

Will ye no come back again By Lorn Macintyre

Mother always maintained that my brother Alasdair could climb almost before he could walk. She would turn her back and he would be gripping a chair, trying to pull himself up, and on one heart-stopping occasion she was cooking when she turned to see that he was on the table. The floor was flagstones, and she was terrified that he would fall head-first. She had to inch towards him, all the time talking to him before she snatched him up.

Nowadays they call Alasdair's condition hyperactivity. Even as a boy he was always on the go in the outdoors, building himself a hut in the small plantation beside our house, making himself a swing which he fitted up himself, and shinning up the chestnut tree to the highest boughs.

'He's going to be a joiner,' mother said at the supper table.

That didn't please our father. He wanted his son to take over his practice as the GP in the Highland community. However, he encouraged Alasdair's love of the outdoors by sending him to Gordonstoun School, where he learned to climb. When he came home for the holidays he was always out, no matter the weather. At the age of sixteen he announced that he was going to camp on the mountain behind the house.

'But you could catch cold,' mother pointed out with maternal solicitude.

'Colds are caught from other people,' father pointed out, and went with his son up to the attic to bring down the tent he had used as a boy. The reason why father never worried about Alasdair in the great outdoors was because he had been a medical student during the war, and knew, as he said, that survival was an important lesson in life, and not only for a doctor.

I was sent to board at St Leonards in St Andrews where I never learned the art of carrying the ball in a netted pole called lacrosse, and where my academic progress was undistinguished, but sufficient to allow me to study botany at university. I loved gathering flowers and pressing them between the leaves of father's heavy medical tomes, with their black and white photographs of people with grotesque deformities and diseases. It was as if the flowers were a healing balm.

But this story is about my charismatic brother Alasdair and his many activities. He learned to play the pipes at Gordonstoun, and when he came home for the summer before his final year he was wearing the kilt which would be his habitual garment, wherever he was. Alasdair was six feet two inches tall, with fair hair and a most endearing smile. The years of rock climbing and other pursuits at school and in the holidays had given him massive shoulders, but gentle arms when he hugged me, because we couldn't have been closer. That summer when he was seventeen, with a year of schooling left, he told us that he was entering the local Highland games. We took a picnic to the slope above the field and sat on our Campbell tartan rug to watch him. In the hop, step and leap it looked as if he would never descend to the sandy pit, and when they applied the tape it was a ground record. Next he won the hundred yards easily, and as the heavy events were about to get under way he quickly buckled his kilt over his running shorts. He swung the heavy weight on the ring between his legs, giving himself balance by digging the prongs on the toes of his boots into the turf, and won that event also. The caber hadn't been tossed since being felled in a local grove five years before. The kilted Alasdair, bare-footed and bare-chested, heaved the tree up against his shoulder and ran with it, his hands locked under the end. As it swayed I thought it was falling back towards him, but it toppled over to a great cheer from the crowd and lay dead straight on the turf. That night we celebrated with a barbecue in our garden, roasting the haunch of venison that father had received from a grateful patient, and as I watched the sparks from the aromatic fire rising towards the mountain I thought: *I am never going to be happier.*

The summer before he went to St Andrews University to study medicine Alasdair spent mostly on the mountain. I tracked his progress with binoculars from the lawn as he ascended the scree,

father's tent strapped to the backpack which contained his provisions. I yearned to go up with him, but mother said that one worry was enough. When Alasdair came down for a bath and more provisions before the next ascent I asked him what he did on the mountain.

'I climb.'

'Explain, please.'

'As you know the mountain has four peaks, so there's a good choice. I've already climbed two of them.'

'Isn't it dangerous, climbing alone?' I asked apprehensively.

'Not if you're careful and have a head for heights. I take it very slowly, and from time to time I look down at the house and ask myself: is my lazy sister Eveleen still in her bed? Last week when I was climbing I saw an eagle's nest on the ledge above, so I made a traverse to avoid disturbing them, because I could hear the chicks. When I reach the summit I admire the view, and then I descend to my tent. I always pitch it beside a burn so that I can wash away the sweat, and then I cook myself a meal – or rather, I reheat what mother has given me.'

'And then what?' I wanted to know.

'By this time the light's going, and the stars are beginning to come out. The landscape below me starts to change, and I sit watching the lochs beginning to turn dark, as if they're getting deeper and deeper, and then the world goes very quiet. Sometimes I think I hear you playing Scottish airs on the piano, but it must be an illusion.'

