on the rostrum at the Olympic Games to receive my gold medals, first for the 800 metres and then for the 1500 metres.

When the Lord Chamberlain called out my name, I walked forwards and turned to face the Queen. I had visions of hundreds of people watching me trip, arms and legs akimbo, but, thank God, it didn't happen. As I approached the dais, I couldn't stop smiling. I curtseyed; then Her Majesty placed my insignia, a gorgeous medal on a smoky pink sash and a big silver star, on the special hooks that had been put on my suit by an usher. She said that she was delighted to be giving me the award and asked me about the hamstring injury that had prevented me from entering the European Indoor Cup the previous weekend. I replied that it was much better and thanked her, remembering to address her as 'Ma'am' as in jam, not 'Marm' as in farm – something I had been taught when I had first joined the British Army back in 1988. I stepped back from the dais, feeling honoured and proud; curtseyed again and, still smiling broadly, walked along the red carpet out of the ballroom. I had a short interview with the Press Association, before joining the rest of the recipients at the back of the hall to watch the rest of the proceedings.

After the ceremony was over I met up with my family and we all stood around chatting. When I went down into the Ladies, I was amused that lots of the other Honours' recipients who were

there unexpectedly asked me for my autograph, which I gladly gave. I still couldn't get used to the fact that, after the Olympics, my face was recognised wherever I went and everyone seemed to know my name. Before going for a celebratory drink in my hotel and then driving home to Hildenborough, I was called outside by the palace PR officer for TV interviews. My family stood in the freezing cold waiting so that we could have our photos taken, along with all the other recipients and their families. We all smiled with real happiness and I showed off my award with pride.

For me, this was a fantastic reward for all my years of hard work. I had come such a long way since the days when I used to run round the fields outside Tonbridge, training as a junior athlete, sharing the same hopes and dreams as so many other young runners. So much had happened to me since then. I had spent almost ten years in the Army, working my way up to be a physical training instructor. I spent more years as a professional athlete, fighting injury, refusing to give in until I had achieved my dream of winning an Olympic gold. It had been a long, hard struggle with moments from which I thought I'd never recover, but I had made it in the end. To be made a Dame was the ultimate accolade.

That night, back in my mum's house in Hildenborough, I changed out of my glad rags, took down my hair and put on a tracksuit and my sister Penny's huge fluffy slippers. As I came down the stairs, my mother burst out laughing. 'If only they could see you now!'

She was right. But I didn't care what I looked like. I was at home where I really belonged, round the corner from the council estate where my story began, where, as a child, those dreams were born that meant so much to me that I would give everything I had until they came true.

1. EARLY DAYS

My mother was seventeen when I was born, on 19 April 1970 in Pembury Hospital in Kent. The fact that she had me at all must mean something, given the odds she faced. She was involved with a Jamaican guy, something that in the 1970s was not the done thing – at least certainly not by girls in the whiter than white county of Kent. I was an accident that no one wanted to happen.

When Mum broke the news to her family, who lived in the village of Hildenborough, that she was pregnant, they were horrified and, instead of support, they gave her an ultimatum: have the baby adopted or leave home. In those days, mixed-race relationships were still looked on with disapproval by many of my grandparents' generation. Their daughter was young to become a mother – she had only just left school. They must have been unhappy about the idea of having an illegitimate baby in their home at all, never mind a black one. So my mum left home, moving to London to live with her Jamaican boyfriend, my biological father. But their relationship together didn't work out and it hit the rocks before I was one year old. I have no memory

of him at all from those days. As far as I'm aware, he showed little interest in me or in what happened to us. He might as well not have existed at all.

Young and single, my mother found herself with a mixed-race baby and no means of keeping us both. She had nowhere to live. Her only choice was to have me admitted to St George's Children's Home, so that she could go back to her parents until she got herself sorted out. St George's was a large old white Victorian house, just outside Tonbridge and opposite the Unigate Dairy; Mum got a job in the laboratory there, testing milk samples, so that she could be near me. Because she lived and worked so close, she could visit as often as possible. She remembers putting me to bed there. I'd cry so much that she couldn't get off the bed to leave me. I have no memories of my stay there, just a photo of me standing, hanging on to a cot in a room full of other cots, and another picture of all the children in care there.

