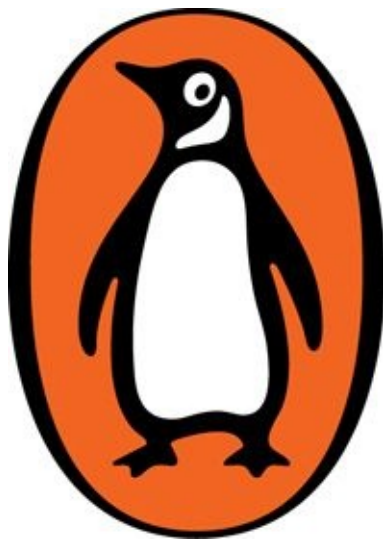


WINNER OF THE 100TH TOUR DE FRANCE

CHRIS FROOME

THE CLIMB



Chris Froome

with David Walsh

the climb



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‘After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.’

Nelson Mandela

To my teammates for their hard work and dedication, and for helping me achieve my dreams, and to Mum and Michelle for the endless supply of motivation.



africa

We have come out of Mai-a-Ihii, leaving his tin house behind us. We have come down the Dagoretti road inhaling the blood scent from the market and from its four death-house abattoirs. I hold my breath as we pass a heap of rotting discarded carcasses. Sometimes in Dagoretti the blood runs down the sides of the road and into the drains. Today we are for the hills and the open road and we don't care.

We have skirted the Kibiku Forest, pedalled a right on to the Ngong road and down past the sad little Ngong Stadium, where the only facility is the grass that the cattle graze on. We have sped past the Kenya Power and Lighting Distribution Centre, which keeps us buying candles for the ambushes darkness that are sprung on us by the power company. We have raced down to the Forest Line road and cut right past Ngong town, dodging the stray goat crossing the road and the colourfully painted *matatus* that grind to a halt at a moment's notice to collect or drop off their passengers. The chaos passes, and we're on to the open road and into the Ngong Hills.

One last ride before I die?

It will be in these hills, for sure. The canopy of blue sky barely above me, the world transforming itself from urban grime to rural safari below me. You can lift your hands up and away from your handlebar grips and stretch your arms skyward in triumph like a stage winner. Your hands will be breaking through the floor of heaven. One last ride before I die? Take me here.

He is Kikuyu and I am chasing him. As always. The land of the Kikuyu people runs out at an invisible seam and this is now Masai country. The Masai named the Ngong Hills. A giant was stumbling, as their legend would have it, from Kilimanjaro with his head in the clouds. He fell heavily and left the indent of his four knuckles in the earth. The Ngong Hills. These four summits. We are riding down the spine of them now, he and I, chasing each other over the giant's knuckles. I am sixteen. My head is never anywhere else but in the clouds. I dream of the great races. But first, I must catch him.

Twenty kilometres we race along this brown, arid, corrugated spine. The best views, where you can see the road snaking down for miles ahead of you, come at Point Lamwia where Karen Blixen, the famous author of *Out of Africa*, buried her lover Denys Finch Hatton. Lucky man. What a place to settle in for eternity. Salute. Then we are heading down into the Great Rift Valley.

For a while in the hills I thought I might get one over on him. I am mad for the climbs. He let me spin away once or twice but always he reeled me in.

Down. Down. The Magadi road has looped out of the green suburbs of Langata from near my old school, the Banda, but coming from Mai-a-Ihii we only join it down here past the bustling, street-side markets of Kiserian. We are on our plunge down into the Rift Valley. Lower and lower. Faster and faster. Past the busy town of Ongata Rongai. Onwards. The road ribbons and twists around the countryside, long straight stretches and big loops which will take us from two thousand metres and send us down on the Rift Valley plains at six hundred metres.

Downhill. No pain. Our calves will complain on the way home but, right now, this is fun. The addict's rush. We are the happy slaves of our own rhythm. We exist in our *cadence*.

We might see anything here now that the city is behind us. It's clear that we are in Masai territory.

Passing through the village of Oltepesi, we stand out like a sore thumb among the local people wearing the traditional red *shúkà*. We ride on.

