

Chris
Higgins



A
PERFECT
10



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The night before the Intermediate, Mike gives us his usual spiel.

‘Perfection. That’s what we’re looking for in gymnastics. It doesn’t matter how simple or how difficult your moves are, they’ve got to be faultless.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ mutters Sophie in my ear. Her boredom threshold is super-low. ‘We’ve heard it all before.’

‘In your case, Sophie,’ says Mike, who doesn’t miss a trick, ‘that means concentrating on what you’re doing instead of eyeing up Jason.’

‘Cheek!’ she splutters, then adds hopefully, ‘Are the boys on tomorrow?’ We burst out laughing.

‘That’s not important,’ he says, frowning at her. ‘What *is*, is getting a good night’s sleep and turning up on time. And that applies to all of you!’ His expression changes and he grins. ‘We’re going to wipe the floor with them tomorrow, you watch!’

We cheer and break up into small groups, heading for the changing rooms, Romilly, Sophie, Hannah and me, chatting together as usual. We're the Jimmies. (Gym-ies, get it?)

I love this bit, the night before a competition when all the weeks of practice are over and your routines are so ingrained in your head you could do them in your sleep. And I do. Them in my sleep, I mean. Maybe that's why I never make a mistake, not like Romilly at last year's Intermediate when she froze in the middle of her floor routine because she couldn't remember what to do next and cost us the team gold. Trust Rommy.

I watch her rummaging through her bag for something, amongst the screwed-up, out-of-date forms she should have given her mother to sign and the piles of unwashed kit. Unlike mine, her mother never goes through her stuff. 'Yes!' She locates the chocolate bar and brandishes it triumphantly. 'Want some?'

'Please.' I slip my top on and sit down on the bench to pull my trackie pants over my trainers. They catch on the soles and I tug them and there's the sound of tearing. Flip.

'You'll get in trouble with your mum,' Rommy says. She snaps the chocolate in two and automatically hands me the bigger half. I'd never do that. I wish I could but I'm one of those people who just has to have the biggest

piece, if you know what I mean. Rommy's more generous than me. Plus she always seems to have an unlimited supply of chocolate. 'Here you are, eat it up before she sees you.'

We munch companionably as we gather our stuff together and leave the sports hall, shouting goodbye to Mike and the others. He waves a hand and calls, 'Don't be late tomorrow!' As if!

Outside the leisure centre, Mum's waiting in the car park. I cram the last of the chocolate in my mouth and thrust my arm round Romilly's shoulders, squeezing her tight.

'See you tomorrow,' I say indistinctly through a mouthful of chocolate.

She hugs me back. 'Sleep well!'

I wish. Mum says I've always been the same. I was terrible as a baby, kept them up all night, not like Amber who was an angel and who slept round the clock from day one.

'That's why we didn't have another one,' she'd said over breakfast one morning when I was nine. 'I never had a wink of sleep with you.' Dad muttered under his breath, something like, 'Thank goodness for that, four's more than enough!' and ruffled my hair and called me his 'little contraceptive'. I remember Ben hooting and Amber making sick noises and Mum spluttering, 'Don't

say that in front of her!’ and I asked, ‘What’s a contraceptive?’ But then everyone fell about screeching like a herd of hyenas, even Zac who probably didn’t get it either, so I got cross and took myself off and looked it up myself in the big dictionary. It said ‘coitus interruptus’, which sounded important but didn’t mean a thing to me, and then it said, ‘a preventative of pregnancy’ and I still didn’t see how *I* could prevent a pregnancy, a condition I knew all about because my friend Hannah’s cat had just had kittens. But I wasn’t going to ask them again because I HATE being laughed at. Thirteen-year-old Amber enlightened me anyway.

‘They meant you were such an awful baby they didn’t want any more kids after they had you,’ she explained.

I was so angry I punched her and she thumped me back, and we continued squabbling in the car on the way to school. I still didn’t really understand but now I know Amber had got it wrong. After they had me they didn’t want any more kids for one good reason only. Why would they? Their perfect family was complete: two boys and two girls.

And in case you’re wondering why I can recall this conversation from four years ago so accurately, it was because it took place at breakfast time **THAT MORNING** and I can remember ever single detail of **THAT MORNING** as if it were yesterday. I’d had a

disturbed night, and Mum had been up and down to me. I know what it was. I had this comfort blanket sort of thing I used to take to bed with me, and it had disappeared and I couldn't sleep without it. I was convinced Amber had taken it and hidden it somewhere. Anyway, Mum was shattered – it took her back to how permanently tired she was when I was a baby and never slept.