In October Alasdair went off to St Andrews University, wearing his kilt and driving the modest car which father had bought for him. He was in a hall of residence, and when he phoned from the coin box in the lobby the instrument was passed round between us. He told father that his studies were going well and that medicine was very interesting, and he assured our anxious mother that he was keeping warm in that chill town by the North Sea. He told me that he had played the pipes for an eightsome reel at a student dance, and that he loved me dearly and was looking forward to seeing me in the vacation.

When he drove up the avenue it seemed that he had grown even more, and when he came into the drawing-room the Christmas tree which mother and I had adorned with baubles and lights seemed to get brighter. Father monopolised him, interrogating him about what he was studying in medicine.

The following year I went to Glasgow University to study botany, and my brother and I exchanged weekly letters. He revealed that he was bringing home 'a fellow medical student, Marjorie, whom you will like, because she also adores flowers.'

Marjorie came to our hospitable house at Christmas. She was small and very pretty, and it came as a surprise to us at the supper table that she too was a climber.

'Where did you learn?' father asked, intrigued.

'With the university climbing club.'

Alasdair spent the following day sawing logs for our festive season fires, and then informed us that he and Marjorie were going to climb the mountain.

'But there's snow on it,' mother pointed out.

'That doesn't bother us. We have crampons.'

'What are these?' mother asked for enlightenment.

'Spikes we strap to our boots for snow. And we've got ice axes.'

They left in the dawn in fair weather. I went downstairs to see them off as they mustered their equipment in the hall, hauling on their haversacks, zipping up their anoraks, pulling on balaclavas because these were the days before hard hats for the mountains. They picked up their ice axes and kissed me, and I stood on the bitterly cold step in my dressing-gown, watching them trudging away, their torches scanning the plantation where my brother had built his hut. At lunch-time it started to snow heavily, and mother began to worry about her firstborn and his sweetheart on the mountain. I waded through the snow of the back garden with father's binoculars, but a white curtain was descending on the ben.

Father had to go to the garage to have chains fitted to his tyres in case he was called out to an emergency. When he returned at four, mother was visibly distressed.

'They should be back by now. It's getting dark.'

'They've probably been held up by the snow,' father advised her, though I could see that he was worried.

That was the first night ever in our house that mother the consummate cook didn't serve supper. We huddled round the drawing-room fire piled with logs which Alasdair had sawn, hearing the wind in the wide throat of the chimney. The coloured bulbs on the Christmas tree began to flicker, and then we were plunged in darkness apart from the firelight.

'That's all we need,' father complained, groping his way through to the cupboard off the kitchen for the paraffin lamps we kept filled, wicks trimmed, for the power cuts which happened every winter, with the lines laden with snow. He brought the light back through to the drawing-room, and for the first time in my life I saw mother crying. At nine o' clock father took the lamp out to the phone in the hall, to ask the police to call out the mountain rescue team, but the line was dead.

The wind dropped, and more snow fell, silent, eerie, submerging the world. I went upstairs to my bedroom at the back of the house and lifted the window on the bitter night. I put the record of the Corries singing *Will Ye No' Come Back Again?* on the turntable of the battery operated player I had received for a past Christmas, turning the volume up full. I kept playing the record over and over, until mother came up.

'For God's sake, Eveleen, how can you play such loud music at such a time?'

'Because I have hope, mother.'

I was falling asleep, despite the rousing song filling my room, but somehow I knew that I had to keep playing the same record over and over. At around 2 a.m. the batteries gave out, and I sat on my bed weeping. I don't know what made me raise my head to look out of the window, and when I saw a light flashing on the mountain I ran down to tell father. We drove over treacherous roads, the chains snickering on the tyres, to the house of the leader of the mountain rescue team.

My brother and his sweetheart were brought down at first light. She had lost her footing on the ice face, and in holding her on the rope he had injured his leg. His shin bone was exposed and Marjorie had concussion.

'We were sitting on a narrow ledge, trying to stay awake, but the cold was putting us to sleep,' he told me. 'I've read about climbers drifting into unconsciousness and death through hypothermia. Then I heard *Will Ye No' Come Back Again?*' being sung, but thought it was a hallucination, until I remembered your favourite record. My fingers were frozen, but I put them into my mouth and managed to signal with the torch.'

Alasdair was back on the games field the following summer, his leg healed as he carried the caber, and Marjorie had an engagement ring on her hand.