The road is nature's audition reel. Look! Waterbuck. If we're lucky we might see a leopard. Dik-diks, the small antelope found in these parts, bound out of sight into the thorny undergrowth. Warthogs and baboons. Eland, monochrome zebras and elegant giraffes.

People still claim to see the odd lion in this area. Not today. Apart from the dreadlocked one in front of me. Leone Nero they called him in Italy. Black Lion. I am chasing the Black Lion.

We pass ostriches with long legs no more muscular than my own. If I point that out to Leone Nero and the boys they won't let me live it down. It's true though.

We are only cutting through this world, he and I. This is no Rift Valley tourist cruise. We are racing. I am chasing him. He is my prey. He is cackling like a hyena because he knows I will never catch him. I don't have it in my haunches. He has thousands of miles of roads and hills packed in there, all compressed into clenched muscle. Teasing me with his back wheel. Now you see it, *kijana*, now you don't.

I can't win, but he stays close enough to taunt me.

Down we go. It becomes stiller and it becomes hotter. The further into this dimple in the earth's skin we ride, the more it is like a furnace.

We will rest and laugh together when we get to the end. The end is the moonscape of Magadi with its salt-crusted shores and boiling soda lakes. There will be candy cotton pink clouds of startled flamingos. And my mother following an hour or two behind in the car will bring food to restore and recharge us before we turn back for home.

I know him. He will say, 'Put your bike into your mum's car and go with her. The long climb home is not for you, *kijana*.'

He knows me. Never.

We race on. There are two dangers: homicidal drivers and potholes. This is Africa. Do we worry? Never.

In fact, I have taken my helmet off. I shouldn't but the heat is my alibi. The helmet is tied round my handlebars, clipped on. He is not even dressed to race. He has a T-shirt and gym shorts on. And a pair of sneakers. I am in full bloody racing gear. He loves that.

People in cars stick their heads out of the windows. *Look at that skinny cyclist kid trying to catch up with that Rastafarian on a bike! Aw, God help him! Look!*

I'm thinking that I didn't pop him on the Ngong climbs but maybe I put some ache into his old leg. If I surprised him could I get away from him on the long downhill?

I make my moves and each time he responds. I get close enough so that he drafts me but when I press the gas he has already pulled away.

We hit a pitted stretch of road. Potholes and fissures and lumps. We hit it fast. If one slows then the other wins. We push hard. Then *pop!*, my helmet unclips as I hit one of the little speed bumps that wear and tear has made for the battered Magadi road. The helmet falls a few inches and catches my front wheel, sending it jolting sideways, towards him.

He rides straight over it. The helmet jams into his front wheel. The front wheel stops dead and the

back wheel buck-jumps from the road. He says goodbye to his bike. He is launched down the road at over sixty kilometres per hour, flying like a missile with dreadlocks.

How far? He says fifty metres. I'm not so sure. That might have brought him into Tanzanian airspace. The flying isn't the thing anyway. The landing is the issue here on the downward grooves of the Magadi road.

He lands first on his elbows and his knees. The road seizes huge patches of his skin from the joints and from the front of his body. There is blood everywhere. His knees alone are a horror show. They look like the grafted-on asses of two young baboons.

I am scared and I feel guilty. Stupid. Sick. Any water I have left in my bottles I use to try to clean his wounds. I might as well try damming Lake Magadi with sticking plasters. He is calm but we are both sweating in the dead heat and I know that his sweat is running freely into his raw, vivid wounds.

We sit there on the side of the road for ten, twenty minutes. I apologize. He waves it away. Every time, he waves it away.

Maybe Mum will drive past and save us. Let it be.

We sit there and finally he stands up gingerly and gets back on his bike. A wounded John Wayne climbing back on to his horse.

This is too much.

'Stop. I can carry you on my bike. I can hold you.'

His laugh scolds.

'What are you now? An acrobat? Let's ride.'

Hours later Mum finds us in Magadi. Her son, the wading bird, and his mentor, the wounded lion.

She wants to drive us back to Nairobi straight away. He negotiates a compromise. We go to the hospital in Magadi. The soda lakes have given birth to a company town and the town has a hospital where they mummify him in bandages. We 'camp' for the night near the lake in a basic hotel.