I think that silly contraceptive incident was the last time I can remember Mum laughing out loud.

I still don't sleep well, but that's another story, and at least I don't keep every one else awake all night any more.

Mum leans over and opens the door for me. 'Is she going to let you down again?' she asks, nodding towards Rommy who's cramming her ponytail under her crash helmet, astride the back of her stepdad's motorbike. 'Dangerous things,' she shudders, then says automatically, 'Put your seat belt on.' She ought to make a tape; she says this every time I get in the car, even though it's the first thing I do.

'No! She's learnt it really well this time,' I say, springing to Rommy's defence before I have time to remember my mouth is full, but it's too late. Mum darts a look at me as she eases out of the car park.

‘What are you eating?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Chocolate! It’s chocolate, I can smell it! Eva, what have I told you? Supper’s ready when we get home and that will spoil your appetite and you’ll . . .’

‘. . . get spots. I know. Sorry, Mum, it was only a tiny piece.’ I lie convincingly. It takes years of practice. You have to with a mother like mine, who sees danger in everything, including a harmless bar of chocolate.

‘It’s for your own good,’ says Mum, peering anxiously from right to left before she edges her way cautiously out into the stream of traffic. ‘You want to fit into your leotard tomorrow.’

‘I’m not fat!’ I object fiercely. Mum sighs and pats my knee.

‘No, sweetheart, you’re not. You’re just right. But you’re not naturally skinny like Amber. You need to watch what you eat. You can’t afford to let the weight creep on if you want to be a top gymnast, can you?’

I don’t answer. There’s no point. Mum can win these arguments hands down. She conjures them up from nothing, breathes life into them, nurtures them to a triumphant conclusion and then moves on speedily to the next topic of concern, and it’s impossible to stop the momentum.

I don’t want to upset her anyway. Which is exactly

what I would do if I dared to say, 'Actually, no one's ever asked me if I *do* want to be a top gymnast.' I hate it when she's upset, properly upset I mean, when she gets in a state. So I keep quiet and start scanning through the itinerary for tomorrow with my feet comfortably up on the dashboard.

Second mistake. 'Eva! You've torn your tracksuit bottoms! I bet you pulled them on over your trainers. How many times do I have to tell you?'

'Sorry.' No point in lying about this, she's not stupid. A deep, heartfelt sigh escapes from her. My heart sinks. I've done it again. There's no doubt about it, I'm a huge trial to her.

At home I go upstairs to take a shower before supper. Heavy rock's belting from Zac's room where he's practising his air guitar bare-chested with a towel round his waist, just out of the shower. I go to grab it but he sees it coming and jumps back, kicking the door shut in my face. I love you too, Zac.

There's no sound from the loft where Ben hangs out, so he must still be at training. He's going up to Oxford University in the autumn, my big brother, to study physics and he's got a scholarship just because he's good at rugby and they want him to play for the university. Jammy or what? Dad's over the moon. Ben's going to his old college and it's a big deal for him.

When I go past Amber's room, I glance in through the half-open door automatically. My sister's bedroom is immaculate as usual: pink throw neatly folded across the purple bedspread, fluffy cushions and soft toys scattered artlessly over the pillows, books and CDs tidily arranged on the shelves.

My room looks as if a bomb's hit it. I grab the towel I dropped on the floor last night after gym and head for the shower. I forgot, Zac has beaten me to it. It's steamy and an upended shower gel bottle is leaking its sticky contents on to the shower tray; the towels are even damper than the one I'm carrying and, most gross of all, I can see a number of Zac's dark-brown hairs clinging to the tiled walls. Time to use Mum and Dad's ensuite, methinks. I nip in quick before anyone notices. What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over, that's my philosophy.

There's been enough grief in this family.

Dad's home. His suit is hanging up on the wardrobe door and the shirt he wore to work today is protruding from the dirty washing-basket in the bathroom. He's 'something in the City' and I'm not sure what that *something* is, except that it's to do with investments, unit trusts, stocks and shares and all sorts of other dull-sounding, soul-destroying things. What I *am* sure of is, *he* thinks it's boring too, because every day, when he comes

home from work, he kind of creeps in looking wary and wearisome and the first thing he does is strip off, like he's a snake sloughing off a second skin that's too tight and restricting. Then he goes for a run in his shorts and T-shirt and when he comes back he looks fresh and alert and invigorated, more leonine now (like a lion, or a panther, in his case) than ophidion (snake-like).

I love words. I like collecting new ones but, even better, nowadays I'm becoming much more aware of how they fit together. They can be really powerful, you know. Like, it's not so much what you say, it's *how* you say it. Maybe one day I'll become a writer. Or a politician. Someone people will listen to and take notice of.