My mother's recollections of that period in her life are hazy. And I can understand why. Who would want to remember such difficult times? She must have wondered what was going to happen to us both. If she wanted me enough to defy her parents in the first place, then she must have been desperate to look after me herself. She can't have been earning much money and without the prospect of any more, our future together must have looked bleak. Living with her parents can't have been easy, knowing what they felt about me, especially when I was staying only a short distance up the road. I can only imagine how torn she must have felt. Then, after perhaps as many as eighteen months, we were properly reunited again. Mum had found a dingy bedsit to rent in New Cross, a rundown area of south-east London. We had somewhere to live together and she was determined to make a go of it.

My earliest memory is of us together in that bedsit. My mum has poker-straight, long, dark-brown hair that she can sit on. The room is small and dark. I'm on the floor playing with toys when there's a knock on the door. In comes the lady from downstairs, furious about the noise I'm making. She and my mother have a massive shouting match and she slams out again. Mum remembers me as a 'sweet, delicate, little thing' but also that, when I was tiny, I was constantly crying – the source of irritation

to our downstairs neighbour. She admits she had no clue how to look after a toddler (at that age, why would she have?) and, without a family to turn to for help, she was finding it impossible to cope. Not long after that the landlord wanted to renovate the building, so we were forced to move on.

Thirty-two years later, Mum told me that the pressure on her from her family to have me adopted was so great that she eventually gave in. St George's had found a couple who wanted me. I don't blame her. She was in such a difficult position and she had tried to do her very best by me. In the same circumstances, I expect I'd have done what she did. But then, when the woman from the Social Services came to take me away, Mum started crying. She couldn't go through with it. So I was saved yet again. This time, she took me with her to live in a mother-and-baby home until a council flat was found for us in Forest Hill. But it wasn't long before things got difficult again. Mum had found a job with De Beers in London, where she graded and cut diamonds. Although she liked the job, the commuting was difficult. Juggling it with looking after me was impossible so I was sent back to St George's when I was about four years old. At least Mum knew I was being looked after properly while I was there.

I remember very little of my stay, but I know that Mum spent as much time as she could with me. One day, not long after I'd last seen her, I was called to the TV room where everyone was sitting on the floor watching Bruce Forsyth's *Generation Game*. 'Kelly. Your Mum's on. Come quick.' I shot downstairs and stood in the doorway to watch my mum and her father, my Granddad Percy, battling against another couple to get a place in the final. Nobody had told me they were going to be on. Or if they had, I'd forgotten. I was riveted. They never made it to the conveyor-belt challenge but my mum left with a Russian clock radio and Granddad won a tankard. 'Didn't they do well?' My mother was on TV. She must be famous. It was a weird feeling being so proud of her when at the same time I missed her and would much rather she was with me.

Other than that, I remember my bed was always covered with cuddly toys, including my favourites, Brian the Snail and Zebedee from *The Magic Roundabout*. My only other memory from those days was being dressed in a yellow bodysuit, with a red plastic

'shell' on my back, an orange scarf knotted around my neck and a pair of antennae on my head. I was Brian the Snail and excitedly taking part in the annual Tonbridge Carnival.

But the unsettled start to my life changed when Mum got together with Mick Norris, an old schoolfriend of hers and the man who was later to become my dad, my support and my biggest fan. To this day he still is. At weekends, she would take me out of St George's to stay with either her sister Sonia (my aunt and godmother) and my uncle Steven whom I loved going to see and spending time with, or with Mick's sister, my aunt Sheila, who was married and lived nearby. Young, with dark hair, Sheila loved everything sporty. We'd go out into the street where she taught me how to ride a bike. Once Mick's dad made me a pair of stilts and it was Sheila who taught me to walk on them. When I got the same purple scooter as a present from both Mum and Mick and Nan and Granddad Norris, one of them was sold so that I could have some roller skates. Again, it was Sheila who came out to help me master them without breaking an arm or a leg. Mick had helped Mum move house from the mother-and-baby unit to Forest Hill and gradually he just became part of our lives.

