

My Brother, with Cornflowers

By Julian Hall

“Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling.”

Alex had the eulogy we had written on the podium, but he wasn't reading it.

“From glen to glen, and down the mountain side.”

Mum clutched my sleeve with the hand that held her tissues.

“What is he doing?” she hissed. I shrugged, not taking my eyes off my brother. His voice clattered against the exposed beams of the crematorium ceiling. He was a picture of serenity as he dragged those syllables out, far longer than they wanted to stretch. His eyebrows rose higher and higher. The bastard was trying not to laugh.

“The summer's gone, and all the roses.”

He leant forward, gripping each side of the podium, bringing his lips so close to the leftmost microphone bud that he could have kissed it.

“Falling.”

Alex sang for seven minutes, repeating the lines he enjoyed the most and peppering the song with dramatic pauses. He finished, turned around and picked up a bouquet from Dad's coffin. He caught my eye, winked, and walked down the aisle, trailing blue petals. The door slammed behind him. Mum was shaking. I pulled free of her and went after Alex.

A gaggle of mourners was gathering for the next funeral. Alex blew through them, and I hurried in his wake. The crematorium staff were stony-faced, presumably because my

brother's extended vocal solo had disrupted their schedule. In the memorial garden, Alex seated himself on a tomb stone. He drummed his feet against the lichen-crusting letters, faced tilted up to catch the drizzle, as he waited for me to catch up. I shoved him in the shoulder, and he toppled backwards into a flowerbed, crushing freshly planted hyacinths.

"What was all that about?" I asked him. He looked up at me from the mud, eyes red and grin rigid. Unsteady, Alex unfolded like a deckchair, leaving his idiot smile in the churned-up mud. He still held the blue bouquet, cornflowers wilting. "Something wrong with the eulogy?" We stood face to face over the gravestone, and I could smell the whisky on his breath. The waiting funeral party watched us, alerted by my raised voice. Alex is taller than I am and much broader. He won every childhood fight.

"Thing is," Alex started. "Thing is, it's all just bollocks, isn't it?" He wiped the rain off his face, smearing mud across his forehead. "Night before he died, you know what he did?" He paused, like this wasn't a rhetorical question. I kept my mouth closed. "He apologised, Si. He said sorry. For leaving. And for coming home." Dad's funeral had finished, and our relatives were spilling into the garden. I couldn't see our mum. My brother was pulling petals off the flowers in clumps.

"Come on, mate, we need to get to the wake. Let's go and find Mum." Alex ignored me and placed his grubby hands on my shoulders.

"Si, it didn't help. He said sorry and it didn't help."