Mum wants me to be a doctor. Someone who listens to others then mends them. Only I'm no good at mending things. I'm more the type of person who breaks things up. I'm good at that.

Like Rommy and Sophie for instance. They were best friends for years, right since the start of their primary school. I got to know them when we all started at Portland High together in Year 7, all fresh from our feeder primaries and looking eagerly around to find all the new friends our mums had promised us we'd make. They were sitting in front of Hannah and me and I noticed Rommy straight away because she had a really long plait right down her back, which she could almost

sit on. I've persuaded her to have it cut now and she wears it in a ponytail like the rest of us. In fact, mine's the longest now.

When I found out her name I was soooo jealous. Romilly. It sounds really pretty, not like Eva. I hate my name, it's so old-fashioned, I mean NO ONE'S called Eva nowadays. I was named after my gran, Mum's mother, who died just before I was born. It's not fair, why couldn't Dad have chosen it? He got to choose Amber which is cool.

Anyway, it wasn't long before I realized that out of all the girls in my class (I didn't bother to inspect the boys, I had enough of those at home) it was Rommy I wanted to be best friends with. She was funny and easy to get on with, one of those people who's always happy and who'll fit in with what you want to do. Everyone liked her but she was Sophie's mate.

It wasn't difficult to wriggle my way in though. I invited her home for tea a few times and she got on really well with everyone, especially Zac who probably fancies her. (She definitely fancies him; she never stops going on about him.) Mum was a bit funny at first because Rommy lives in the council flats at the other end of town but even she liked her, you can't help it.

Anyway, after a while she started coming to gym club with me (I've been going since I was five!) and she got

to really like it. She's never going to be as good as me because she started too late, but she's good enough now to be in the same team. Soon we were spending all our time out of school together and Sophie didn't get a look-in, even though she joined the gym club too (spurred on by Rommy who was feeling a bit mean for neglecting her). I didn't worry about Hannah, I mean everyone needs to find their own friends, don't they?

In the end, it all worked out OK, because Hannah was already at gym club anyway; we'd both been doing it since the year dot, only I'm better than her. Soon we were all in the same competition team along with a few others in our age group from other schools. Now we do all our training together as well as go round in a group at school and everyone knows us, Rommy and me, Hannah and Sophie, as the Jimmies. And I really like this name because my surname is Jamieson so I feel as if it's my gang, named after me, which it is in a way.

Only now, Rommy and I are best friends. I make sure of that. Oh. And everyone calls her Rommy now, not Romilly.

I make sure of that too.

'Eva! Supper's on the table!'

I towel my hair roughly, run a comb through it and pull on my pyjamas. Early night tonight!

Downstairs, everyone's sitting round the kitchen table

with plates of lasagne in front of them. Ben's come in from training and is talking rugby to Dad at one end of the table. Mum's at the other end, pouring glasses of water. Zac's sitting impatiently the other side of Dad, his face a picture of torture as his plate of food steams provocatively in front of him. I slip into the chair next to Mum.

'Sorry.'

'Right, now we're all here, we can start,' says Mum reprovingly, holding a basket in front of me. 'Garlic bread?' I help myself to two slices.

'One's enough, Eva,' Mum says quietly. I put one back and start eating supper.

Opposite me, Amber's chair stands empty.



As usual, I took ages falling asleep; my brain has a fault in its off-switch. When I do eventually drop off, I have that dream again. I've had it for years. Actually, I have a number of recurring dreams but this is the one where I'm running, but it's like my legs are sticking in a gluey substance and I can't go fast enough. I don't know whether I'm chasing something or something is chasing me, but I must go faster so I turn round and run backwards and that's a bit better, though I have to keep looking over my shoulder to watch where I'm going in case I trip up. When I wake up I feel exhausted, right down to my bones, as if I really have been running all night.

I'd love to know what I'm running towards.

Or away from.

'You're awake already? Good girl.' Mum comes in with a cup of tea, bright and breezy, and swishes my curtains

back. She loves competition days. 'It's a lovely day for it.'

'Lovely day for being stuck inside a gym for hours,' I grumble, not being at my best in the mornings on account of being a rubbish sleeper. I reach for the tea. 'Thanks, Mum.'

'I thought you loved gym?' says Mum, sitting down on the bed, her brow creasing into that familiar worried frown.

'Of course I do,' I say hastily, slurping my tea. 'Ow! That's hot! I'm just grumpy because I didn't sleep well.'

'Nerves,' she says, patting my arm. 'Understandable. But you've got nothing to worry about, Eva. You're the best in your age group.'