In the morning he won't get into the car, so he and I saddle up. I have a hangover of such guilt that I swear I can actually feel some of his pain.

He rides hard though, the bandaged bastard. Hard up the long, long climb to Kikuyu and home. Hard enough to show me what it takes. Hard enough for me to forget the guilt and want to beat him again. He takes me on the hills. We do some sprints. He takes me on them too. He schools me. For hours he schools me.

We hit Mai-a-Ihii. We lift our bikes into his two-roomed tin hut on a corridor of two-roomed tin huts.

I should go home but he knows that I don't want to.

We sit and talk into the night about old races and racers.

'Tomorrow again?' David Kinjah says to me before he sleeps.

'Okay! Sure.'

Yes.

My name is Chris Froome. I am a professional cyclist. Before that I was a skinny *kijana* with big dreams.

Boyhood happened to me in a house just outside Nairobi, twenty kilometres south-west of the city, in a genteel suburb called Karen. The most famous resident Karen ever had was Karen Blixen and,

although there are minor protestations that the suburb was named after a different Karen entirely, most people believe the place was named after the Danish woman who married her cousin, coming to Kenya to run a coffee plantation.

The homes around us were stately and elegant and secluded by means of long driveways and security gates. In *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen described the very land I grew up on as 'Africa distilled up through six thousand feet, like the strong and refined essence of a continent'. She was right about the land, but what was built on it, and those who live in the town, are very un-African.

Karen was once predominantly British but in the last couple of decades many Americans, Germans and Japanese have come to live there too. A few outliers from the emerging black middle class live in the town, but the place is primarily a colony of wealth, an enclave shielded from the sprawling city and its epic slums.

My earliest memories are from our big house in Karen called Windy Ridge. We had a pleasant, decent-sized home, and I had my own bedroom, as did my two brothers, Jonathan and Jeremy, who are seven and nine years older than me respectively. When they were fourteen my brothers were sent off to England to attend Rugby School. We were relatively well off, at least when I was young.

My mother, Jane Flatt, was born in Kenya in 1956 and raised in the highlands of Limuru. Her parents, my grandparents, Patrick and Patricia, had followed a similar path to Karen Blixen. They came here from Tetbury, England, early in the last century, drawn to the coffee plantations like filings to a magnet.

He was an archetypal character, my grandfather. The sort of grandfather you might see in films or read about in books. He won the war, or so he would have us believe. He had served in World War Two, and in Kenya he had fought for the British against the Mau Mau, a militant group made up of Kikuyu rebels.

He passed down funny stories that weren't really meant for kids. They were contraband, slipped to us from the adult world, and we loved them all the more for it. My favourite tale was about how Grandfather ended up eating his donkey in the jungle because he got so hungry. Some comrades found him there in the middle of nowhere. They were starving too and they all ended up tucking into the donkey. This upset Grandfather because his donkey had been his companion through the whole war. I was never quite sure what rank he held or what role he had played during that time, travelling with a donkey – probably not espionage.

Grandfather was an aficionado of hunting and fishing. He taught us both of these but duck hunting was his main bag. God knows what he was shooting with back then when he scoured the forests of Kenya with his donkey but it had left him deaf. He had a hearing aid and, poor man, my brothers and (mainly my brothers, as I was timid) would have some fun at his expense. We would sit at the dinner table silently mouthing words to each other, making a great play of laughing heartily. Grandfather, excluded and frustrated by his impairment, would be frantically trying to tune in his hearing aid. It would be whistling with feedback as he tried to adjust it. Once he had turned it all the way up we would start talking at the top of our voices.

He would recoil as if our words were sudden gunfire.

'Stop shouting. No need for shouting.'

Growing up in Karen, we didn't have the usual activities or even the usual range of family pets.

When I was six years old I remember crossing by my brother's snake enclosure, which was basically waist-high pit covered with chicken wire, and I noticed that the back legs of my favourite pet bunny rabbit were hanging from the mouth of Jeremy's twelve-foot python. I had quite a few rabbits, but this was the one I had tamed, the one I could pick up and carry around with me. He was close to being my best friend. I would have known his hind legs anywhere but this was the last place I expected to see them. In fact, it was the last place that I would see them. Like most of our pets, he had a Swahili name but now he was just 'Lunch'. There he was, about to be digested. I knew he couldn't have found his own way into the snake pit. He must have been served up by my brother.