I first remember him being around when we occasionally stayed in Hildenborough with Aud and Geoff, his mum and dad, who are my other beloved nan and granddad. Mick was a painter and decorator who worked in partnership with his dad. A slim, quiet guy with wide long sideburns that were fashionable back then, he was laid back to the point of sleeping: something that's always been a family joke. I can picture him in his cowboy boots and a succession of loud, patterned cowboy shirts singing 'Viva España' at the top of his voice. Ever since he'd been there on holiday, he had had a love affair with Spain. But he also loved my mum, and I came as part of the package. We just accepted one another as we were, beginning life as a family in Forest Hill before moving to a top-floor flat on the Longmead Estate in Tonbridge, where I went to the Infants School.

It wasn't long before we moved to Riding Park, at first four doors away from Nan and Granddad Norris, then we moved to a slightly bigger house just next door to them – number 62, where I grew up. It was a three-bedroom, redbrick, semi-detached house with a deep-red front door with white beading and a window

above that boasted a white '62'. Inside it was comfortable, although there wasn't much money for luxuries. I eventually had my room done up in my favourite colours, red and white, right down to the light switch and the door. The wallpaper was white with little red flowers, the bedspread was red and white, and there was a red carpet and red curtains. I always had a few toys on the bed, especially my favourite Smurfs and, later on, when I started running, I hung up all the pendants and the medals I won from the English Schools Championships. I was proudest of all of my trophies on the shelves.

My other nan and granddad, Elsie and Percy Norman, lived in the blink-and-you-miss-it village of Hildenborough for over fifty years. My nan stayed at home to look after their five children, Daphne, Rodney, Celia, Mum and Sonia, while Granddad Percy was a travelling blacksmith. He had a white van that he used to take his equipment to stables all around the area. I remember Mum taking me to see him at work, the warmth of the fire from the dusty black coals, the deafening sound as he hammered the glowing horseshoe into shape on the anvil, the acrid smell of burning hoof. Although they had fallen out when I was born, Mum and her parents had patched things up so that Nan and Granddad Norman had slowly come to accept me. She remained especially close to her dad who grew to love me too. He was quite a short man, and he wore a flat cap, corduroy trousers and the sleeves of his soft, old shirts rolled up. He sometimes wore sleeveless, Fair Isle V-necked jumpers too. When he was reading the newspaper, I'd crawl under the table, come up between his knees and try to swing from his braces. Other times, I loved flicking them. I remember him singing songs with me and teaching me silly rhymes:

Down in the jungle
Got a bellyache
Can't find a lavatory
Poop
Too late.

On 10 April 1977, when I was nearly seven, Mum and Mick got married in St John's Church in Hildenborough. It was their

wedding that gave me the first inkling that something about our family set-up wasn't quite normal. Someone at school pointed out that it was weird to be your own mother's bridesmaid. Of course, everyone else's parents were already married. I could see that. So what did that make Mick's relationship to me? But I was so excited about being a bridesmaid with two of my cousins (although less excited about the frilly blue mob cap that went with my blue dress and the little bag I had to carry) that I put the thought to the back of my mind. Nearly all the photos of the day show me behaving badly, either lifting up my skirt to the camera, smudging my face with chocolate cake or making faces.

The first time I really questioned Mick's relationship to me was when my brother Kevin was born in June 1977. He was white. Until that moment, being a mixed-race child had never been an issue for me. I don't remember anyone having made a comment about my colour, not to my face at least. I don't think it had ever occurred to me that I was different from anyone else until my friends at school pointed out that children are normally the same colour as their dad – children can be so brutally honest.

'Why aren't you the same colour as your dad?' they asked.

'I don't know,' I replied, unconcerned, and went on playing. But I carried the question around in my head for a few days, brooding on it. As soon as I had a chance, I asked Mum why I was a different colour to Kevin and my dad. She practically choked when she heard the question but I suppose she must have known that I'd ask one day. She handled it well by being honest and to the point. I'd had a different dad when I was born but he had left Mum when I was a baby. That was it. Conversation over.

But it wasn't over for me. I suddenly resented the fact that my mum was with this guy, Mick, who wasn't my dad and who was stealing her attention away from me. It wasn't that I wanted to see my biological father or that I felt any curiosity about him, but I felt cross that Kevin had his dad there and I didn't. I couldn't help feeling it would be fairer if Kevin didn't either. Then, in 1980, my second brother, Stuart, was born. My feeling of unfairness that the boys both had their father on the scene intensified, although it was less of an immediate issue because, by then, I adored Kevin and went on to feel the same about

Stuart. However, my relationship with Mick began to go downhill simply because I knew he wasn't my 'real' dad. I turned into a stroppy teenager, screaming and shouting at him whenever I disagreed with him. Rather than chasing me up the stairs to my bedroom, trying to slap my legs when I'd refused to do the washing up or had given him some backchat, he put up with it all. He took me on as if I was his own. I respect him so much for that and for all that he has done for me.