'Maybe I'm not, any more,' I say worriedly. 'Now I'm 13 plus, I'll be competing against the year above for the first time.' It's not fair the way they suddenly make the age group spread over two years. I suppose it's because it's only the good ones left by this stage. All the little wannabes have fallen by the wayside.

'There's no one there you can't beat,' Mum says consolingly, pushing back my fringe. 'You'll be fine.'

I smile and put my arms round her and give her a hug. She's right, there's no real opposition to worry about. Suddenly, I don't feel nervous at all. Mum's confidence rubs off on me and I know I'm going to win. She's great

on competition days, she loves to see me performing and winning medals and cups. I've got nearly as many as Amber now, I'm catching up. They're all on display in the hall cabinet alongside Ben's rugby trophies, Zac's football awards and Dad's marathon medals. The only one who doesn't have any of her own is Mum.

Once, when we were polishing the things from the cabinet together, I said to her, 'Where are your medals then, Mum?' and she laughed and said, 'When would I have time to win medals, ferrying you lot about all day?' But then her face fell and she added, 'Anyway, you children were my trophies,' in a choked voice and she started crying.

Dad said, 'Now, what have you done to upset her?' and I said, 'Nothing!' because I really hadn't. But it must have been something serious, because she had one of her turns and went to bed for a week. And I honestly didn't mean to; I know sometimes I can be mean to people on purpose, but I never want to hurt Mum, I just want to keep her happy.

Which is why I like competition days, because she's always proud of me then. I breathe in deeply while I hug her, savouring her familiar smell of soap, fresh air and . . . I don't know . . . Mum. She pats me on the back and rocks me gently for a second, just like she did when I was little, then pulls away and holds me at arms' length and

fixes me seriously with her hazel eyes, the same colour as Amber's.

'Just do your best, Eva.'

'I will, Mum.'

'I know you will.' She stands up. 'Breakfast!'

I manage to force down some cereal though I don't really feel like it, but I know I'll start feeling sick later if I've got nothing in my stomach. Mum smiles approvingly. 'Good girl, Eva. Keep up your carbs. Slow-release energy, just the ticket.' I reckon she could write a book called *The Lorna Jamieson Guide to Bringing Up the Sporty Child*, because what my mother doesn't know about nutrition and training is nobody's business.

I lapse into a daydream as Mum makes a start braiding my hair. The combing and tugging on my scalp as she separates the hair into partings is soothing and hypnotic, taking me back over years of competition days. Maybe Mum's thorough approach is the reason why we've all been so successful in our chosen sporting fields, not that Ben and Zac pay her much attention.

But we girls had the full benefit of her guiding hand from the moment Amber first tumbled her seven-year-old way into the county record books in her first gym competition amidst gasps of admiration and delight from her enthralled audience.

And I remember wanting *so* much to go out on that

floor so that everyone would smile and clap me too, but Mum kept a firm hold on my eager, wriggling body and wouldn't let me join Amber as she held her arms up high in triumph to her adoring, cheering crowd. No matter how loudly I protested, I had to endure eons of training sessions and endless competitions from the sidelines while Amber moved on gracefully from strength to strength before I was finally allowed to join gym club at the grand old age of five. And by that time, Amber was so amazingly good I despaired of ever catching her up.

But I have now. Almost.

Even though (and I would never admit this to anyone) I know deep down, I'll never be as good as Amber. Because *her* talent's the kind that's natural and awesome and only granted by the gods to the lucky, rare few. Whereas mine is the result of years of sheer, bloody-minded hard work and dedication and a touch of healthy athletic ability.

I know I'm not as good as people think I am and I've always been scared they'll find out. But I should be safe now. I mean, as far as I know, there's no one around to beat me in my age group. I'm the best in the county, I've walked away with the individual gold for the past two years.

But I still can't help feeling a fraud.

'That'll do.' Mum puts the final touches to my hair and

blasts it with some glitter spray. ‘Ready, Eva? We’d better get a move on.’

‘Yep.’ I snap out of my thoughts. ‘I said we’d pick Rommy up on the way.’

Mum tuts her disapproval. ‘Why didn’t you tell me before? We’ll be late now.’

‘No we won’t!’ I glance at the clock. ‘We’ve got loads of time.’

‘We don’t know what the traffic will be like. Saturday morning . . .’ Mum starts fretting. ‘Why can’t her own mother take her? Surely she’s going to watch her compete?’

‘She works on a Saturday.’

Mum’s tongue clicks in disapproval. ‘Fancy not bothering to go and watch your own child in a county competition.’

