

Four hundred miles didn't discourage me from arranging a memorable sixtieth birthday for my only sibling. I hadn't celebrated Daniel's birthday in over forty years. For at least twenty of those years, I'd despised him.

It wasn't Daniel's absences from Mom's graduation ceremonies for undergraduate and graduate school that caused me to feel so negatively, though his failure to attend was reprehensible. For both events, I lived in Virginia and purchased a plane ticket before thinking to notify my employer I would be taking leave.

Though it didn't seem to matter to Daniel, Mom had dropped out of high school to help care for her mother, then married Dad and became a selfless housewife and sole around-the-clock caregiver for our severely disabled younger sister. After our sister died of medical complications, Mom earned her equivalency diploma while I was in junior high school. Years later, she risked competing with younger students in college, and she fared quite well. I couldn't have been more proud if Mom had been my child. How could Daniel not feel the same way?

Much to Dad's embarrassment, at both graduation ceremonies I cheered loud enough that Mom wouldn't miss her son's voice. She tried not to show it, but it had to bother Mom that Daniel didn't join us. I was pissed.

The night after she received her master's degree, I confronted Daniel, who lived with our parents. His shift had ended at midnight, but I caught him when he came in. "You are wrong. How could you put a job ahead of Mom?"

"She knows I have to work."

"No one works when an immediate family member graduates. You work for the city. You don't know how to take leave or call in sick?"

"I can't do that. I have to put in for leave way in advance or I could lose my job."

"You're a jerk. No job comes before family."

Daniel left me ranting in the kitchen, retreated to his bedroom, and closed his door.

Always the peacemaker, Mom pleaded with me to let it go. I couldn't.

Never married and childless, Daniel viewed people as problematic, and life more pleasurable without them. Mom's expertise in offering excuses for Daniel's absences from family gatherings annoyed me.

"Just tell the truth," I said after he missed yet another family party. "Say that he chose not to come."

But Mom never did.

Daniel's lack of ambition embarrassed me. I'd run into friends who asked what my older brother was up to. What could I say about a college-educated, young Black man, raised middle-class with no ambition to earn big money, buy a car, own a home, or have a family? He'd tried a few white-collar jobs before settling for the comfort of manning a token booth in a quiet subway station, and he was content.

After Daniel got his own apartment, I realized he wanted to be invisible. His seclusion was extreme. He didn't have a cell phone, an answering machine, or active voice mail. His landline often rang unanswered. E-mails to him were eventually opened, perhaps.

Other than Cousin Gary, who accompanied him to carry heavy purchases, Daniel lived in virtual solitude. If he didn't need assistance, he probably wouldn't have kept in touch with Gary.

Once I moved from home, I saw Daniel if he happened to be there when I visited our parents in New York; and after they relocated to live near me and my family in Virginia, during his once or twice a year visit to our parents. I stopped by for an awkward kiss on the cheek from Daniel, trivial talk over a meal, filler background noise when discussion waned, and Daniel's hug

upon departing. That was the extent of our relationship, until my husband and children began enjoying Daniel's company.

"He's really intelligent," Joe said. We had visited my parents' home while Daniel was there. "If he's interested in a topic, he reads everything he can find about it."

"And you didn't find him strange?" I asked.

"Not at all. We never ran out of things to talk about."

At ages four and six, my children had a ball playing with Daniel.

"If Uncle Daniel's in town," Trevor said, "let's go to Granddad's and see him every day."

"Yeah, Uncle Daniel's so much fun," Star said, "even if he keeps wanting me to pull his finger."

Daniel ran around the house with the children, made noise, and laughed at the silliest riddles again and again. At face value, Daniel was pleasant, attentive, and fun. I knew better. The fun uncle demeanor was not his usual self.

It took a lot for Mom to confide in me about Daniel. She incessantly entreated me to have a closer relationship with him, so she never said anything negative about Daniel to me. Yet, one day she needed to vent.

Only Mom and I were in my parents' home during my visit. She was quiet after greeting me at the door. I got myself a cup of coffee and handed her at the table in the breakfast nook.

