Vignette twenty-six

One particular man, Maori male in his 40s, had been in the mental health system since his very late teens or early twenties, and was classed as a high risk, safety to self and others, but presented to me as quite a quiet, shy, humble man I got on really well with. We ended up having quite a good rapport. It was a 24/7 staffed facility. The time I used to spend with him he expressed to me a real need to make contact with his remaining family, and carried a great deal of guilt. With his illness he had at times been quite threatening to family members, and, on one occasion, threatened to burn his parents' house down and kill them. He told me his mother, right up until the day she died, never ever gave up hope on him. But his remaining family were actually quite afraid. They were his siblings, his sisters. There was one in particular that he desperately wanted contact with – and she lived in the same town. So I got in touch with her, with consent from him, and advised on what he was doing, what state he was in at this time. There was a nephew as well – her son – who he was very fond of. Much to everybody's surprise she was quite keen to initiate some contact. He was very house proud. I had gone in and set up regimes for everybody, alongside the other staff, with maintaining their homes and things, and he responded really well to praise. Another thing he wanted to do was to learn how to bake. He was a wonderful cook but a shocking baker. He had a real passion for chocolate cake, so what we used to do when I was on shift was we used to make a cake together because for him it was really important. Eventually we slowly built up contact with himself and his sister and this young nephew, who was about aged 7 at that stage. He used to travel into a day programme that he attended. Once a week he attended a day programme and after that he would go and spend the rest of the day with his sister and nephew, and he was always able to bring something to eat, which was really important to him to be able to do that, and it was particularly good that he had made it himself. I felt that that was a really, really big achievement for him to have contact with his sister, and build up those connections again. ... But through this with his sister – he had another sister up north, and there had been a meeting arranged regarding his family's land. They were quite a well-off family, and he had always been well looked after financially on that side of things. Because the sister that he was having contact with had obviously been telling this other sister, he was invited. So he got to go up north, spend a week staying with the family to attend the meetings and to be really involved, and through that he ended up having contact with other family members who he hadn't seen for years, and years, and years. It was just amazing.