Zac looks up from the end of the table where he’s trowelling his third bowl of cereal down his throat. Unbelievably, he joins in the conversation.

‘Rommy’s mum works weekends in a supermarket while her stepdad looks after the kids. She can’t take time off when she feels like it.’

‘I never missed a gym competition, not once, not for Amber or Eva,’ Mum remarks pensively. She’s just stating a fact, but it sounds a bit pious. Zac must have thought so too because he pauses before he ladles another spoonful into his mouth.

‘That’s different. Rommy’s mum would lose her job if she didn’t go in.’

Mum and I stare at Zac in surprise, Mum because he’s actually given an opinion for once in his life, me because I’m wondering how come he knows so much about Rommy’s family.

‘You’ll be late,’ he points out mildly and scoops more breakfast down his gullet. ‘Good luck!’ he adds indistinctly, through a mouthful of cornflakes.

Rommy is waiting at the end of her road, hopping up and down with impatience. ‘Your hair looks nice,’ I say, turning round to inspect it as she scrambles into the back of the car. It’s caught up in a high ponytail and secured in an enormous scrunchie. Mum glances at Rommy in the mirror and I notice her lips pursing fractionally and I know what she’s thinking but thankfully she says nothing. It’s showy but not very practical; it’ll get in the way of her headstand for a start. But that’s her problem, not mine. Mum’s done mine in tiny French plaits, close to my head, threaded with blue and yellow ribbons, club colours. It’s neat and unobtrusive.

‘I’m soooo nervous,’ Rommy bleats. ‘What if I forget my routine again?’

‘You won’t,’ I say quickly as Mum darts her a venomous look. ‘You’ll be fine.’

We get to the leisure centre with bags of time to spare. The car park is awash with neat, athletic-looking girls in hoodies and trackie pants, ranging from about nine to sixteen. Except for the tiddlers, I recognize most of them from years of competitions. Suddenly it strikes me for the first time how alike we all look. Slim ponytailed clones of each other.

At least I'm a *bit* different. My hair's in plaits.

As we get out of the car, I suddenly spy a girl who's *very* different. She stands out from the crowd. I've never seen her before. She's peering anxiously at a handout and looking around as if she's wondering where to go and I notice her because she's so big compared to the rest of the milling gymnasts. It's not so much that she's tall: she is, but not much taller than me or some of the others. It's more that she's BIG in a heavy, lumpy sort of way. Rommy's spotted her too.

'Who's *she*?'

'Never seen her before.'

The girl looks up and sees us watching her. Her face breaks into a shy smile and she hoists her bag over her shoulder.

'Watch it, she's coming this way,' I mutter.

She's wearing a tracksuit and trainers and has mousy hair scraped back into a band. There's an expression of eager friendliness on her face.

‘She can’t be competing!’ says Rommy out of the side of her mouth, then fixes a smile on her face as the girl stops in front of us.

‘Hi, I’m Patrice. Can you show me where to go? I’m new here.’

‘Are you in the competition?’ asks Rommy in disbelief. The girl nods eagerly.

‘My first Intermediate. I’m so nervous!’

‘What age-group are you in?’

‘13 plus.’

‘Like us. How come we haven’t seen you before?’ I ask curiously.

‘I’ve just moved here. I haven’t been doing gym very long. I started it to see if I could lose weight.’

Rommy eyes her doubtfully. She’s obviously thinking the same as me, didn’t work then, but she’s too kind to say so. I struggle not to laugh. Mum takes charge and smiles at her warmly. ‘You go along with Eva and Romilly, they’ll show you where to go.’

Thanks, Mum. ‘What did you say your name was?’ I ask, as we turn to go into the centre.

‘Patrice.’ She stresses the second syllable, *Patrees*, but then she adds, ‘Call me Patty, everyone does.’

I nod, biting my lip, trying to suppress a giggle. She continues, ‘I like your name, Romilly, that’s really pretty.’

‘*She’s* Romilly,’ I say curtly. ‘I’m Eva.’

‘Eva?’ She considers for a moment, trying it out.
‘That’s unusual.’

Not as unusual as yours, I think grimly, linking my arm through Rommy’s and whispering in her ear. Rommy bursts out laughing, then stops immediately with a guilty look at Patty. When I glance at her, the new girl’s face is tinged pink and her eyes are cast down.

But it’s not my fault the new girl’s got super-sensitive hearing. She wasn’t supposed to hear what I called her.

Anyway, looking like that, she must be used to it by now.

Fatty Patty doesn’t look so eager to please any more.

I feel a bit mean though. Trust me, I’ve done it again. Now I’ll have to make it up to her.

The story of my life.