1
How on Earth Did I Get Here?

On the morning of 13th October 2016, I was picked up by a taxi. From the outside it looked like any normal London cab: glossy black paint, hooded headlights and a winking orange sign. But appearances can be deceptive.

The driver was trained in high-speed manoeuvres and knew the shortcut routes of London like the back of his hand. The door was opened by Michael, the six-foot-five owner of a private security company I had been recommended. His clients ranged from Hollywood stars to singers and CEOs. His career in the armed forces and his relaxed but alert air filled me with confidence.

'Morning!' Michael said cheerily, holding the door open and ushering me inside.

I slid into the back seat, feeling the squeak of leather against my clothes. Michael got in next to me. There was an umbrella lying on the floor of the cab. It was a clear day, with no rain forecast, so I was puzzled.

'What's that doing there?'

He rolled the umbrella across to me. When I tried to lift it, the umbrella was so heavy I could barely get it off the ground. According to Michael, it could be used to fend off anyone intent on attacking me.

'Great,' I thought, my heart thumping as I imagined angry-faced protesters running at me from every direction.

'Does it open up?' I asked.

Michael nodded. 'Yes,' he said matter-of-factly. 'Because if someone throws something at you, it acts like as a shield as well.'

'Clever,' I thought. I tried to stay calm and composed. We probably wouldn't need to use the umbrella . . . would we?

On that strange, topsy-turvy morning, everything looked like something it wasn't – myself included. I had dressed carefully for the occasion: a black trouser suit with a crisp, feminine but business-like white shirt and a pair of comfortable high heels. I always wear high heels because they make me feel as if I'm stepping up; they are part of my armoury as I get ready for battle. But inside I was so jittery that I hadn't managed to eat anything for breakfast. I hadn't even drunk a cup of coffee, which would have been a must on any other morning.

The special taxi pulled out into the morning traffic, with my husband Alan in a second taxi following behind. We were on our way to attend the first day of a High Court hearing into whether the government was legally obliged to put the plans for leaving the EU to a Parliamentary vote. I was the lead claimant in the case.

Alan and I were both dropped off at the back entrance of the offices of the law firm representing me, Mishcon de Reya. My legal team had gathered as pre-arranged for the short walk to the High Court. There was the super-organised Emily Nicholson, a managing associate litigator who has not only worked in politics in the UK and US but who I'm sure is destined to have a hugely successful career. The ever-smiling, approachable Rob Murray, who is a partner in the firm's Dispute Resolution Department, who always took copious notes and never missed any details from a conversation or meeting. Lisa Tremble, who was the head of communications and who, along with her colleague Hayley Geffin, brilliantly

managed the overwhelming amount of media requests that were coming from all over the world, as I had no team of my own. Lurking at the back of the group was the most senior Mishcon member, James Libson, partner and head of Mishcon Private, with his glasses on his forehead and his attention on the email he was writing. James exuded seniority, but in a calm, collected and confidence-inspiring manner. We were ready to set off.

I chose to be flanked by the two women, followed by Michael and his fellow security officer, then Rob, Alan, James and the rest of my Mishcon team. As we turned the corner and walked towards the iron railings of the Royal Courts of Justice, there was already a daunting crowd of media and protesters gathered outside. Some of them wore nooses around their necks and tabards with my name printed on their chests. Others had placards denouncing what I was doing.

This was the first time reality struck – I realised that people actually wanted me dead. It took all my strength to stay calm and carry on walking past. I wanted to stop, I wanted to talk to them, I wanted to explain, but my team hurried me on.

I wondered what Michael could possibly be making of it all. On the journey, to lighten the mood, he'd told me his team's previous job had been looking after Lady Gaga at the Victoria's Secret fashion show. This was quite a change in pace: there were to be no beautiful supermodels parading down a catwalk in glitzy underwear on that cool October morning in London.

On the walk towards the entrance, I heard photographers screaming my name. One angry voice rose above the fray and shouted, 'Traitor!'

