

Letter to my sister

by Sue Hitchcock

My Dear Sister,

It's two years since we last met, and we may never meet again, with the difficulties caused by the pandemic and our great age. Though you are six years older than me, it seems nothing now and you are the only person who has known me my whole life.

When we were young, you took your responsibilities very seriously. Do you remember Mum reprimanding you harshly for smacking me, when you took me to the library? I must have been quite naughty, but I got off scot-free.

I always wanted to be like you, which is why I chose to study languages as you had, instead of following the school's recommendation to study biology and maths. When you graduated, you took me on a holiday to Germany – what an adventure! Then two years later you took me to Austria to a language summer school. Did you know I had sex with the Algerian boy? But where were you?

I went to university and became a naughty girl, but you became a teacher and assumed respectability. When you got married, we were both pregnant. I had an abortion and became the black sheep, because the university informed Mum and Dad. It was a useful distraction from the fact that your son was born less than eight months after your wedding. Do you remember the terrible row we had, when you were hugely pregnant? I fell down the uncarpeted stairs at your house and ran home sobbing and hiccuping. I took quite a lot of aspirin before the hiccups stopped, but that was the end of hostilities between us.

Motherhood was the foundation of the warmth between us. I adored your son and your generosity to my daughters was extraordinary.

As a girl you fainted several times when visiting people in hospital and your experience of childbirth put you off having another child. Strangely, apart from dentists, I don't mind hospitals. During my fertile years the Obstetric and Gynaecology departments at the Whittington Hospital became much too familiar. Now things are reversed. I depend on the N.H.S. only for the briefest interventions. You, on the other hand, seem to have explored far too many departments at your local hospital. They never seem to liberate you from your problems and now, here you are, a skinny, old lady, like our mother's mother who lived almost to a hundred. I fear I take after Dad and have outlived his seventy two years already.

So here we are, apart, but glad to talk to each other. This is not a letter, but my arms about you for a brief moment.

From your little sister.