I doted on Kevin and Stuart. I loved them to bits and wanted to do everything for them. I dressed them, changed their nappies, washed them and played with them. They were like living dolls to me. As they grew up, Kevin always wanted to copy whatever I did, with Stuart following close in his shadow. I remember teaching Kevin to ride a bike, just as Auntie Sheila had taught me. The difference was that I decided he didn't need stabilisers. I just put him straight on the bike and gave him a good shove down the hill. Down he went, screaming his head off, until he crashed in a heap at the bottom. Fortunately he was so young and flexible there were no bones broken, just a graze or two. The other thing they both remember to this day was when I was babysitting them and pretended to be dead on the landing. I was a great babysitter! As they desperately tried to wake me up, they were getting more and more upset. The only time I moved was when Stuart ran down the stairs to try to telephone the police or an ambulance. As I heard him dialling, I let out a great groan. Both the boys rushed back to me and helped me to my feet as I pretended shakily to come round. Why I did it, I don't know. But I'm ashamed to say both episodes have left scars on their mind forever, although we laugh about them now.

Number 62 Riding Park was a good family home. It was in a small estate of similar neat redbrick houses on the fringes of Hildenborough, edged around by fields. All the houses had small front gardens with a low wall that separated them from the pavement. At the back were long gardens. Ours had a climbing frame and a swing while next door Granddad Norris spent ages in the greenhouse or in his vegetable plot at the end of his lovingly kept garden. I'd watch him digging up potatoes, or picking tomatoes and runner beans, or I'd sit in the kitchen with Nan Norris, shelling peas.

Dogs were an important part of our family. My dad had an Alsatian called Champ. He'd lie on the landing outside Mum and Dad's room and whenever I came out of mine, he'd growl long and fiercely. I was absolutely terrified and would run down the stairs or shout to Mick to come and move him. Eventually I got so fed up with him being so aggressive that I decided to fight him back. I thought that my dad would rescue me if Champ turned really vicious. But after a good wrestle, we got used to one another – although he'd still rumble away whenever I passed him. We always had a dog in the family. After Champ came Gemma and after Gemma there was Charlie, a white Heinz (57 different varieties) dog who looked just like a polar bear with a couple of black patches and a thick white woolly coat. He was so gorgeous. As a result, I've always loved dogs. I also had a cat called Candy, but I was allergic to her so practically ignored her.

Christmas was always special. Mum would pin Chinese lanterns to the ceiling and hang shiny paper chains from corner to corner across the room. She loved decorating the tree. Then in the night, Santa would sneak into our rooms, leaving a pillowcase full of useful things like colouring pads and pencils, small toys, *Mr Men* books, Smurfs, tangerines, nuts and chocolate coins. On Christmas morning we weren't allowed downstairs until Mum had had a cup of tea and her breakfast in bed, the dog had been taken out and we'd had a wash. Only then could we go into the front room where our presents were waiting, piled up on the chairs by the tree. The agony of anticipation was prolonged for as long as possible.

The year I remember breaking the rules was when I'd saved up to buy Mum and Dad a tumble dryer. Every Friday I was paid £12 a week for my paper round. For months before Christmas, I'd give £10 of my weekly earnings to my nan and granddad. Every Saturday, they'd take it down to Curry's and put it towards the payment for a tumble dryer. Mum and Dad didn't have one and I was determined to get it for them. When Christmas Day finally arrived, I volunteered to make Mum's cup of tea. I crept out of the back door and hopped over the wall to Aud and Geoff's where the tumble dryer had been delivered. I could hear my mother shouting, 'Where's my tea?' as my nan and I struggled unsteadily with the dryer in the wheelbarrow. We managed to get it into our

front room where I tied a big ribbon around it. I dashed back upstairs with the tea as if nothing had happened, although I was bursting for them to go downstairs. Eventually the time came. The look of shock and amazement on their faces was worth all the planning and secrecy. They were so pleased.