It was the strangest feeling. I knew I was doing this because I loved my country, not because I wished to betray

it. I was doing this because I wanted to protect the freedoms that made Britain great, not destroy them. I was doing this because I believed it was right. And here I was, accused of being a traitor by someone I'd never met. It was hurtful and bewildering, but there was no time to dwell on it. The case was about to start. Michael bundled me past the protesters towards a back entrance and down a series of corridors until we got to the appointed courtroom.

The High Court is housed in an imposing Victorian Gothic building, built in the 1870s, and inside the courtroom it felt as though not much had changed since then. It had that old library smell – the kind of dusty, bookish fragrance you associate with many centuries of learning. I sat on a wooden bench, flanked by two senior members from my legal team. I've got a short torso and one of my lawyers joked that, from behind, I resembled a child sitting between two big men. I certainly felt dwarfed by the sense of occasion.

In front of me was a row of QCs, including my barrister, the brilliant and unmistakable Lord Pannick. They were all wearing their wigs, and I remember thinking that, from my vantage point, the silhouette of the wigs looked like waves in the sea drawn by a toddler's hand. As a girl I attended a convent and was taught by strict English nuns who made us recite pages of proverbs and collective nouns. I thought a fitting one for the sight before me might be 'a sea of silks'.

The juniors were finishing bringing in boxes full of files containing the arguments and precedents they would use during the case, wheeled in on trolleys, twelve to fifteen boxes in each. Amidst the pomp and regalia of the court, the trolleys struck a duff note: like the wheels of a trolley you'd put your groceries in.

The courtroom was bursting at the seams. The press was sitting in a special boxed area towards the front of the court,

all staring at me. I was permanently aware of the movements I was making and how they might be perceived – a glimmer of a smile in the wrong place could be misinterpreted; as for yawning (it had been impossible to sleep the night before), forget it! I kept wondering what these assorted members of the media were thinking. It was a constant pressure being under their gaze.

Above me, the public gallery was full. I didn't feel particularly safe. There were so many people up there – what would happen if someone threw something at me?

The whole situation was surreal. There I was, flanked by men used to being bodyguards for American pop stars, sitting a few benches away from the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales and having every tiny movement on my face scrutinised by dozens of people I'd never met. Inside the courtroom, the attention was intense. But outside the courtroom, the entire country – and beyond that, even nations as diverse as Australia and China – was watching. And I thought to myself: 'How on earth did I get here?'

2
The Promised Land

Four months earlier, on the evening of 23rd June 2016, I'd been lying in bed at home, glued to the television, watching the results of the Referendum roll in. On one side of the bed was my husband, Alan. On the other was our eleven-year-old son, Luca, who had asked to stay up late because he was so interested in the result. In the weeks leading up to the Referendum, Luca had taken part in a series of school debates about Brexit.

I was so anxious about the result and what it would mean for the country that I couldn't switch off. I know I barely slept that night because Alan, who is always paranoid I don't get enough rest, had some weeks earlier given me a watch which tracked my sleep. On the night of 23rd June, it registered thirty-six minutes.

I remember seeing the UKIP leader Nigel Farage's speech just after 10 p.m., within minutes of the ballot closing, when he effectively said he expected defeat for Leave, despite a secret poll by the Leave.EU campaign website putting Leave four points ahead. I relaxed a little, but, like the pollsters, was nervous it would be a very close vote. I eventually drifted off to sleep around 11.45 p.m., but woke little more than half an hour later to the noise of cheering on the screen – the result for Sunderland's whopping 61 per cent vote to Leave versus 39 per cent to Remain was just in. It

was a far larger margin than pollsters had predicted, and from there things seemed to take a turn: suddenly we were on course to leave the EU. My first reaction was one of total disbelief. I felt a dreadful pain in my stomach. I just couldn't get my head around what was happening.

I woke my son at about 6 a.m. to break the news. He started crying. 'What's going to happen to me and all my friends?' he asked me, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

I held Luca close, but there was nothing I could say to make it go away. Although I felt completely helpless, I said, 'Don't worry, people will be sensible, the people who can make sure everything is done right will make sure it's all right.' As a mother, it's the worst feeling to know your child is upset and that you can't do anything to alleviate their sadness.