"I'm so worried about Daniel." Mom's voice cracked. "I haven't spoken with him in over a month."

Instinctively, I knew to keep quiet.

Her delicate hands shook slightly as she sipped for what seemed like minutes. "The last time I called, he was in a really bad mood. Maybe I'll write to him more."

I bit the inside of my lip to remain silent. Mom and Dad were in their seventies. It's not like Daniel received calls from Dad, who had a hearing problem. He had to care how our parents were doing, didn't he?

"He's not healthy, you know. Daniel's in pain from arthritis, and I believe he's depressed. He won't go to a doctor." Mom hugged her cup as though enjoying its warmth. Finally, she spilled the whole story.

Not having heard from Daniel in almost two months, Mom had called her nephew to ask if he had seen or heard from him.

"Gary hadn't, but said he'd go by Daniel's when he knows he'll be home and bang on the door until he answers."

Mom looked at me with watery eyes. "Gary called the next evening. He'd seen Daniel. They'd had words."

"Really?"

Mom nodded. "Gary told me, 'Daniel was real mad, but that's okay, Auntie. I made him promise to call you.' Later, Daniel called." She blew out air. "He was yelling. He said I'd disturbed his privacy for no reason. Daniel went on and on, and said things I'm sure he's sorry about."

My fingers rapidly tapped the table, not to rush her, but to control myself and say nothing. I visualized tearing Daniel, like a sheet of paper.

"Since then, he's so rude. Sometimes he picks up the phone and hangs up without saying anything. If I didn't call, I guess I'd never hear from him."

I restrained expletives, leaving me momentarily speechless. Stop calling him until he calls you, I wanted to tell her. But I said what I thought she needed to hear. "He didn't mean it.

Give him some time.”

“Why don't you call him?”

“Uh. Um. I will. One day.”

My fury toward Daniel seethed, and mushroomed with time.

Ten years later, I tried to keep my mind from wandering as the pastor preached on forgiveness.

“Miss the opportunity to forgive, and regret may be eternal. No one deserves to be forgiven.”

Daniel immediately came to mind. I uncrossed my legs and sat up.

“By forgiving others, we're not only obedient to God, we gain control over our lives. The person forgiven no longer has power to evoke strong emotions in the one who was rejected, hurt, betrayed, or otherwise wronged.”

Daniel empowered to change my mood?

“To forgive doesn't mean what has been done is to be forgotten, but never again mention what it was that hurt your relationship. Accept the person who wronged you as he is. Forgive and enjoy the freedom from negative emotions. Reach out and contact the person you believe you could never forgive. And you will have peace.”

Contact Daniel? Yeah, right.

The pastor next detailed how to initiate contact with someone whom you've not spoken with in years. It couldn't be that simple.

The usually frigid sanctuary suddenly felt too warm. My foot bounced as I perspired and breathed faster. Thoughts of Daniel rattled me without his doing or saying anything, or even

being present.

It took a few days before I resolved to contact Daniel. I'd tell him he was important to me, I wanted to stay in touch, and I wanted my children to know their uncle. I'd curtail my sarcastic remarks and criticism, my defenses to Daniel's injurious comments. It wouldn't be easy.

During lunch, I drove from work to a secluded area. Daniel shocked me by being warm and talkative. For an hour, we reminisced about our childhood and the strangeness of New York.

"It's been good talking to you, but I have to get back to work," I said. "Is it okay for me to call from time to time?"

"Sure. Good hearing from you. Love you."

This began my praying for Daniel's well being and for me to accept him as he was. I called him regularly. Mom was elated whenever I told her we had talked.

During one call, I breached the topic of religion.

"I read the Bible, but I don't understand certain verses," Daniel said.

"Me too. Do you have a relationship with Jesus?"

"I wouldn't say that. Like I said, I read the Bible, but I want to understand it more."

Religion became one of our safe topics. I suggested a few books I had read, and Daniel perused them so we could share opinions.

I now enjoyed Daniel's visits as much as Joe, Trevor, and Star. My children were in high school, and Daniel told stories about his work at the subway station. He'd been robbed, shot at through bullet resistant glass, and exposed to all sorts of deviance that warranted calling the police. Some incidents were a bit much to share with my teenagers, but I never tried to stifle Daniel's storytelling.