Mum loved parties. There were always lots of family get-togethers going on. We regularly went round to my Aunt Celia's and Uncle Mick's house for parties, where all the family including my cousins always turned up. We'd play games for hours eating up all the brilliant food she would put out. It would always make me laugh because Celia, Daphne, and Sonia would always get drunk and my uncle George and Steven always had to stay sober to drive them home when they were in a state. I remember helping Mum with the boys' birthdays when we'd all go to the bowling alley or the village hall. Even now she'll always buy balloons and put up banners round the house on every birthday. At Easter, she has a huge Easter basket with all the mini eggs she can find. I'm not embarrassed to admit that I still get my stocking at the end of my bed whenever I'm at home for Christmas.

Mum was also quite house proud and everything was always tidy. She was strict about meals so we had to eat everything up, including the vegetables. I hated all of them. I'd forever be trying to hide them under my napkin but she would always spot them and make me force them down. Often she would wheel the tea trolley from the kitchen to the lounge at teatime and it would be groaning with stuffed jacket potatoes, sandwiches and cakes. Not all her food was so tempting, though – I drowned most of it in tomato sauce. Once she made roast lamb for Sunday lunch – the first and last time as far as I was concerned. The smell was bad enough but the taste of it was disgusting. Soon after I ate it, I ran upstairs and was sick. I hated it so much that I've never eaten it since. After meals we had to take it in turn to wash up and dry – of course, I always moaned!

The other thing that Mum drummed into me from an early age was that I had to be very polite to everyone. I still am to this day – well, most of the time! On Sunday evenings, she always did the ironing as she tried to persuade me to get my uniform and books ready for school the next day. One family ritual that I particularly remember happened every night. 'Bath, Biscuit, Bed,' Mum would

shout, interrupting whatever we were doing. We had to stop and go upstairs to get ready for bed. Bath was bearable. Biscuit was brilliant – I could make those crumbs last for ages. And bed? I wasn't having any of it and would delay it for as long as I could.

I played with my Tiny Tears (the doll that eats, cries and wees) and my red-and-white stripy buggy when I was really young but then I turned into more of a tomboy. If I wanted to, I could get to my toys that had been stored in the loft by climbing onto the landing banisters, putting my legs over the open airing cupboard door and hauling myself up there, but I much preferred playing outside. There was a small gang of us that hung out in the street together: Simon Wickson came with his mother to stay with his nan and granddad (Roy and Marg Spender), who lived at number 58. Blond and cheeky, he was also my first kiss. We were six years old and we used to go to the trees at the bottom of Riding Park and pretend we were kissing like they did in the movies – no tongues of course! There was also Ian Russell, who was younger than us and lived at number 68, and the Porters, Julie, Steve and Tessa, who went to Hildenborough Primary School with me. I have stayed good friends with Tessa over the years although there was one moment when, because she had gone to an all-girls secondary school and become too gobby for my liking, I punched her off a wall into a garden to teach her a lesson. I'm pleased to say she's not gobby at all now really.

The Porters and I would spend hours playing Doctors and Nurses in their house when we weren't outside. Once we found a porn video hidden behind the TV unit. We pulled the curtains and watched it in secret, listening in case one of the Porter parents came in. We fell about with laughter, looking at the weird things the men and women were doing to each other, but as soon as we heard the noise of the key in the lock, we switched the TV off and hid the video back where we'd found it. As we hung around outside in Riding Park, we thought we were incredibly cool, although of course we weren't at all. We'd pass the time playing hopscotch, football, skipping games, tag, Knock-down Ginger (knocking on doors and legging it before we were caught) or British Bulldog. I was just an ordinary 'roughie toughie' young girl.

Being fiercely protective of my friends and brothers often got me into trouble. I can remember chasing Ian Russell for some reason and scrapping with him big time on the concrete outside his house with the other kids standing round cheering us on. I was punching him and I loved it! Another time, I raced after a boy I'd been fighting with, who slammed his front door in my face just as I was reaching out to grab him. My hand went straight through the glass panel. Fortunately my cuts weren't as serious as the damage to the door.

Best of all was going down Riding Lane to the Brook. When we reached our early teens, we were allowed to play in the woods down there for hours at a time. We'd drag out the broken logs and twigs from the stream that flows through it to make rafts. We'd paddle down the water pretending to be explorers, hunting people down. We'd leap across the stream and float any old containers we could. We thought it was brilliant.