Over the following days, the country fell into a state of disarray. The margin of victory had been so narrow – 51.9 per cent in favour of Brexit; 48.1 per cent voting to remain – that debate became increasingly toxic, with both sides claiming the moral high ground. Remainers were disillusioned and exhausted. Even the most hardened Leavers were unsure about what would happen next. We knew we were leaving. But no one seemed to know *how* exactly. After all, we didn't even have a prime minister.

Once my disbelief at the result had passed, I reflected and realised I wasn't entirely shocked by what had happened. Since the previous October I'd been a spokesperson for the Remain campaign. I had been invited to speak by forums, think-tanks, the media and at various other events in all parts of the country. On my travels around the UK I had started to understand how so many people had felt ignored, futureless, angry and hopeless. I realised that when people feel rock bottom they also feel they might as well roll the dice and hope for a better life

rather than putting their faith in a political system that had let them and their families down.

It was summed up in a report I read in August 2016 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)[1], which examined specific data on the roles of poverty, place and individual characteristics driving the Leave vote. As I had seen first-hand, their report showed how Britain was divided along economic, educational and social lines. They found that the poorest households, with incomes of less than £20,000 per year, were much more likely to support leaving the EU than wealthier households; in other words, people who were unemployed, in low-skilled[2] and manual jobs, people who felt that their financial situation had worsened, had all voted Leave. The vulnerable, feeling voiceless, had found a way to shatter the complacency of the politicians, the liberal elites, the experts and academics who seemed so out of touch and ignorant of their daily lives.

The JRF concluded that age, income and education mattered, though it was educational inequality that was the strongest driver. They found that, other things being equal, support for Leave was thirty percentage points higher among those with GCSE qualifications or below than it was for people with a degree. In contrast, support for Leave was just ten points higher among those on less than £20,000 per year than it was among those with incomes of more than £60,000 per year, and twenty points higher among those aged sixty-five than those aged twenty-five.

There were also strong regional differences: in areas with a high percentage of low-skilled workers, the proportion of A-level holders voting Leave was closer to that of people

1 'Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunity' – Matthew Goodwin, Oliver Heath, jrf.org.uk, 31st August 2016.

2 'Low-skilled' being defined as not having or needing a high level of skill or education.

with low skills; in high-skilled areas, the vote of A-level holders was much more similar to graduates. Groups in Britain that the politicians like to class as 'left behind' (as if their situation had nothing to do with successive governments' failed policies) felt that they had been cut adrift and forgotten. As the JRF clearly articulates, these voters face a 'double whammy':

> While their lack of qualifications put them at a significant disadvantage in the modern economy, they are also being further marginalised in society by the lack of opportunities . . . in their low-skilled communities. This will make it extremely difficult for the left behind to adapt and prosper in future.

Quite early on, I started to ask myself whether the Referendum vote was really going to be about the EU. From the work I had been doing since 2009 through my True and Fair Foundation, aimed at supporting small, dynamic grassroots charities, I had seen first-hand the pathways to deprivation in Britain and met some of the most marginalised people in our society. At numerous Referendum events I had expressed my fear that people might vote Leave as a means of improving their families' lives, to take a chance. They needed to do something dramatic to alter their own futures.

The problem was that this was not the question Conservative politicians were asking. The question *they* wanted an answer to was how to heal their own party, not the country.

As I travelled around the UK, I realised people I spoke to didn't want to hear facts and figures or any explanations about the consequences of staying or leaving the EU; they weren't being reasoned into a decision, they were just

following their instinct to do *something*. That's when I started to ask myself, 'What happens if we lose and have to leave? Where do we even begin . . . ?'

I was becoming so alarmed that after a trip to Wales I tried to relay my concerns to the Remain team, who sent out to all their spokespeople a list of facts, figures and talking points each morning. All I got back was a condescending pat on the back. 'Don't worry, Gina. We know what we're doing. We've got a lot of experienced politicians[3] on our side.'

I felt patronised, angry and frustrated. I started straying from their script and talking about 'Remaining and reforming – being the leaders of change from the top table. Not throwing the baby out with the bath water.' Suddenly the requests to speak or for media appearances from their team stopped. I was replaced by more 'obedient' women.