I got so angry with Jeremy that I picked up a wooden plank and started battering the snake enclosure. I managed to puncture holes in the chicken wire covering the cage. I wasn't a bad kid but I could throw a good tantrum if I didn't get my way or if somebody crossed me. Or if my favourite rabbit was used as snake fodder.

My brothers always did their best to knock that out of me. For my own good, of course – they were only ever cruel to be kind. They'd both give me a hard time in generous measures. We had some dog kennels, and when the dogs came into heat they would have to be put into cages to keep them away from each other. We also had a huge male turkey which my brothers would terrorize if I wasn't around to provide them with some fun. And then one day they found a way to combine the dog cages, the turkey and me into a new, ground-breaking form of entertainment.

We had air rifles and the boys would shoot at the turkey with the pellets that I fed my rabbits with. The pellets would fit comfortably into the barrel of an air rifle. So they'd sting the turkey with the pellets and make him angrier and angrier. One day that didn't provide enough amusement so Jeremy and Jono had to improvise. When the turkey was sufficiently demented with rage they caught him and put him into one of the dog cages. Then they caught me and put me in the dog cage with the lunatic turkey.

The ceilings were closed in and the cage door had a bolt that they jammed with a stick. The turkey and I were the same height, or maybe I was a little bigger, but that turkey could punch above its weight. I remember being absolutely petrified because he was so aggressive. He ducked his head down and came charging at me, his feathers puffed out in anger. I ended up huddled in the corner of the dog kennel with the turkey jumping and grabbing at me with its feet, whacking me with its wings and pecking at me all at the same time.

This was so funny for my brothers that they had to try it again and again. It was hysterical and they loved it. Only when I was in absolute floods of tears would they open the cage up and let me out. My sparring sessions with the turkey were usually two or three minutes long. Time enough for both of us. Victory inevitably fell to the feathered one in the red corner. Luckily my brothers never thought to feed me to the python for a laugh.

The turkey lived to be the fall guy in my own entertainment when Jeremy and Jono had gone back to school. The turkey stopped growing, while his partner from the dog cage didn't. No. I finally got big enough to traumatize the turkey myself. I would sneak up on him – *boo!* – then let him chase me. Repeat. Repeat again. Tease the turkey, let him chase, on and on. I thought that was a great game. Payback at last!

My father, Clive (or, as we all call him, Noz), grew up in England. He had been a good hockey player

and had played internationally at Under-19 level but left it all to build a new life in Kenya. Noz started in the tourism trade, and soon established a successful company, Flamingo Tours, which specialized in beach holidays and safaris in Kenya, bringing people to the Masai Mara and to the perfect beaches and blue waters of the Kenyan coastline. Noz would organize the entire trip for holidaymakers, from start to finish.

Aside from the company and the house, we had some land: maybe ten acres, two or three paddocks and a very generous garden with a tennis court. As well as our menagerie of pets, we had Jersey cows. My mother ran a bit of a dairy on the property so we had a barn where all the feed would be kept for the cows, a milking area and stables. We had two *ayahs* (nannies), an *askari* (a night watchman) and a couple of *shamba* boys (gardeners) who helped out with the milking of the cows and the feeding of the livestock that we had on the property.

The Ngong racecourse is a feature of life in Karen and Noz kept racehorses, two at a time when I was quite young. The horses are a vanished memory as I was only three or four years old when they left, but the cows stayed and we had a bull too (no tease and chase with him). There were ducks, geese and chickens, and that turkey. We were comfortably well off, but our lives still had the wildness of Africa in them. Kenya was a magical place to grow up. Then suddenly it all ended.

I was five or six years old when my parents' marriage hit a reef and at the same time Noz lost control of the company.

The details are vague to me. Noz blamed the business setback on a very large loan that someone had taken out in the company's name without his knowledge. Money had been siphoned away from the Flamingo accounts. Noz thought that it was being taken for an overseas branch but the money had just disappeared. It's blurry. My parents were divorcing at the same time, but the bank showed no sympathy when it came after the family to pay back the loan.

