

Oh, brother!

He calls you names, farts in your face, or even just completely ignores you! Legendary author **Judy Blume** explains why, with brothers, it can take a while to appreciate what you've got.

My brother was four years old when I was born, and I'm not sure he ever got over it. Family lore has it he had such a temper that he held his breath until he turned blue. He kicked his kindergarten teacher in the stomach on the first day of school. In photos, he has a pained look on his face. So I tried to be perfect. I sang, I danced, I got good grades—whatever it took to please my parents. Only my eczema gave me away.

My brother was quiet, and uncomfortable around people, like our mother. While I roller-skated and played with friends on the street, he spent his time in the basement workshop, inventing things. He lived inside his head. None of us understood him.

I'd heard whispers about his genius IQ, so when he told me to stand with one foot off the ground during thunderstorms so the lightning would have a way out if it hit me, I believed him. I hopped around the house on one foot and never used the toilet during a storm because he said the lightning could come up and strike me *there*.

My friends thought I was lucky to have an older brother. They found him fascinating. I never told them we weren't the perfect family we pretended to be.

I was starting eighth grade when my brother left for college, and for the next five years I lived as the only child in the house. I'd like to say I missed him, but the truth is, I was *relieved*. The tension in our house disappeared when my brother left. I sometimes felt guilty about that.

The first time we visited him at college, I was only 14, but he set me up on a date with a red-cheeked freshman. The four of us went out with another couple. My brother and his date in the front seat, the rest of us squeezed into the back. I wore a sleeveless denim dress and Cuban heels and stuffed my bra with toilet paper, trying to look

older. I wanted my brother to be proud of me. It never occurred to me that he probably wanted the same. After the movies, my brother and his date and the other couple made out. My date and I just sat there, staring straight ahead, wishing we could go home. My brother has no memory of this night. I remember it in great detail. Like most siblings, we remember things differently.

I didn't see a lot of my brother after that. He dropped out of college, joined the Air Force, married early, and was sent overseas. He and my sister-in-law arrived back in the States on a sunny Sunday in July, just weeks before my wedding. On the way home from the airport, they announced they were expecting a baby. My father let out a whoop of joy—then the car swerved. My mother screamed. Two hours later my father died of a heart attack and our lives were changed forever.

You'd think this tragedy would have brought us closer together, but it didn't. We never talked about it. Neither did our mother. Each of us mourned alone. There was no comfort in being together.

For the next 25 years my brother and I lived in different worlds. Oh, sure, we saw each other once or twice a year, and at those family gatherings our kids played together. But that was it. It wasn't until after our mother's death, after our kids were grown, after we'd both divorced and remarried, that we discovered we have some things in common. We began to spend time together in Key West, a city we both love, although we never knew it. When we're together we reminisce. There are some things we can't talk about, like politics. I look at my brother differently now. I care about him.

Maybe it's true that as you grow older you mellow. Maybe the things that once made you so angry don't seem as important.

You don't get to choose your siblings. You're lucky when you grow up close, when you're there for each other. Some brothers and sisters never reconnect. I feel lucky that we did. After all, my brother and I share a history. We're family. **17**

Judy