I started conducting my own research, looking into the history of Europe and the EU, beyond that which I already knew. I have always liked to read, to know why things are the way they are. As a girl, my other love was archaeology and I would spend hours reading about who we were, where we came from; about ancient civilisations, ancient mythologies, history. I have carried this habit and curiosity throughout my life, and now I applied it as I started reading Article 50. In fact, I memorised Article 50 (1) and (2) – all 118 words. Sad, I know.

In March 2017 when I read the draft Article 50 Bill, which was designed to do nothing more than start the negotiating process on leaving the EU, it struck me that only a few words of legalese could create such momentous change.

*

3 Code for older, out-of-touch, arrogant men with egos the size of mountains.

On the Monday after the Referendum results, I was speaking at an event organised by Mishcon de Reya. It was a panel debate about the lack of diversity in the City, in front of an audience comprised of clients, Mishcon employees and other interested parties.

It was held in a smart conference room in their offices, with a stage set with four chairs on a platform just like a TV debate. I had thought it was going to be an informal gathering and was surprised to see the room full to capacity, with about 120 people waiting to hear what we had to say.

I'm never short of an opinion or six, so I said some typically politically incorrect things about how certain women held out as heroines of diversity are more like men in skirts, coming from the same small pool of universities, public schools and social backgrounds; with the same unconscious biases. That real diversity should be about much more than gender; that real diversity is about psyche as well as outward diversity (but that's probably a whole other book).

As the event concluded, I was approached by a man wearing a light grey suit. He had an air of authority and he introduced himself as a senior partner at Mishcon. After some polite small-talk, he said, 'Gina, you were really passionate and don't seem afraid to speak your mind. Is there anything else you feel passionate about?'

Immediately, I thought of everything that had happened over the preceding days. The feelings of the previous Friday night came flooding back to me: the sense of shock and confusion; the sleepless night; my son's tears. I couldn't help myself. I started rattling off my fears that I thought nobody knew what they were doing with Brexit; that the politicians who campaigned for us to leave didn't seem to have a clue about the detail – it was all about ideology. That it was an arrogant political miscalculation and I was worried about

the Article 50 process – I was warming to my theme. Would MPs finally have the debate they hadn't had to date? Would they really deliver the advisory result as binding? Finally, would there be serious debate about what Brexit would really mean to our country?

I explained my concern was that Cameron might be replaced by a more right-wing prime minister who might just trigger Article 50 without a plan. Whether I had voted to leave or remain was nothing to do with it. There were much bigger, more important issues at stake now. How could we minimise the damage that appeared to be upon us? What could we do!

At the end of my rant, he just looked at me and said, 'I have a letter we've drafted that I need to send you. Once you've read it, call me, and if you are in agreement you must come to a meeting here, as there is an urgency in terms of filing.'

Overnight the draft letter was sent to me, and a few days later I met with the Mishcon team, who were already planning a legal action. They said they had been thinking along the same lines as I was, and they were hoping to put together a case with two existing clients: would I be interested in coming on board? At that point, it felt as if everything had come together. There was something fatalistic about it. Instinctively, it felt right.

When they asked if I would do it, I immediately said, 'Absolutely, I'll join the other two.'

Later that week, Mishcon sent out a letter revealing that they had been instructed to pursue a case against Her Majesty's Government. At that stage, the three clients – myself included – were not named. But it didn't stop the trolls. Mishcon de Reya were taunted online with horrific anti-Semitic slurs for issuing the letter. Their offices were attacked.

I watched it unfold with mounting horror. But instead of making me scared for my own safety, it made me angry, because we weren't doing anything wrong. These respected, expert legal individuals were putting their necks on the line. They were asking the court's permission to clarify a matter of constitutional law and it was a perfectly legitimate but urgent question. To attack them with such foul language and with such venom seemed to me to be out of all proportion. It was bullying – and I hate bullies.

As the complexity of the legal arguments unfolded, I realised how fortunate I was that my team at Mishcon was being led by the legendary James Libson, with his intellectual agility.