First they eyed up the house and the cars, and then came the bailiffs. They took furniture and anything they could from the house.

I have quite a vivid memory from that time. I had a little black bike that I would ride around our place and I was practically welded on to it. All day, every day, I would ride up and down our driveway and around our garden, pedalling backwards to apply the brake. There was a narrow dirt road that led to our drive, and I would be there raising dust until my mother summoned me for whatever meal was next. My brothers had gone off to school in England. Noz had already left by this time and moved in with his new girlfriend, Jenny, whom he later married. I was left to my own devices.

On this particular day I remember the gates being locked.

It was as if Mum knew what was coming. I don't know if it was the bailiffs or merely that Noz wanted to collect his possessions after the divorce, but I know that we had chained the gates because some people were coming to take our belongings from the house. It was a weekend and I was supposed to be going to a friend's birthday party up the road.

Outside the locked gates there was a big lorry, and people ready to do the lifting and shifting. My mother refused to let them in. There was a stand-off. I knew better than to whine about the birthday party. I recognized the man overseeing the operation as someone from Noz's company. I was the messenger boy in the negotiations, riding up and down on my bike, ferrying between the gate and my mum, relaying news of what was going on.

‘Listen, open up,’ said the man. ‘Tell your mum we need to come in.’

I conveyed the message and my mum was very upset. She was crying. She threatened to call the police to intervene. I remember cycling down to the gate and saying gravely to the man, ‘She’s calling the police.’

‘Okay,’ he said finally, ‘tell your mother that if she doesn’t open up we’re going to pull the gate off.’

And that’s what they did. They attached strong ropes and big chains on to our gates and ripped them off their hinges.

My mother was a remarkable woman. As soon as they breached the broken gates she said to me, ‘Right, don’t worry about it. Get in the car.’

And we left. She took me to the party I’d been invited to.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ she said again as we drove. ‘We are fine. It’s only “stuff”. We’ll go home and we’ll sort it out. I’ll sort it out.’

With Noz gone, we were on our own. Just Mum and me. Jeremy and Jono both continued with their schooling in England. When things started getting difficult in terms of finance, other members of the family stepped in to help with their education. By then Jonathan had finished at Rugby and was at university. Naturally, they have different memories of those times.

My immediate family may have been reduced to just me and my mum but, growing up, I was always really close to the *ayahs*. *Ayah* is a word used in Kenya for babysitter or nanny, and that's what we called them. We had two *ayahs*, Anna and Agnes. They were second mothers to me and it was Anna and Agnes who taught me to speak Swahili. They were both Wakambas, a large Kenyan tribe. They taught me to speak certain Wakamba words, but mainly we spoke Swahili.

Anna had a daughter called Grace. Grace was three years younger than me and I remember the two of us would often play after school. I'd be climbing trees, trying to set up a rope, slide or swing for us and we would do all sorts of things together. Poor Grace. I would soon play the same kind of tricks on her that my brothers had on me. It must have been some sort of revenge. I'd terrorize her a bit but we were good friends. I gave her my bike when it was getting too small for me and taught her how to ride.

Apart from Karen, the other affluent area in Nairobi is Langata and I was sent to the Banda School on the Magadi road in Langata. It was a little piece of the British public school system set down in Kenya. The Banda School is set on thirty acres beside the Nairobi National Park. Twenty of those acres are playing fields. We had four rugby pitches, many hockey pitches, squash courts and a six-lane swimming pool. All very English, apart from the odd warthog escaping from the National Park and waddling across the pitches. Banda wasn't an all-white school; it was maybe seventy per cent white. It was quite expensive though and the other kids were all well off.

No matter how much some people might wish it to be otherwise, wealth or colour will never insulate you from the fact that you are surrounded by Africa. I remember one occasion when I was twelve years old in Banda and we were coming back from a school rugby game after playing up at Turi. We would always come back on the six-hour drive via Dagoretti with its abattoir, lines of hanging animal carcasses and bloody roads. We were on a school bus, just a bunch of pupils, one master and a driver. There was trouble in Dagoretti. The road was blocked and there was a riot in progress.

