

## **R -V- Alice Wood**

**Sentencing remarks by Judge Michael Leeming,**

**2 February 2024**

### Introduction from HHJ Lemming

Alice Wood – you may remain seated for the time being.

I must now sentence you for the senseless murder of your fiancé Ryan Watson. There is only one sentence which the law allows for the offence of murder and that is a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment. There should be no misunderstanding. I am required to impose a life sentence and that is the sentence you shall receive. You may never be released but if you are, you will be released on licence subject to conditions and be liable to be recalled to prison for the rest of your life. The sentence for murder will be one of life imprisonment and that is the sentence that I shall pass on you but the law requires me to determine the minimum term which you must serve before the Parole Board can even consider you for release.

I am required to set the minimum term by reference to the statutory scheme laid down by Parliament and to explain my reasons for arriving at the term that I do.

### **THE ESSENTIAL FACTS ARE THESE**

Ryan Watson was aged 24 when he met his death.

On Friday night, 6 May 2022 you murdered him. Ryan was run over and killed when he was struck by the car you were driving, the impact pulling him beneath and trapping him under the chassis of the Ford Fiesta. Ryan was dragged along Sandbach Road, Rode Heath trapped beneath your car for a distance of 158.8 m/521 feet over a period of 21 seconds before you turned right into the mouth of Keats Drive where, having unsuccessfully attempted to dislodge Ryan's body from beneath the vehicle, you exited your car leaving his body in situ beneath the vehicle.

You made your way to the home of Mr and Mrs Colbourne, where in state of distress, you told them that you "thought" that you had run over your boyfriend.

Paramedics attended. There was no sign of life and Ryan was pronounced dead at the scene at 23:50.

The "favoured" cause of death (opinion of Dr Lyall, the pathologist who carried out the PM) was traumatic/compressive asphyxia due to Ryan's torso and chest being compressed by the weight of the car. Alternatively or additionally, trauma to the chest and/or head and/or neck affecting the brain might have caused or contributed to his death.

It comes down to this in the final analysis - Ryan would still be alive had you not deliberately and intentionally run him down.

It may be of some comfort to Ryan's family that his death, in the opinion of the pathologist, was likely to have been "rapid and (and to have) occurred very quickly".

Earlier, on that Friday evening, the two of you had attended a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party for a resident of the Headway Charity at a venue in Stoke on Trent.

Ryan drove the two of you to the party in his own white Fiat Punto.

The plan had been for Ryan to drive the two of you home to Rode Heath afterwards.

Both of you were drinking alcohol at the party. The evidence at the trial included good quality CCTV footage from the party and a good deal of time was spent showing it to the Jury. It is apparent that Ryan was enjoying himself, "working the room" as one party-goer described it; he was the "light of the table" as another put it – we can all infer what Tiffany Ferriday meant by that remark – he was being outgoing and gregarious. But there came a point in the evening when he had had too much alcohol to drive home. You too had been drinking alcohol. Because Ryan had only recently passed his driving test and was relatively new to his job, you took the decision to drive the two of you the 9 miles home in Ryan's car. You were over the drink/drive limit and you knew that to be the case, which is an aggravating factor in your case, as shall be shown.

Having seen the available CCTV footage, I am not sure to the criminal standard that you were in a bad mood at the party. Nor am I required to make a determination as to the veracity of your account to the Jury that by the time you reached Church Newton on your way back home, that Ryan had tried to jump out of the moving vehicle, or that he had deliberately grabbed hold of the steering wheel whilst the car was in motion. But I am sure from the available evidence which includes the accounts of neighbours and CCTV footage from the Jade Garden Chinese Takeaway, that by the time you arrived back home, the atmosphere between the two of you had changed to a significant degree and for the worse. The two of you could be heard arguing; doors were being slammed; a male voice which could only be Ryan's, was overheard to shout: "Oh God, not this again"; the CCTV shows Ryan running towards a parked car and kicking it in frustration.

I am sure that you had by now, begun to lose your temper with him.

I have to consider the manner of your driving. It is what happened next that ultimately led to Ryan's death.

Again, assistance is provided by the available CCTV footage.

There are, as the prosecution identified at the trial, a number of episodes/phases to your driving before the fatal impact occurred.

