

## My Brother's Friend from Uni

I remember when I first met Nathan. I'd driven to Wales to pick up my younger brother Adam from Uni. Adam had just finished his first term, but his room looked and smelled like he'd been living there for years. He hadn't packed, but it didn't take long for him to topple his belongings into a few plastic boxes. A pool of something brown and syrupy congealed by the sink as Adam announced that he was ready to go. I chanted 'lift with your legs not with your back' in my head as I heaved the boxes down the four flights of stairs and into the car. The only item I wasn't allowed to touch was Adam's computer, which he cradled like a baby and laid carefully in between the back seats, letting out a soft 'hush' as he closed the door. When I turned to ask Adam if he had everything he needed for the holidays, I saw a young lad with a Burberry cap and a shiny blue tracksuit shuffling his feet next to my brother. 'This is Nathan', Adam said. 'He might come to Spring Harvest with us'.

'Oh. Hi Nathan, I'm Susie'.

He was quiet and polite with a gentle mix of Welsh and Liverpoolian. Adam went to check and lock his room and I was my usual weird, giddy self and tried to make small talk into big talk by moving my hands a lot and wriggling about: 'Hello! So what do you study? What do you think of my brother?' He was nice and smiled, but probably made a mental note to ask Adam what was wrong with his sister.

I didn't see or think of him again until my family were setting off to Spring Harvest with Adam's friend from Uni in tow. Now, Spring Harvest, for those of you whose dads aren't vicars is a Christian conference thing where people go to lectures about a guy called Jesus and hold their hands in the air a lot. I've never been and don't really ask too many questions about it in case I end up confirming my suspicions that it's a bit cult-ish. According to my parents, Nathan was pleasant, but largely kept to himself.

A couple of weeks later and my dad was having regular online conversations with him about his drinking problem. It emerged that Nathan's life was in a bit of a mess. He'd been in social care since he was sixteen after reporting physical

abuse from his father. They'd set him up in a hostel and put him through a scheme that meant he could get a place at university without any qualifications; a university that provided him with accommodation and grants and left him to figure out the rest.

My dad encouraged him to go into rehab and when he drove over to collect him, his body was soaked through with drink. They bundled up the things in his room: a shiny new bike, piles of clothes with the tags still on them, and enough empty beers to sing ten green bottles all the way home and back again. My dad placed him in a Christian Rehabilitation Centre, where they endeavour to cleanse bodies *and* souls. Nathan was dried out and refilled with holy water. Nothing was left untouched. They even took his iPod and changed all the music to Christian songs. They told him to turn to Christ, to let Him heal him, to be reborn, and when Nathan looked at the dark emptiness he faced alone and the shining hopefulness of the new life they were offering, he found it wasn't a difficult decision to make. He had a religious experience, an encounter with God, and he was saved.

Two days later, he turned up on my parents' doorstep. He'd escaped from rehab and cycled forty miles to our house. It was raining and his brown hair seemed to trickle down his face. His clothes were falling apart and my parents let him in. He told them the rehab clinic had been using him for slave labour. They didn't ask many questions.

My mum never found out whether Adam had suggested Nathan come to stay with them, but the truth was that Adam had already had enough.

He'd seen Nathan on MDMA and ecstasy and catatonically drunk.

He'd seen him smash up plates in his room.

He'd heard him banging on his door asking to come in.

He'd felt him cling.

He'd peeled away the gripping fingers.

Adam had troubles of his own.

At first, Nathan settled fairly easily into the family. He told us his story. He told us how he'd been beaten by his father and hounded out of the house by his mother. How he'd turned to neighbours who were glad to see the back of him. How he'd had girlfriends, but they'd never lasted long. How he just wanted to play the trombone, to become a musician. How he was going to leave university and pursue a music career. How the university was reclaiming money from him for dropping out. How he had fines from the police that he couldn't pay. How he'd lived on the streets. How he'd been in a gang. How the army had been trying to recruit him since he was fifteen because he was such a talented trombone player. The stories mounted up, but a common thread emerged. He needed a fresh start. That's all. A fresh start so that he could begin his life. The life he was meant to lead. He just needed to find his true self. If he could find his true self then everything would fall into place.

My parents, whose own adult children were on their fifteenth fresh start, could sympathise. They went with him to court and spoke in his defence and came up with an agreement with the judge, a payment plan that they would help him follow. My oldest brother James kept a record of his finances and took on the unofficial role of bank manager. A role he relished. Nathan's income was divided into different budgets. There was a cigarette fund and a clothes fund and a rent fund and an emergency fund and a fund for paying fines and if Nathan wanted money, for cigarettes, let's say, then he had to go to James and request the money. If the money was in the right fund then James would sign off on it and Nathan would go to my dad to collect the cash.