Months after we won in the Supreme Court, Alan and I watched a film called *Denial* in which there is a lawyer character called James Libson, played by the actor Jack Lowden. James had never mentioned it to me, but he is the same James Libson who, in 2000, had been instrumental in successfully defending Deborah Lipstadt when the Holocaust denier David Irving sued her for libel in the UK Supreme Court. As James himself put it, this was 'a world pre 9/11, pre the ubiquity of social media and, for Jews, pre the emergence of much-debated new forms of anti-Semitism'.

It was therefore bitterly ironic that his firm and his offices should be subject to anti-Semitic attacks. It is extremely distressing that so little appeared to have changed over nearly twenty years.

When my name emerged as a claimant in the administrative hearing on 19th July and Lord Leveson named me as the Lead Claimant, I too was the target of racist and sexist abuse. The other two claimants in my case, both men, ultimately decided to withdraw from the action when they saw the level of hate directed towards me. And that's how I came to be the sole Lead Claimant.

I understood the other two claimants' reticence: the case would have had a huge effect on their businesses and families. They were far more high-profile than me. They had so much more to lose. That said, I'm a mother to an adult daughter with special needs and to two young children, who were then eleven and nine, and I jointly run an investment business. I was also keen to protect my family and our privacy, so it was a very tough decision. But, when it came down to it, this was just too important. The rule of law, British values, these are worth fighting to protect. It was a battle worth pursuing for my children, their future, and the country's future. There was something almost inevitable about these events – fate seemed to conspire to hand me this baton. Of course I would pick it up and run with it.

It was exhausting. As the only client I had to read every single bit of communication in preparation for the case. Not just from my team but from the other parties who also wanted to question the government's legal position. Rather than have a series of cases clogging up the courts, it was decided that several other cases, dealing with different legal angles, such as expats' rights and the rights of minors, would be heard at the same time as my case.

I didn't feel alone, but I suppose I *was* disappointed that no academics, politicians, business or high-profile people decided to come out in support of me or the action. They seemed quite happy to let me take the full heat.

I consoled myself by saying they would support me, that they were with me in spirit but were fearful of the backlash I was experiencing. In the aftermath of the Referendum results, it was hard not to feel there was a lock-down on public debate. Fear had taken hold. And then fear turned into a sort of apathy, as people felt confused and lost. It was as if Brexit had polluted the British consciousness.

That was how I found myself in the High Court, facing three eminent judges who were about to decide on a fundamental principle of the British constitution. As I sat there on that autumn morning, surrounded by the sounds of shuffling papers and dry coughs and the tap-tap-tapping of the stenographers as they got ready to transcribe the opening arguments, I thought back to my childhood. I felt this day had all been set in motion many, many years before.

3
The Things I Was Going To Do

I was born in Guyana when it was still a British colony, then called British Guiana. When I was a year old, Guyana became independent and part of the Commonwealth. My childhood home had pictures of the Queen hanging on the wall. My mum collected Wedgwood china with royal-themed photographs printed on plates and every evening when my father was home he would tune the radio into the BBC World Service and we'd listen to it as a family.

My siblings and I grew up thinking Britain was the highest pinnacle of all that was best in the world. It stood for everything to which we most aspired. At school, I learned about Queen Victoria, Dickens and Shakespeare. I was taught to speak English with perfect grammar by British nuns: no 'couldn't' or 'wouldn't', it was always 'could not' or 'would not'. Guyana is supposedly where Eldorado existed, but for me Britain was the Eldorado: a promised land of civility, culture, greatness and great people.

My father was a barrister, with an overwhelming sense of social justice, who would later go on to become Attorney General of Guyana. My mother had been a schoolteacher but became dedicated to her children when we were born. She was also respected as a botanist who loved orchids and flowers: she once entered – and won – a competition to grow a black rose. Our brick house was designed by her,

comfortable but not lavish. Downstairs, there was a sitting room, study and a lovely wooden spiral staircase leading up to our bedrooms. At the top of the stairs stood my father's desk and a piano, which was my mother's pride and joy – we all took piano lessons. There was a veranda that stretched the entire length of the house, which kept it cool when it became very humid.