Phase 1 – Ryan's white Fiat Punto had been left on the Oak St carpark once you both arrived back home. You got into your own Ford Fiesta, and painstakingly drove your car backwards and forwards on a number of occasions to create space between it and Ryan's car; you told the Jury that your intention was to drive to your mother's, some distance away, because you couldn't spend the night at home with Ryan because things were so bad between the two of you; in doing that, in driving in

that way, you managed to avoid any impact with any parked vehicle or street furniture; you were fully in control of your car; you then got out of your car and into the driver's seat of Ryan's Punto and using the handbrake alone, rolled the vehicle backwards to make more room;

Phase 2 – at this point the CCTV footage shows Ryan's phone to light up; he was receiving text messages from a local youth and missed Instagram calls from Ms Ferriday who had been sitting at the same table at the party; he had been getting on well with her at the party; when Ryan walked away from you, you had now lost your temper with him – you can be seen to reverse your Fiesta at some speed/it is a quick reverse into the stationary Punto pushing it backwards before the Fiesta collides with street furniture – a concrete bollard which was flattened and a metal bin which was also damaged. At this point Ryan was behind your car; you were reversing aggressively in his direction and you had by now determined to use your car against him as a weapon. Pausing there, in your letter to me you accept that you “chose to use your car as a weapon of intimidation”;

Phase 3 – this involved you again seeking to intimidate Ryan with your car, aggressively and repeatedly driving your car forwards and backwards on the carpark; Ryan was on foot, and he moved around your vehicle seeking to avoid it; neighbours heard the engine of your car revving.

Some seconds passed.

By now, Ryan was on the pavement of Sandbach Road and he was holding or paying attention to, his phone.

This is when Phase 4/Strike 1 as it was described, occurred:

Having manoeuvred your car onto Sandbach Road, you swerved fully off the road and across the full width of the pavement and on your own admission, you deliberately drove your car at Ryan who was simply walking in the carparking area. You collided with him. As a result of contact with the front of your car, he was thrown backwards onto the bonnet of your vehicle with the back of his head connecting with the windscreen. Ryan slid off the bonnet and landed on his feet, seemingly uninjured and still in possession of his phone. You told the Jury that you had intended this manoeuvre to stop short of any physical contact and was merely designed to frighten him. I do not accept that account, that you intended to stop short of colliding with him. You accelerated towards him giving him no chance to move out of the way. Your intention was to cause him some harm; a neighbour, Rebecca Calister described the manner of your driving as intimidatory and a “scare tactic”;

Phase 5/Strike 2 is the fatal impact on Sandbach Road, just 3.7 seconds later. The CCTV footage shows that Ryan having regained his feet, you then reversed your car in an arc onto Sandbach Road stopping at an angle as if the aim for Ryan again rather than reversing fully and straightening the vehicle up, as would be expected were you intending to drive away along the road. Ryan was still holding his mobile phone; he was on the pavement; he can be seen on the footage and he was available to be seen and was seen by you. You drove straight towards him and ran him down, dragging him underneath the car which led to his death. The available

CCTV footage shows the chassis of the car rise as you ran over Ryan's body – his screams were recorded by the CCTV camera which you claimed not to have heard. You then drove away over the distance I have already described with Ryan trapped underneath your car. I am sure to the criminal standard that by the time of Strike 2 your intention was to kill him. It may not have been a long settled intention but an intention to kill can be formed in the heat of the moment and on the spur of the moment. Having failed to injure him with Strike 1, this time, you made no mistake.

Those three incidents – Phase 3 through to Strike 2 occurred within a very short space of time – between 23:24 – 23:26 – just over 2 minutes in all.

The time interval between the Strike 1/the bonnet impact and Strike 2/the fatal impact was just 3.7 seconds.

Having been arrested at the home of the Colbourne's, you made no comment when asked questions during your various police interviews under caution, even when the CCTV footage was shown to you.

At your trial, your defence was that Ryan's death was all a tragic accident and that you were simply unaware that he was standing in front of your vehicle when you set off driving along Sandbach Road. And that you had no intention to kill him or to cause him really serious harm. Your account was rejected by the jury.

**So much for the facts of this tragic case.**

## **VICTIM IMPACT**

Powerful and understandably emotional Victim Personal Statements from Ryan's parents, Lisa Watson and Jonathan Plant, and from Owen, Ryan's younger brother, have been read aloud by them (at least extracts have been read aloud) at this sentence hearing. I have read the Victim Personal Statements in their entirety. They and other family members had attended every day of the trial and behaved with the utmost dignity in what must be for them, very trying and distressing circumstances. The Victim Statements show how much Ryan was loved by his family and how much he is missed. We have only seen a snap shot of an evening in his life during the course of the trial. It is apparent to me, that he was a good and loving son and a popular member of staff at the Headway Charity, Stoke where Ryan worked helping those less fortunate who has sustained head and brain injuries. He was a young man full of promise with his whole life ahead of him. Pausing there – I am reminded that a colleague of his, Phillipa Bayley whom Ryan referred to as his "Headway Mum" described him in this way: "he was ...just a young lad who was really keen on the job; had a bubbly personality, he was great with clients, very interactive with them and attentive to their needs. He was good at his job and both the staff and clients liked him". But the impact that Ryan's death has had and continues to have upon his family, friends and work colleagues, is obvious. His untimely death has left

a void in the lives of all those left behind. Their suffering is plain to see. Of course, I recognise when sentencing you for Ryan's senseless murder, that no sentence imposed by this court can ever restore to them the loved one they have lost. The period of time a murderer must serve does not reflect the value of the life taken away and does not attempt to do so.