Our parents died within eleven days of one another, so it was fortunate that Daniel and I

had reconnected. Their deaths left a void in my life where there had been traditions and celebratory events. Daniel was born on our parents' fourth wedding anniversary.

Childhood birthdays had been major productions in our household. Cake, ice cream, the corny song poorly sung, wrapped gifts. I kept up the tradition after I left home. I'd honor my brother with the same, and at the same time pay homage to our parents.

I reserved a hotel room in Queens, scanned the Internet for restaurants, and planned our journey. Joe and I would pick up Star, who lived in northern Virginia, after work on Friday. I'd decorate our hotel suite with family photos on posters and elaborately wrapped gag gifts. Saturday we'd take Daniel to a late lunch or early dinner. Afterward, we'd return to the hotel to open gifts and look at photos I'd bring.

Joe and Star were eager to join me. In my bedroom, I readied to wrap gifts when I remembered to call Daniel. Though I expected a pleasant reception, I never knew what mood Daniel would present.

Five rings. I was about to hang up when he answered.

"What are you doing next Saturday?"

"Uh, nothing, I guess. It's Saturday."

"Well, Saturday I'm taking you out to celebrate your sixtieth. Joe and Star are coming, but Trevor has to work."

"That's not a good idea. I don't celebrate my birthday. In fact, I usually take my phone off the hook that day."

"What?" A bit more jaw pressure and I would've broken some teeth. I quickly recovered. "Turning sixty is quite an accomplishment."

"Not for me. And anyway, my arch fell."

"That must have hurt."

"Not really. It just feels funny."

I couldn't keep my voice from hardening. "If your arch doesn't hurt, I'm talking about coming a week from now."

"I won't be up to going out. Thank you, though. I appreciate the thought."

Somehow, I feigned nonchalance as I monotoned what was new in my life. Daniel interjected.

"Speaking of talking, I talk to Jesus when I'm in my apartment. We talk a lot."

Rude, but at least he was sharing. "Yeah?"

"Oh yeah. I have a lot to be thankful for. Some people have had terrible childhoods, terrible parents, horrible lives. We're lucky. We had parents who brought us up right. They were devoted to family. There's a lot for me to be thankful for. Jesus does work miracles."

"Yes he does." I waited. Nothing followed.

I returned to updating Daniel. He interrupted again.

"Well you certainly can run your mouth without hesitating. Do you realize how much you talk? Maybe you can sell that ability. I'm getting tired, so I have to go. Love you."

"Oh. Good-bye. Love you, too."

Joe came upstairs for the night. He caught me sitting on the floor with my head in my hands. I told him our trip was off and why.

"Baby, it was good of you to try to make his birthday special," Joe said. "I'm sorry we're not going, but there's nothing else you can do. You tried."

I phoned Star. She and I had in common the need to look forward to the next event. "I'll change hotels and we can do Manhattan," I said.

"That's okay. I wanted to see Uncle Daniel."

I felt a good cry coming on as I slouched on the edge of my bed.

Joe heard me sniffing. "What's wrong?"

"It meant so much to Mom and Dad that I keep in touch with Daniel. The last time he was in Virginia, Daniel said he didn't like to fly because of his limp and the walking through airports. I told him I'd visit him instead. Next he said I'd have a problem with how he kept his apartment, and I told him I'd stay in a hotel and pick him up to go out. It's always on me."

"You did what you could," Joe said. "That's all that matters."

I tried not to be angry for his ungraciousness, or cry because of my disappointment. It wouldn't matter. I knew I'd try to see him again. Just because birthdays were special to me was no reason to expect Daniel to feel the same way. I had to accept this. After all, he didn't mean it.

Then I recalled Daniel telling me that he often speaks with Jesus. I straightened.

I'd wanted Daniel to be able to experience peace through spirituality when the tranquility in his life was disrupted. I smiled, thankful that Daniel had Jesus to talk to.

Daniel would be all right. Even if I didn't get to visit him, he'd never be alone.