He earned his money by doing odd jobs around the house and for the neighbours. He worked hard and made a modest amount, but it wasn't long before he ran out of steam and began taking too many breaks and losing focus. Eventually my parents set him up on a music course at a local college and bought him a trombone and tried to keep him moving forwards.

Sometimes, I remember, I would hear him playing in the night. He'd strum a guitar, or he'd play chords on the piano, and he'd sing very softly and very sweetly. I remember hearing him playing.

It was around this time that James started pushing Nathan, pointing out the gaps in his intellect, winding him up. It was around this time that Nathan

challenged James to a fight. He said he could beat James easily. James is a big man and experienced in beating up my brothers and me, so it took him about four seconds to push Nathan to the ground, sit on him, and get him into a leg lock, which he twisted until Nathan submitted.

It was around this time that my little sister Jess and Nathan started rubbing each other up the wrong way. Jess would tell Nathan that he wasn't really part of the family. That he wasn't allowed to come to the meal to meet my future-in-laws. That he shouldn't be there. It was around this time that my parents thought Nathan was bullying Jess.

It was around this time that my parents started to realise why he'd had to leave so many places behind. Why he needed fresh start after fresh start. That they discovered his mood swings, his periods of intense rage, his paranoia about what they might be saying about him, about what they might be doing with his money. They began to suspect that he made up stories and twisted the truth. One day he came home with a dent in his trombone and told them that someone had thrown it into a wall. He came home and told them he wanted to be a landscape gardener, not a musician.

One day, they found the scars on his arms. They found the confusion in his head, the fantasies that clouded his connection to reality, the anger, the mistrust, the fear of abandonment, the desperation to be loved and the desperation to push love away. They found out that his father had a restraining order against him. They found out he'd tried to kill himself. They recognised his impulsive need to spend all his money, to throw it away on something new, something grand, something that might give him an identity; that might solve all his problems.

One day my dad looked up BPD. Borderline Personality Disorder. He read the symptoms, the nine point checklist of criteria. One: An intense fear of being left alone, causing extreme behaviour such as constantly phoning or messaging someone. Two: A pattern of intense and unstable relationships, switching between love and hate. Three: Lacks a strong sense of self. Four: Impulsive behaviour, such as drug abuse and reckless spending. Five: Repeated suicide attempts and self-harm. Six: Severe mood swings lasting a few hours to a few

days. Seven: Long-term emptiness and loneliness. Eight: Sudden and intense anger. Nine: Paranoia and disconnection.

Of the nine criteria, a person only need tick yes to five in order to be diagnosed with BPD. Nathan ticked every single one of them.

This was it. This was the answer. This was why things kept going wrong. Why he kept losing motivation. Why he annoyed the hell out of them. Why it was ok for them to not like him. It was a problem that was beyond them. It was a problem they couldn't be expected to cope with. Suddenly everything made sense. Suddenly there was nothing they could do.

No one is exactly sure what happened next. I spoke to every member of my family and none of them could recall word-for-word what it was that Nathan said to my sister, that Nathan said to make Jess cry. Some say he called her fat. Some say he said 'no wonder you haven't got any friends'. Some just say he said something truly 'evil' and leave it at that. Whatever it was, he was out. My parents shouted, he shouted and shortly after they kicked him out. Pushed him on to another family. He sold his speakers and weights and some clothes to my dad for quick money and then he was gone.

Since then, he made repeated attempts to get in touch with my family, but he has been completely cut off. My family refuse to let even a finger slip through, lest the rest of him follow. Because I was away at university for most of this time, I didn't know, I didn't see, I didn't have to deal with Nathan. My parents told me not to speak to him, that I shouldn't invite him to my wedding and even briefed my husband to keep things in check. I'm still friends with him on Facebook and we comment on each other's lives from time to time. He's working on his own business at the moment. He mostly does decorating work as well as some construction. His last profile picture was of him and his dad, with their arms around each other.

Sometimes I watch videos of his new music and wonder what, if anything, we could have done differently. It's difficult to separate out the different sides and objectively say whether my family could or should have done more. He wasn't their son, but he did need their help. The everyday is more complicated than a ten minute monologue. Perhaps if he'd been willing to get help from a mental health professional, spoken to other people affected by Borderline Personality

Disorder, or if he'd had access to Dialectical Behaviour or Mentalisation Based Therapies, or medication, or if my family had more support themselves. Recovery rates are surprisingly high and maybe things would have ended differently.

I suppose it's not really for me to say.