### **Turning to your personal circumstances:**

You are now just 24 years of age.

There are no convictions recorded against you.

There is no Pre-Sentence Report – in my judgment, one is unnecessary in your case.

### **MITIGATION**

**Miss Young KC – her Sentencing Note has been uploaded to the DCS at T9.**

**I intend no disrespect to her by summarising her written and oral submissions in bullet point form:**

- **The starting point when determining the minimum term should be 15 years – Miss Young seeks to distinguish the three authorities Mr Ford KC has referred me to in his written sentencing note – Beckford (2014), Whittle (2019) and Butt (2022) – from the facts of this case;**
- **Driving in an intimidatory manner does not equate to an intention to kill or to cause really serious harm;**
- **That the CCTV footage does not support the contention that the requisite intent for murder had been formed by the time of Strike 1; and that the requisite intent must have been formed between Strikes 1 and 2;**
- **That in the minutes leading up to his death, Ryan was volatile and aggressive towards you, angry and in temper and spoiling for a fight and his conduct in the minutes prior to Strike 1 amounts to provocation (I cannot accept that you were provoked to act in the way that you did – instead, I am sure you were in a temper, fuelled by alcohol and the knowledge that he had been texted by another woman and drove your car at him in the ways I have described – I do not accept that you were in fear of violence at Ryan's hands);**
- **Given the timings from the CCTV, you acted impulsively and spontaneously and with no real premeditation but if there was premeditation, it was formed over a short period;**
- **There is no proper basis for the Court to conclude the intention was to kill as opposed to an intention to cause really serious harm;**

- Some aggravating factors are recognised – the use of the car as a weapon with the requisite intent formed in the seconds before the fatal impact (here, there was no “hunt” or “chase” for the victim which was the situation in Beckford”); the consumption of excess alcohol is also recognised as an aggravating factor;
- Miss Young disputes that there is sufficient evidence of “significant” mental or physical suffering in the moments before death; pausing there, the mental or physical suffering does not have to be “significant”;
- The mitigating factors relied upon are these – your age, a lack of premeditation, an intention to cause serious bodily harm, your good character and what is submitted to be “remorse at the scene”; and your own personal circumstances. It is submitted that your life too is in now in ruins;
- I am invited to impose a sentence that does not destroy your hopes future.

I have read your letter top me at T11 – although you accept that Ryan’s death was “solely (your) responsibility”, you continue to deny the offence you were convicted of. You do accept having chosen to use your car “as a weapon of intimidation”.

I have read the character references from your parents, from Jessica Reading and her mother at T12 – 15.

Character references from your brothers, George Wood and Jonathon Sproston, which were uploaded to the DCS this morning – I have read them.

Your family and friends remain supportive.

You continue to engage with the Mental Health team in prison.

I take all of this into account.

## **SENTENCE**

It will be a matter for the Parole Board to determine the risk you may pose to the public in the future.

My task is to determine your culpability for the killing.

Every case is fact specific.

In setting the minimum term and pursuant to the provisions of section 322 and Schedule 21 paragraph 5 of the Sentencing Act 2020, the starting point when determining the minimum term for a murder in this category is 15 years imprisonment.

The starting point in determining the minimum term is not necessarily the finishing point as the presence of aggravating and mitigating factors has to be considered in every case and the presence of aggravating factors can significantly increase the minimum term that you will be required to serve.

Schedule 21 paragraph 9 sets out a non-exhaustive list of the aggravating factors that may be relevant to the offence of murder.

Only one of the aggravating factors set out there is present on the facts of this case – that is, mental or physical suffering inflicted on the victim before death – I will return to this in a moment.

But there are other aggravating factors which I consider to be relevant (and I must avoid double counting):

1 this murder involved the use of a highly dangerous weapon or weapon equivalent, namely your Ford Fiesta motor car;

2 Ryan Watson was obviously vulnerable – he was a pedestrian, he was holding his mobile phone and was standing on the pavement; he had been drinking and there was nothing he could do to avoid the fatal impact;

3 you too had been drinking; you were arrested having provided a positive roadside breath specimen and a blood sample was taken at the police station; the Jury heard agreed evidence that a “back calculation” showed that the most likely blood/alcohol concentration at the time of the fatal collision would have been approximately 136 milligrams of alcohol in 100 millilitres of blood (where the legal limit is 80 milligrams of alcohol in 100 millilitres of blood) – so over 1.5 times the legal limit for driving a motor vehicle on a road in England and Wales;

