

'You stole my brother's life and cheated us out of our futures'

This is what knife crime does: a letter to my brother's killer



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BBC

By Chanell Wallace

I heard you might be leaving prison soon. Or you might not. Either way, there's not much I can do about it, apart from write a letter to the parole board. One sheet of A4 is what they give you; it's called a 'Victim Personal Statement'. But what you did to my family the night of 9 March 2006, when you stabbed my 20-year-old brother to death, just metres from the safety of his own flat, doesn't fit neatly on one page.

You knew Daniel, didn't you? There was no love lost between you - you'd grown up with friends in common but you two didn't get on. I didn't know this when he died - I didn't know anything about you. You were just my

brother's killer. Daniel hadn't mentioned your name - Cornelius Messam - to me before. Why would he? I was his 11-year-old kid sister; protective big brothers don't make a habit of worrying their little sisters by talking about people who have taken against them. You'd had run-ins before, incidents that I wouldn't have any idea of until 12 years later when I was filming a documentary about my brother's death. Daniel didn't breathe a word to us - he wouldn't have wanted my mum to worry.

He was always looking out for her, for all of us. Mum was 18 when Daniel came along, unplanned. He was her firstborn and only son.

The baby who taught her how to be a mother. The favourite. She loved the three of us but Daniel was the special sauce; he knew how to make her laugh, bring her back up when she was down. He always reminded me of Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince Bel Air*, so charismatic and constantly joking. There were the play fights with my older sister and me, Daniel pretending to do wrestling moves on us as we giggled. Or the time he cooked dinner for our family but accidentally smothered the chicken in hot paprika so with one bite, our mouths were on fire. Grandma was rolling on the floor with laughter.

"I can't eat this!" I remember protesting. "Just put salad cream on it!" Daniel advised. He put salad cream on every Caribbean meal he had: chicken and rice, curry goat – it didn't matter what. Everything was smothered in salad cream.

He was clutching a Caribbean meal on the 9 March 2006, still hot from the takeaway up the road, when you emerged from those bushes you'd been waiting in and blocked his way. I always think about how he never got to eat it, that he died hungry. Hungry and scared. I don't think I can ever forgive you for that. When you took my brother from us, you took my mum too. We didn't see her for days. We didn't hear her voice. A part of all us died that day but it hit my mum the hardest. I think she relives that night all the time. When I look at Mum, still standing, still trying to be strong, I can see the hurt that sits behind her eyes and that raw pain that hasn't dulled, even 13 years later. I want to say to her, 'It's ok, I'll take it. You stand back now'.

But how can I heal the wounds of what she's been through?

A mother never expects to be summoned to a morgue to identify her 20-year-old son and to see the wounds on his arms where he died trying and failing to stop a blade slicing into him.

A mother never thinks that when she is finally allowed to bury her boy, after the police have released his poor, punctured body, she won't even be able to dress him in his Sunday best because the decomposition process is too advanced. That soon, one of the only tangible things she will have left of him are empty Baileys bottles, lined up on the kitchen windowsill, that he would religiously gift her every birthday and Christmas, knowing it was her favourite drink.

These are things I want you to know, Cornelius. The consequences of your decision. What you did went far beyond ending Daniel's life. The day my mum woke me up at 2.30am and told me my brother was dead, my world crashed around me and I was reborn, a new person. I was defined by guilt: guilt that I was alive when Daniel wasn't, guilt every time I wanted to cry and run to my mum but felt ashamed that I was demanding emotional support from a woman who had lost her son. Imagine going through your teens and early adulthood and thinking you can't talk to your mum when you're upset or need a hug because you've got it into your head that you don't deserve her love and strength, that it's finite and she needs to save it for herself? It's unbearable.

Everything I do is to try and fix what happened to my family when you ripped Daniel from us. Nothing is good enough. Graduating from university didn't fill the hole. I did a Masters and it still wasn't enough. I became a journalist, a knife crime advocate, someone whose voice is heard, who has a platform and still I don't feel like my life is my own.

I am compelled to speak about knife crime, to help families like mine, to try and make sure that what happened to Daniel didn't happen just to cause us pain. We can gain meaning through his death by making change.

It's a constant, wearing pressure. I am so tired. I wish I could start again. I wish, when I read the news, my eyes aren't automatically drawn

to the story about the stabbing victim, however far down it's buried on a page. I wish I didn't immediately have to look up how old they were, where they were from, details about their family. I wish I didn't feel this responsibility – like if I don't follow this path, it's on my shoulders if someone else loses their brother and feels this pain.

I'm scared of losing people. Family, friends, my partner... I feel like I always have to be the best to them; best friend, best lover, best sister, because the best constantly wins and winning means not losing people you love. I can't relax. If I argue with someone, it feels like a punishment. I don't think, 'We'll get over it', I think, 'I have to fix this now'. My grandma once taught me to never go to sleep on an argument, but when I think about the idea of arguing with someone I love and going to sleep, it's, 'What if my mum wakes me up and tells me they've died too?'

I wish I could have known Daniel on his terms. Since he died, I've talked to his friends and hoarded the memories they gave me like precious gems. But they're not mine. It's not the way I was supposed to learn about my brother. It feels like a punishment, speaking to his mates. They talk about this amazing person with the infectious laugh, the in-jokes and little rituals they had. I only had Daniel for 11 years – some of them knew him for closer to two decades and better than I did in many ways. There's a great pit of jealousy in my stomach thinking that they got to see him interact with the world in a way I never will. I can't remember my brother's voice, not really. You robbed that too. I know it was deep. I can feel it vibrating, if I really take myself back, become that 11-year-old girl again, sneaking downstairs on my birthday to see Daniel wrapping up my cake in clingfilm so no hungry little hands could get at it before my party. But I forget the exact sound of his voice. That's something I really struggle with.

I have his music though. Daniel loved Tupac, he'd always have his albums blasting. Tupac is my way into Daniel's world; if I've had a bad day at work or just need my big brother, I'll listen to Tupac. There's a particular song – Keep Your Head Up. Daniel played it to me and the lyrics do so much for me now, it's almost like he did it on purpose. Left it for me as a gift, still protecting me just like the way he 'had a word' with the bullies at school or silently produced a tenner when I cried about losing my pocket money.

Was it worth it, Cornelius? Tell me. I need to know. Was there a reason for what Daniel went through? What we've all been going through? I hope so, I really do. Otherwise my brother died for nothing. In court, the judge said you wanted "to teach Daniel a lesson" in revenge for your past problems. You sure taught him.

I need you to understand how far the ripple effect goes here. I shouldn't have to explain to a kid what "murder" means. But in 2019, that's what I'm doing. My nephews, my future kids, their kids – our family will always be keeping Daniel's memory alive.

What you did broke us. I glued myself back together and kept fighting. If you get out of prison, I need you to change. No other person should go through this pain; no other person should forget the sound of their sibling's voice.

I have been trying to find myself since my brother died – everything I do is to make him proud. But you stole my ability to choose my future. I hope no one else ever has to fight like this because of you.

As told to Moya Lothian-McLean.