

Celia Dodd, to her daughter

Dear Alice,

It's hard to believe it's only a year since you left; you've changed so much as the distance between us has grown. While you've been at university and teaching in Cambodia I've been adjusting to life without you. It hasn't been easy. I loved being a mother from the word go, and the day you were born was one of the happiest of my life. I still miss you coming through the door at 4.30pm, our trips to Topshop, our random chats. Talking on the phone just isn't the same – I miss the hugs.

If I'm honest, I'm a bit jealous that you're 19 and I'm 57; that you've got so much exciting stuff ahead, while for me it's a time to look back as well as forward. Some memories still make me wince: you crying every morning when I left you at nursery, the sickening thud when you fell off the top bunk and got concussion. And I don't suppose either of us will forget the first time I visited you at university and we ended up arguing about your plans to travel by yourself.

There are happier memories, too: reading picture books on the train, teaching you to knit, buying your first serious frock. Then there was the friend's wedding when I first noticed that the rest of the world saw you as a gorgeous blonde and we had a shouting match about how many mojitos you'd knocked back. I'm still not used to the stares you get in the street, but at parties, it can feel like reflected cachet – a nice turn-up for a middle-aged woman

who's used to being invisible. I envy your ability to laugh off male attention – when I was 19 I walked around with my shoulders hunched.

Of course, there are times when I miss you more – if I spot a blonde girl in your school uniform, or when I'm worried about you. It makes my stomach churn to hear that you had a fever in Cambodia (I'm quite glad I found out after you'd recovered) and that I wasn't there to take you to hospital when you crashed your bike. But I'm learning not to imagine

the worst automatically. In some ways, you're lucky that your two older brothers left before you; it's taken me years to see that the only way you lot learn is by making your own mistakes. My job's done – all I can do now is stand back and have faith in you. I hope you know that I'll always be here if you need me.

Celia Dodd is the author of 'The Empty Nest: How To Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child' (Piatkus)