4 the CCTV footage reveals repeated hostile and aggressive driving against the deceased leading up to the fatal collision; this is not a factor of double counting with the use of the car as a weapon but a factor of double significance;

5 mental or physical suffering prior to death. First, I am sure to the criminal standard that you were aware that Ryan was trapped beneath your vehicle as you set off along Sandbach Road – I come to that sure conclusion from the CCTV footage which shows the vehicle lifting up and down as Ryan passed under the car; I do not accept from the evidence that you thought that may have been due to the wheels entering the pothole in the pavement surface; I am not going behind the expert evidence because you, yourself recognised in your evidence that following the fatal impact, there was an issue with your vehicle - that the vehicle was not accelerating as it should and that there was something amiss on the driver’s side as you turned into the mouth of Keats Drive – I reject your assertion that you had no idea that Ryan’s body was there – instead I am sure you were aware of it, you drove the 521 feet along the road (it taking 21 seconds to cover that distance) aware that he was under the car and then sought to dislodge his body by driving forwards and backwards in the mouth of Keats Drive and it was only then, when those manoeuvres failed, that you got out. This finding is entirely consistent with the Jury’s verdict.

Second, Ryan screamed when he was dragged under your car. In Dr Lyall's evidence, over 40 separate sites of external injury were identified on Ryan's body (lacerations and abrasions for the most part) consistent with being dragged along the road surface whilst trapped under the car, rather than being caused in the final fatal impact although some of the minor injuries or scuffs could have been caused by that but his death was likely to have been "rapid" and occurred "very quickly" BUT Dr Lyall did not say that Ryan's death was likely to have been instantaneous.

I am sure to the criminal standard, that he did suffer at least some physical and mental suffering over some of those 21 seconds and that is an aggravating factor.

There are Mitigating factors in your case – mitigating factors can include an intention to cause serious bodily harm rather than to kill. An intention to cause serious bodily injury might result in a modest reduction in the sentence. I have considered this aspect carefully. Having conducted the trial and having heard all the evidence, I am uniquely placed and best placed to make that determination. I am sure to the criminal standard that there WAS an intention to kill which was formed on the spur of the moment, once you had seen Ryan regain his feet having slid off the bonnet of the car following Strike 1 – and so, whilst not longstanding, the intention had been formed – you had not injured him by driving at him, so you determined to kill him.

Other mitigating factors present in your case:

- You have no previous convictions; there are no motoring offences recorded against you;
- Your good character (what your friends and family say about you; your undoubted academic prowess) and that you acted in a way which was out of character, provides you with some mitigation but it carries less weight and is of less relevance when the offending is as serious as this;
- Your age – you are only just 24 (22 at the time of the killing);
- Having failed to dislodge Ryan's body, to your credit, you did not seek to flee the scene;
- I am prepared to accept for the purposes of sentence that you did make futile attempts to lift the car off Ryan's body only to realise that the task was impossible for you to do on your own; there was only your evidence of that but I am prepared to accept it;
- And in doing that, I am sure that at that stage, you regretted what you had done and expressed some acknowledgement of being responsible for running Ryan over when at the Colbourne's house but it does not negative the intention to kill that you held at the time you ran him over;
- I also have regard to your personal circumstances, the fact that you will be unable to support your parents as they get older and your recent history of depression, anxiety and struggles with alcohol.
- I also have regard to paragraph 32 of Miss Young's sentencing note;



- Prison may be hard for you but you only have yourself to blame for the situation you now find yourself in.

In my judgment, the aggravating factors outweigh the mitigating ones and justify an upwards adjustment to the minimum term.

On 2 January, you were convicted of murder by a unanimous verdict of the Jury after a trial lasting 13 days – there is no credit for a guilty plea here.

To my mind, you have shown no true remorse for Ryan’s murder.

### **Alice Wood – STAND UP PLEASE**

Alice Wood – for the murder of Ryan Watson, I sentence you to life imprisonment with a minimum term under section 322 of the Sentencing Act 2020 of 18 years less 616 days you have spent in custody on remand.

18 years imprisonment less 616 days is the **LEAST** amount of time you will be in custody. After that time, you will only be released if the Parole Board decides you are not a danger to the public..

If you are released, you will be on licence for the rest of your life.

If for any reason your licence is revoked, you will be recalled to prison to continue to serve your life sentence in custody.

It is in these ways that a sentence of life imprisonment protects the public.

I make a Deprivation Order in respect of your Ford Fiesta motorcar reg number OE65 VVL – the vehicle used to kill Ryan pursuant to sections 152 – 153 Sentencing Act 2020.

The Statutory Surcharge Provisions apply to this case and the appropriate order can be drawn up together with a collection order.

I direct that a transcript of my sentencing remarks should be obtained and provided to the Parole Board.

You can go with the dock officer.

HHJ Michael Leeming

2 February 2024