Our bus was trapped and there was traffic behind us and in front. There was nowhere for us to go. We had managed to get right to the front of the queue when the mob surrounded us. Suddenly people were shaking our bus backwards and forwards, an angry crowd rocking and banging the side of the bus.

I am back there. I am sitting in an aisle seat. The crowd doesn't break any windows but they're trying to push in the door, the main door, and our big rugby coach has wedged himself in on the stairs, pushing backwards against the door to stop anyone opening it. Then our driver's door is suddenly flung open. Someone pulls him out. He's a Kenyan guy from the Wakamba tribe, and this could be bad for him. As he is being dragged from the bus he pulls a weapon from underneath his seat. In Kenya we call it a *panga*, a machete kind of thing with a big wooden handle and an even bigger blade on it. One

swing and you could do a lot of damage. We never even knew it was there. They pull him out, he instinctively grabs his *panga* and very quickly they let him go again.

He jumps back on the bus, turns round and has this huge grin on his face, really proud of the fact that he's scared them off. We kids, we love that the driver did that. We cheer and applaud and we are on our way.

At Banda I noticed one thing which puzzled me. Everyone seemed to have *ayahs* but hardly any of my friends could speak Swahili as well as I could. I always found that strange. Some of my friends couldn't put together two words of Swahili. I suppose it was a sign of how sheltered life could be in Karen or Langata.

'Wow,' I'd say, 'you've lived all your life here and you don't even speak ...'

Anna and Agnes could not speak English so it was always natural to talk with them in Swahili. Other people had English-speaking *ayahs*, or ones with a bit of English, but in our house my mum spoke Swahili, as did Noz and my brothers. In my life now people find it unusual that I speak Swahili but growing up it was never a conscious thing, no one ever told me that I had to learn. It just came naturally. When I came home from school, for instance, I'd be straight down to the stables or hanging out with Mutheke, the *shamba* boy, helping with milking a cow or just chatting to him about life. We always spoke Swahili.

Anna and Agnes were always very protective of me when times were difficult, and sharing a language allowed them to speak softly to me sometimes about hard things.

Everything had gone bad very quickly for my parents, both professionally and personally. There were huge debts to be settled with the bank, and the house and our possessions didn't cover it. It is hard to imagine how Flamingo Tours sunk so rapidly. There were, at a guess, over a hundred employees, who were suddenly all out of work. Noz spent a couple of nights in prison. They took him in to ask about the accounts; I think they thought that he might have had the money salted away somewhere. There were no charges but the collapse of the company was big news at the time and affected many people.

Mum and Noz divorced while they were still living under the same roof. It was a tough period. My bedroom was closest to their room and before Noz moved out there were times when I would be woken up in the middle of the night to the sound of my mum yelling at him. I know that Noz would never have hit my mother but they would argue viciously. We had quite a few meals that descended into chaos. I remember a shepherd's pie dish being thrown at Noz once. And wine glasses. Things would flare up and Anna and Agnes would swoop in and take me away, leaving my parents to it.

At the time I didn't really understand much of it. I was angry with my mother because she was the one who did most of the screaming. They were both having a hard time but, to my eyes, she was the one being emotional. Noz would always stay quiet. He isn't a confrontational man but I think he could stir her up just by saying very little. He wouldn't shout or get worked up and I think that made Mum even angrier.

For a while after they split Noz still lived in Kenya but in a different house. I would go and see him sometimes on weekends, or spend a week with him every now and then. It was always quite uncomfortable. I never really wanted my parents to see each other, and I always asked to be let out of the car a little bit further down the road when I was getting dropped off so that I could walk the rest of

the way.

I knew that if they were together there was going to be some kind of confrontation.

For years afterwards I used to get this sick, sick feeling whenever people raised their voices. I can still remember that horrible churning sensation in my stomach any time I heard people shouting.

When I was seven years old Noz moved down to South Africa to start his life again. It must have been hard for him to do that. I know my mother always thought Noz had taken money from the company, but I can't believe that he had. When he moved to South Africa there were a few really tough years for him and my new stepmother, Jenny. He had nothing and had to start all over again. He lived with his mother at first, who had sold her property at an old-age village in order for them to buy a small place there. They started a new conference management business from scratch, running it from home for the first few years.