I spent most of my time outdoors in the beautiful garden my mother had created. I have one older brother, two younger brothers and a much younger sister, so it's little surprise I was a complete tomboy. We had dens and a tree-house, and we used to camp outside, playing cowboys, which often ended with me being tied up by my brothers and left until someone took pity on me and loosened the knots. We grew up with an incredible amount of freedom and used our imaginations a lot. There was no television, so we had to invent our own worlds.

We could cause as much chaos as we liked in the garden, but my parents were disciplined when it came to academia. Their view – which I still hold – is that one of the most precious things you can ever give a child is education. We were taught never to waste it. When we weren't studying, we were expected to do chores: watering the garden, mowing the lawn, deadheading the flowers, walking to the dairy for milk.

When I was around seven or eight years old, my father bought a brand-new car. He had been doing well at work and his legal practice was becoming more successful. One day he returned from the office at the wheel of a Holden automobile. It was olive green and so shiny you could almost see your face in the paintwork, and my siblings and I were all really excited by this new apparition. We opened the passenger door and scampered inside, giggling as we inhaled the expensive smell of new leather.

The next day our father drove us around so that we could experience the Holden for ourselves. I sat in the back with my older brother in the front, and my father turned on the air-conditioning. It was a real treat, sitting there having our faces fanned with a cool breeze when it was so hot outside.

The car became indelibly associated with my father. Everyone around Georgetown knew when they saw the Holden that it was my father driving and that he was doing well for himself. I was so proud of him.

That was the first time I remember being made acutely aware of what money could bring you. I realised that if you worked hard, like my father, you could potentially earn enough to buy yourself and your family nice things. Even so, my mother was always modest and hardworking. She would always remind us that life can change in an instant, so we shouldn't take things for granted or be frivolous. I supposed she was speaking from experience, as everything did change for her when her father was murdered, when she was just ten years old. Men broke into the house, tied up my grandmother and murdered my grandfather amidst a burglary as he would not tell them where the safe was. My grandmother was a loving, compassionate woman, but as she could not read or write, my mother had to help with the paperwork associated with my grandfather's business and land ownership. She had to grow up fast and become responsible overnight. The echoes of how fate conspired to rob her of her childhood resounded with my situation as I sat in Eastbourne so far away from her. She was an eco-warrior, even before the term was invented. Every bit of packaging, plastic bag, string and ribbon was neatly folded or rolled and put away into its assigned cupboard or drawer. Every bottle, tub or tin was made useful – habits that are imprinted on my siblings and me. I can hear her words – 'You never know when you might need it'.

In the neighbourhood our house was in, there were also lots of families who didn't have smart cars or the trappings of a comfortable life, or the luxury of going to good schools. There were wrought-iron gates at the end of our driveway and in the street outside there would usually be children playing in torn clothes and bare feet. I would look through these gates and wonder what their lives were like.

My mother scolded me for being a daydreamer. She thought I was away with the fairies half the time. But I wasn't daydreaming – I was just curious about what made other people tick. I loved people-watching, wondering about their lives. (This has stayed with me: my husband Alan likes to joke that if ants could talk, I'd be lying down on the floor with them and asking them questions.)

I got into trouble as a child because I would give away my things to these children. It didn't seem fair that I had so much and they had so little. My mum used to have our clothes made for us by an old-fashioned English dressmaker. As a tomboy I hated them. On one occasion, when I was about eight, my mother had a dress made for me which I instantly disliked because it had puffed sleeves and was far too girly. But my mother was very proud of it, as the material had come from Britain and was the best quality cotton.

The dress was red and blue, and had a pattern of robins all over it. She also bought me some red sandals from Clarks (it was always Clarks). One day when my mother was busy in the garden, I ran down the drive as fast as my legs would carry me. There were children on the other side of the iron gates, laughing and playing games. I caught the eye of one little girl I had got to know. She was playing barefoot, so I beckoned her over and gave her the dress and the sandals.

'You mustn't tell anyone,' I said, whispering. 'This has to be our secret.'

The little girl smiled and nodded and gleefully ran up the road to the fire hydrant, where her friends were waiting. I turned and ran back up the driveway, feeling happy that she was happy. The dress and the sandals were only for best, so I knew my mother wouldn't discover they were missing for a while.