One of the best presents I was ever given was a brightly coloured plastic wigwam adorned with pictures of an Apache reservation and an Indian chief with his tomahawk. We put it up in my grandparents' front garden so we could play Indians. Forget the cowboys; we weren't interested in them, just in circling the tent hollering at one another. The squaw's blue and yellow dress, which came with a plastic headdress with long brown plaits and a brilliant blue feather, made me feel just like the real thing. Later on, Kevin and I graduated to the orange family tent that we used for holidays when Mick would drive us down to Cornwall and Somerset. It was massive, complete with a living/cooking space at the front with two bedrooms behind, one main and a smaller one off to the side. I used to love sleeping in it. I'd always take Kevin with me but he'd get scared of the noises and the dark and would run indoors. I'd stay out there on my own, weeing in a little bucket and pouring it out of the back so I didn't have to follow him in and break the spell of being outside camping.

Although my racing achievements so far were limited to winning the egg-and-spoon and the sack races in my primary school sports day, I loved trying any new activity going. At primary school, I was prefect and games captain for my house, Riding House. I was good at all the games so everyone always wanted to be on my team. Because I had the pick of the best we

nearly always won. The only activity I tried that was an out-and-out failure was riding. Although encouraged by Mum, I didn't take to it at all. Apart from the expense, I didn't like the fact the horse was doing all the work, not me. I joined the majorettes but didn't stick at it for long. I learned all the techniques and liked all the twirling and throwing but when I saw our uniform – that was it. Instead of the lovely bright colours I'd seen other teams wearing, we were given dowdy brown and cream. I was out of there immediately. I loved gymnastics too, but not for long. I managed the trampolining and floor work but wasn't too good on the beams. Ballet lasted for about three days – just long enough to discover I was an elephant. But best of all was Budokan, a form of martial arts that is something like a cross between karate and judo. Kevin came too, although he was only three or four. I can still see him in his blue jogging suit with his cap, peak turned up, doing all the punches. I enjoyed martial arts and seeing how they could help me defend myself, so Kevin, Stuart (when he was old enough) and I went along to judo classes in the Angel Leisure Centre in Tonbridge as well.

I belonged to the Brownies and then the Girl Guides, going after as many badges as I could. The thing I liked most about being a Guide was the camping, making fires and living outdoors. Putting up the tents, sleeping squashed together in our sleeping bags on the bumpy ground, cooking marshmallows on the campfire and singing songs was my idea of heaven. I remember I took my first secret puff of a cigarette behind one of the tents. One of the other Guides had given it to me and told me that they were going to have a smoke. I followed them, thinking I would give it a try, but I practically choked to death. It was disgusting. I absolutely hated it. I've never had another one.

I loved all the challenges we were set, especially crossing the 'swamp' on a tightrope. Loads of girls fell in but I'd hang on for dear life, determined not to. I hate water. One of my abiding childhood fears was drowning. I'd have nightmares about falling into water as I dropped off to sleep. First of all I'd see those fuzzy stars and then I'd be falling from a cliff or a rock into the water below. It terrified me.

The other recurring dream I had was of being abandoned somewhere by my mother. I used to scream my head off. It

probably related back to the times I had been left at St George's. I was certainly always very possessive of Mum and never wanted to share her with anyone. I always liked it whenever she left me to stay at my aunt's or at my nan and granddad's, although sometimes, like any child, I was frightened that she wouldn't come back – even though she always did. When I think about how I behaved in my twenties, I can sympathise with her wanting to get out and enjoy herself. Who doesn't? As a child, though, I found it hard to cope with because I didn't understand.

Looking back, I can see I was quite independent from an early age. I always wanted to forge my own path and whatever I did, I had to do it properly, or at least do it the best I possibly could. Mum is independent too, hating anyone to think she's weak, so perhaps I got it from her. However, she thinks that I may subconsciously have felt that things were expected of me because I was such a novelty in the village, and that I reacted to that. Whatever the reason, I always wanted to give 100 per cent to everything I liked doing. What I enjoyed was achieving things for myself. If I was quite good at something, I knew I could make myself better. If there was something I couldn't do, I'd just switch off. However, while I was at Hildenborough Primary School, I suppose I let life take its course. It wasn't until I went to secondary school that the dreams and ambitions that dominated my adult life began to take shape.