The day Noz left Kenya, my stepmother and I went to the airport with him. By the time we arrived he had fallen asleep in the back seat. He says that it was the one moment in his life when he actually cried – leaving Kenya, not wanting to wake me up and not knowing when he'd next see me. More than a year passed before we saw each other again.

After Noz left, my mother and I agreed that we wouldn't ever shout, or at least that she wouldn't shout at me if she was angry. If she did raise her voice I always got that memory back in my gut. The agreement was that if she was angry with me she would tell me she was angry with me. She would talk to me and tell me why she felt that way, but she was never allowed to shout at me.

If I am honest, when Noz left I was slightly relieved. This was life and we could get on with it now. There would be no more shouting. It wasn't easy. Mum didn't really have any qualifications and money was scarce. We stayed with my mother's parents for a while in the spare room of their house. We lived out our lives between Karen and Langata, and although most of the time the great yawning slums of Nairobi, places like Kibera, never concerned us, we had our own struggles.

Mum earned some money by house-sitting for people when they were away. Sometimes we would rent a modest cottage in the grounds of a bigger house. One of the places that we stayed in while we were house-sitting had a vast garden but it was completely overgrown. I spent ages with Grace cutting back the grass and making a cycling track through the garden so that we could ride our bikes around.

Mum needed a qualification and she decided to study physiotherapy. She would spend long hours interning at the Kenyatta and Kajiado public hospitals. And when she was home, it felt as though she spent all her free time studying for upcoming exams. I would sit for hours intently colouring in her workbooks, shading all the different muscle groups in different colours.

I learned how to amuse myself. Because of Mum's hours at the hospital I had to be dropped off at school very early each morning. School didn't start until half past seven but I would be there on my own at 6.00 a.m. every day. Mum would always pack me a bacon sandwich or a pot of yoghurt and fruit, and I would sit outside the classroom, on the step, and wait. After a while, the security guards started opening up the classroom earlier for me, so I could go in and sit at a desk and do my homework before school.

Academically, I wasn't great. I loved numbers and maths – they had a logical sequence that I could appreciate and enjoy. But I am dyslexic and a really slow reader. I would have to gaze at each word for a while, desperately hoping to recognize it. I dreaded having to read out in class. I couldn't do it

fluidly, it would be, 'and – the – man – went – to – the –'

Because of the dyslexia I went to classes on Saturdays with a special needs teacher. I would try to work through exercises to improve my skills, but even then I found that I would read stuff painstakingly slowly and still not be able to remember a word of what I'd just read. The process of concentrating so hard used up all the available space in my brain. English and history, or anything that required a lot of reading, was difficult and I would struggle with the time limit in exams or class to read everything through.

My concentration span wasn't great either. I was a dedicated daydreamer. I would always be off in the clouds, thinking of whatever hobby I was fanatical about at the time. Butterflies were an early obsession. There was a famous butterfly collector not far down the road from me, a man called Steve Collins, who founded the Nairobi Butterfly Centre in Kenya. He got me into butterflies and I used to go along to his place and learn all that I could.

I used to love the detail of it. And the ritual. I would go off and catch a butterfly, and once it was dead and stiff, I would inject it with hot water to soften it again. Next, I would display it carefully on a board, knowing how to spread the wings properly and pin it securely. I would spend a lot of my time chasing butterflies and trying to find different varieties from all over Kenya whenever we travelled anywhere. If Mum and I took a trip I would take the net with me, down to the coast or to the Mara, wherever we were going.

I really enjoyed collecting, and I got to know most of the different names, the Latin ones, for the butterflies. The most rare and hardest to catch were the different types of Charaxinae, which I would lure into traps using rotting banana and mosquito netting. It was something I was passionate about. I've found that every time I go through a phase with a hobby or something I enjoy doing, that's all I want to do for a while. I get completely obsessed with things. That's how cycling would be for me. Still is. I'm lucky to have been able to turn an obsession into a career.

