

A Nun's Story

She was going to be my boss. And she was a nun.

The smell of floor polish, absolute cleanliness, little statues in niches and the sound of bubbling stillness. The training college was in a convent. The students were on holiday and only the nuns were in residence.

She danced down the stairs. Mother Bede, tiny and swift, with a round, vivid face and bright blue eyes. She told me that she was the librarian and that she needed help with her particular interest – the children's library. I don't know if there were any other applicants. I was the lucky one.

That gap year job was, literally, heaven sent. Mother Bede's idea was that the trainee teachers should know and love children's books and to that end she had made in one room of the library a children's section to inspire their interest. My main task was to keep this little world going and to help the students find their way round it.

Over those few months in that small corner of London, I observed Mother Bede. I had never known a nun and she toppled all my preconceived ideas. She was talkative and intelligent and strong. She went out in the world, as she put it, from time to time, even, once, to a publishers' book launch with me in tow, where I watched her in her habit, drinking sherry, managing the nibbles and talking books with five men in suits. But, just as naturally, she would mention God, as if he had slipped out of the library for a moment and would return later. She would gossip about the other nuns without malice but with complete honesty. She expected me to work hard but was unfailingly kind. Together we rather guiltily listened to music while we worked.

While I was there, the Convent was in the process of change. One morning Mother Bede said rather testily that I was to call her Sister Bede in future – there had been some kind of edict from on high, of which she clearly did not approve. Too late! She was always Mother Bede to me.

When I left to go University, I was curiously jealous of the person who would take my place.

We kept in touch. Over the years I glimpsed Mother Bede from time to time as her life changed beyond anything I would have imagined in those months I worked for her. The modernisation continued. She continued not to approve. She applied to join a more restricted order of nuns. I wondered how the woman who strode through Bloomsbury to Publishers' parties would cope with twenty three hours of silence each day. The next message from her was even more amazing. She had been turned down by the restricted order and was about to leave the convent altogether. In future I was to call her Patricia.

She worked as a librarian in Catford until she reached retirement age when she moved to Devon. Her homes recreated the world of that little library – small sanctuaries of peace, full of books and pictures and music.

A while ago, I realised that there had been no Christmas card that year. There was no reply when I phoned. The next time I went to Devon, I called at the house. I could see through the window her tiny colourful sitting room. There was the sign in the garden, 'Beware the Jabberwock'. The neighbours told me I had missed her funeral by three hours. She was always elusive, Mother Bede.