Later I started giving the little girl delicious biscuits and cakes my mother had baked, chocolate, too. The political situation in Guyana became very difficult and our President Forbes Burnham had banned the importation of many goods. But on several occasions, visitors from England would bring my parents presents and chocolates for us children; Cadbury's chocolate that came from England, and because it was from England it was like gold. It was so hot in Guyana that the chocolate used to melt, my mother kept it in a special fridge. I would tell the girl to hide behind the gate-post for the handover and then I'd run to the fridge, get the chocolate and run all the way down our drive to give it to her. I made her promise never to tell anyone. My mother would be furious at the disappearance of the chocolate, since it was so hard to lay hands on, but I was much happier eating Mum's plantain chips or my grandmother's bitter-sweet tamarind balls instead of the chocolate that was meant to be such a luxury.

I didn't speak a word about our transactions.

Then, one day, my mother wanted me to wear the dress for a special event. In a panic, I told her I'd packed it with the sandals to stay over at my best friend Sharon Chung's house, and had forgotten it. She didn't believe me.

'Go and get the cane,' she told me, and I knew at once that I was going to be punished for what I'd done.

My mother was the disciplinarian in our family and in those days it was quite normal for children to be caned for their misdemeanours. The cane was made of bamboo and

kept in the hat-stand in the hallway, along with the umbrellas and coats. I went to retrieve it as my mother had ordered, and because I knew what was coming I rapidly stuffed one of my comic books down my pants so that it wouldn't hurt as much. If my mother knew I did this, she never said anything.

I went back to my mother and handed her the cane. She made me bend over and then – thwack! – brought the cane down sharply on my bottom and the back of my legs. It was like a lash: an instant stinging pain that burned immediately. She caned me a few more times, and I winced with each blow but refused to cry. The next day there were long, vivid bruises criss-crossing my skin.

Although the caning hurt, it didn't bother me as much as it should have because I'd done something I thought was right. I just kept thinking of the happy smile on the girl's face at handovers. I just couldn't see the point in having a new dress when I already had so many clothes. The pain was trumped by the happiness I felt that I had done something good, and the smile that shone on the girl's face.

It wasn't until I was a grown-up, with a child of my own, that I finally confessed to my mother in my small bungalow in Yate, north-east of Bristol. She was amazed. She said, 'You let me cane you and still never told me the truth!' Then paused and added, 'But I would still have caned you for lying.'

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At night, when I was meant to be in bed, I'd sometimes stay up and sneak to the top of the spiral staircase, listening in to the adults' conversation below when people came over. My father was heavily involved in Guyanese politics and he would have meetings at our home in the evenings or on weekends, which I knew were extremely important.

The meetings were predominantly attended by men, who smoked cigars, drank rum or Johnnie Walker whisky, and talked about big things like politics, justice and socialism and how to improve people's lives. My mother would make sure she baked delicious snacks and cut lots of coconuts for their water, which would be mixed with rum. The men would agree and disagree with passion and intensity, but always with respect for each other. Even though I didn't understand all the words, I knew what they were saying was important. I remember the conviction in their voices and the smell of their cigar smoke, and I remember thinking, from my position at the top of the stairs, 'These men are like the heroes in my books, they care, and I want to be part of their world.'

Even as a young girl I felt I could change things. I never really felt that as a girl I was weak or limited. I knew I wasn't like other girls my age: I was not a pretty girl in any way, shape or form. I had knotty, wild, long dark hair that went far below my waist, and I was very skinny, tiny and quite awkward-looking. I realised I wasn't going to be treated in a special way for being pretty or as dainty as some other girls, or as clever as my siblings were, but it never really bothered me. I was just happy being me – playing make-believe in our idyllic garden. I decided when I was quite young that I would be a brilliant lawyer, or archaeologist, or historian – that I would do important things.

I don't know if it's nature or nurture, probably a combination of both, but my childhood taught me to stand up for what I believed was right, no matter the personal cost. It also left me with an abiding sense of wanting to be involved in important discussions about the things that really mattered. Even though I was a girl I wanted to be included in those male-dominated conversations. I didn't want to be the woman on the sidelines, serving the snacks and drinks; I would be just like my father.