The butterflies lasted quite a while though, a couple of years at least. Cycling had always been part of life too and I had always had a bicycle, as far as I can remember. No matter where we moved, all those different houses with Mum, I would always get to know the maze of back roads and footpaths. Every single one. When we moved to a different house I was the pathfinder. It was an adventure for me to go out and explore the byways, learning all the back routes. I knew quickly how to get to places faster and which path was the most direct, or which road went where. These days I get lost sometime on training rides – I've lost that gift.

I had the same little bike for a long time until I finally outgrew it. I then went through a stage of riding my mother's bicycle. I was the coolest kid in Nairobi. It was a big shopping bicycle with baskets on the front and back. I would ride it around, and although it was old-fashioned, the bike gave me my first taste of making a living from cycling when I went through a phase of being a kid entrepreneur. We were still living at Windy Ridge at the time, where we had a huge avocado tree that grew right on top of our barn. It was not one tree really, but two or three avocado trees that all came together in the one spot. I spent hours climbing up and gathering the avocados that were ripe. I would collect baskets full of them.

I couldn't stand avocados at the time. I would put them into the basket on the back of the bike and cycle up and down the streets at our end of Karen. I would ride up to people and ask them if they

wanted to buy them. They were five shillings (35p) each or thereabouts – my pricing structure was fluid. Sometimes I would take my stock down to a small kiosk owner who sold the basics. It was just one guy in a wooden construction on the side of the road selling sweets, bread, milk and other staples. I would go to him and swap the avocados for sweets, or have him take the avocados on consignment for me. Some days when sales were good, and I was able to get a few notes together, I'd sneak them into my mum's purse.

My two brothers are accountants and as a kid I felt myself slipping towards that abyss. With Noz gone, I was often more conscious of our financial situation than a child should have been. There was school car-pool and a few of the parents would share lift duties as the school was twenty minutes or more away, depending on traffic. On Fridays, the gang of us in the car would be allowed to stop for ice creams on the way home. If it ever fell on my mother's day to pick us up from school I would fret that she wouldn't be able to buy the ice creams and the other kids would find out that we were struggling. I really worried about that. I remember going into the shop with my friends and picking up the locally made ice cream because the fancy imported ice creams were six or seven times more expensive.

I would grab the local ones and offer them. 'Here we go, guys!'

And, being kids, they would all look at me and keep fishing in the fridge for the more expensive ones. I was in knots of dread. Mum always came up with the money but I can still feel the tension when I think of those afternoons when ice-cream time fell on my mother's turn to do the car run.

It's a quaint thing to say, but in Karen we made our own fun. There were good times, and my memories of those are still light and clear.

On a weekend, as soon as we had time to ourselves, one of my mother's favourite things was to go down to the Rift Valley. We would point the car south for forty-five minutes or an hour of driving away from Nairobi, open the door and step into another world. The Rift Valley is Masai land. The Masai are nomads, cattle drovers, but you can see how they worship this strange, arid, rocky terrain. It has an almost desert stillness, watched over by the extinct volcano Longonot.

When we got there we would take a dirt road off into the hills and the bush. Mimosa trees grew beside little rivers and the more we climbed and wandered, the more interesting the landscape around us became.

Mum loved the bush and the animals concealed there, the different sounds and the many different trees. As soon as I had sunburn, for instance, she would cover me in aloe, from the thick fleshy leaves of the little plants which thrive in arid places with low rainfall. She would break the leaves off and rub the edges over my skin. Another discovery she showed me was the toothbrush tree, which has all sorts of beneficial properties and which people used for centuries as a natural toothbrush. The elephant pepper, whose fruit sticks upward out of the ground like so many red elephant trunks, was also a great find. I would play practical jokes on people that didn't know what it was, convincing them to chew it and laughing at the reaction as their mouth began to burn. Mum never tired of teaching me about the bush. She loved the nature of that place.

We would abandon the car and walk and walk and walk, often following tiny animal footprints and tracks. Finally we would find somewhere to stop and light a fire. We brought meat with us to cook over the fire and we would sit and eat and talk.

The bike became a part of it too. The road from Nairobi stretches out towards the Rift Valley and

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