

I look at these photos of my brother and think **You idiot. What have you done?**

Micheal Evans tells the heart-rending story of how his big brother became an Islamic terrorist with a 14-year-old bride

THOMAS EVANS'S CLOTHES still hang in his bedroom wardrobe. A framed photograph of him on a holiday in New York sits conspicuously on the living room mantelpiece. Pinned to the inside of a kitchen cupboard door is a colourful painting he did as a nine-year-old. But Thomas Evans hasn't lived in this neat Buckinghamshire semi for four years. These artefacts of family life are but a ghostly reminder of happier times.

Thomas – English, middle-class, Manchester United-loving Thomas – was killed in a fire-fight with Kenyan security forces in June as he embarked on another murderous attack with the jihadi group al-Shabaab. Still strapped to his chest was the hunting knife he'd used on countless other raids to butcher who knows how many innocent people. He was 25.

The clothes, the photograph, the drawing in his High Wycombe home are mum Sally's way of preserving the memory of Thomas as he was. The son she'd given

birth to, raised, and then, inconceivably, lost to Islamic terrorism.

She and her younger son Micheal still struggle, as any decent family would, to comprehend the depraved depths to which Thomas sank. Yes, he was hurt when his father deserted the family ten years ago, devastated when a teenage

romance ended abruptly. But how could it all end in radicalisation and barbarity?

In his first major interview Micheal, a mature and thoughtful 23-year-old photographer, offers some insight but remains shocked and bewildered by it.

"Do I hate him? That's a really hard question to answer. Yes, I hate him for taking the lives of all those innocent people, I hate him for all the pain he's put my mum through. But it's as if we are talking about two people – the brother I remember and the person he became. I love the brother he was, but I hate who he became."

Thomas – or Tom as he was known to his brother – left the UK in 2011 at the age of

'I hate him for all the pain he's put my mum through'

MICHEAL EVANS



BEFORE Family snapshots of Thomas with his younger brother Micheal



AFTER Thomas Evans, who became a knife-wielding jihadi with al-Shabaab

muslim-only gym – and that's when he turned to Islam."

Initially, the family welcomed his interest in religious study. It did, as Micheal says, start to "sort him out".

"He was a lot calmer. He was like the brother I used to know. It seemed like he'd found what he was looking for. It seemed a positive thing. The petty crime and stuff just stopped overnight. But that didn't last long. He changed mosques and started going to a local prayer centre and it was there his views became more extreme.

"He was massively into music and TV. He loved hip hop and R 'n' B and, on TV, things like *Family Guy* and *The Wire*. But he completely cut out all music, and wouldn't come in the room when the TV was on. He stopped eating with us because he wouldn't have his food cooked in the same pots and pans as us.

"Every discussion we had with him about it turned into an argument. But it was really hard to have an argument with him because he seemed to know all the answers. He said we were racist. He said that unless we became

Muslim, me and Mum would burn in hell."

Occasionally, the mask slipped. "He was ill once and as Mum went upstairs to his bedroom to see how he was, she could hear *Family Guy* playing on his laptop. But as soon as Tom heard her footsteps, he switched it to the Islamic chants he would listen to. So there was still some of the old Tom there.

IT HAPPENED LATER when he was in Somalia," says Micheal. "He would ring home every month or two. I found it very difficult to talk to him, it would depend on the mood he was in. A lot of the time he'd just be preaching, which I didn't want to hear. It was almost as if his soul had gone. But then you'd get him on another day and he just wanted to know everything about the UK, what his friends over here were doing, even silly things like how the cats were. You imagine that he'd be missing things, maybe he was at a weak point, but then the next time you spoke to him, he'd be really strict in his Islamist ways."

It was British security services who had >

◁ alerted Micheal and his mum to the fact he was in the Horn of Africa. Unbeknownst to them, Thomas had been tracked by intelligence officers as he made his way from Egypt across Africa. “The first we learned of it was when we got a knock on the door from someone at the Home Office saying that they’d ‘lost’ him in Ethiopia. My mum said, ‘What do you mean – lost?’ As far as we were concerned he was still in Egypt. So it was a big shock.

“Strangely, two days later we got a call from Tom saying he was in Somalia and that we wouldn’t see him again. Mum was obviously upset but for both of us it was confusing. Today we know what’s going on out there but then we had no idea.

“After reading about them [al-Shabaab] online I knew what they were like and I knew there wasn’t going to be a way out for him. I knew we wouldn’t see him again. My mum had a glimmer of hope all the time, but I didn’t. I felt betrayed. After my dad left it was me, my mum and my brother. We were a strong unit, and it just seemed like he’d turned his back on everything to go and fight for a cause he had no reason to be involved in.”

MICHEAL AND HIS mum learned of Thomas’s death on 14 June this year. They were midway through filming a documentary with Channel 4 about radicalisation, when images of his body appeared on Twitter.

“There he was, laid out on the street with the other people who’d been killed,” says Micheal. “It was obviously him. He had been gone for four years, so in a way you were kind of coping with that absence already, but he was gone for good now. There was not going to be another phone call.” How did he feel? “There was a sense of relief. That wasn’t my brother. I was glad that person had gone. I have always got the memories of the good days. That’s

‘He’s not gone to paradise – he is burning in hell’

SALLY EVANS

what’s important for me.”

In hindsight is there anything more he could have done? “I don’t like to think about it. I can see, now, that there were warning signs, but we just didn’t know about radicalisation then. I look at these photos of my brother and all I think is: ‘You idiot. What have you done?’ The victims and the families of the people he’s killed were only guilty of believing in a different religion. You shouldn’t be killed for that.”



MOTHER'S LOVE
Sally Evans with a school photo of her son Thomas – killed in Kenya in June (right)



HOME LIFE
Brothers Thomas and Micheal in happier times

‘Everyone will remember Tom as a terrorist but he was a normal boy before that’

It was only after dozens of witness statements were taken that the gut-wrenching horror of his complicity in the jihadist atrocities became clear. A survivor of one of the many attacks he took part in spoke of him slaughtering victims with his knife and then filming them being shot. He was recording one such night-time raid when he was shot and killed by Kenyan security forces. That footage features in the Channel 4 documentary.

Micheal can’t bring himself to read those reports. “You knew the group he was fighting for were terrible and that if he was out there fighting, he was going to be involved in these terrible acts. I don’t really want to know anything else. I have heard some of it, but I don’t know... I don’t feel like I need to know.”

Thomas’s mother Sally resisted what must have been an overwhelming maternal urge to bring her son’s body back home. Instead, he had an Islamic burial somewhere near the Kenya and Somalia border.

“We had the option to bring him home, but we didn’t think it was right,”

says Micheal. “He said he’d never come back to the UK, so it felt wrong to bring him back over here for our own selfish gain if you like. Plus, we were concerned that people would either vandalise where he’d be buried or idolise it, and we didn’t want either.

“My mum has thought about going out to see where he’s buried, but it’s not a safe place to go. And would you really want to? I don’t want to see where he was doing all those terrible things.”

More torment was to follow for Sally. In a telephone conversation with her dead son’s 14-year-old jihadi bride, the girl expressed her joy at his passing. He had gone to paradise as a martyr and she should be proud of him, the girl said. Through tears of anger Sally was forced to condemn her own son. “He has not gone to paradise,” she told the girl. “He is burning in hell.”

TODAY, THE FAMILY are speaking out to alert others to the dangers of radicalisation, but not to engage in cultural hate. Says Micheal: “I feel really sorry for the millions of ordinary Muslims who have this stereotype applied to them. My mum went to the local mosque and prayed with the imam after we found out Tom was killed. They were as shocked and angry as we were – it’s almost as if they felt betrayed as well.

“But if we sit at home and don’t talk about it, we’re almost letting the terrorists win and that’s not right. People need to talk about it.

“I have these two people in my head. The brother I used to go BMXing with and the brother in this strange country who is killing people because they believe in a different religion. It doesn’t make any sense. I don’t think it’s something we’ll ever understand.

“Everyone will remember Tom as a terrorist, but he was a normal boy before that. People need to realise it could happen to anyone.”

TERRY PAYNE

