

Love is a Powder Blue Suit
by Annika Herb
First Prize

It was a real shock to have it happen at Uncle Bill's funeral.

Especially because Uncle Bill wasn't dead. He just liked holding a funeral every few years. My mother says he's celebrating life, and wants to see all his loved ones while he can. My grandmother says Bill is a spoilt brat with a narcissism complex, and we should all just ignore him.

"He's really committed this year," my sister Abigail remarks, joining me by the casket. She nods at the body, tastefully dressed in a powder blue suit. Uncle Bill has a wonderful flair for the dramatic, although the blue did clash with the red roses strewn about. "You can barely see him breathing at all."

I glance at my watch. I'd left Mia at home, promising to be back around lunch. "How long do you think this will go for?"

A reproachful cough comes from the coffin.

"Sorry," I say. "I only hope there's enough time to mourn."

We file into our seats. Abigail tugs her dress over her knees. Despite Bill's powder blue, the funeral notice always requested a sombre black to mark the occasion. Bill liked standing out.

I wasn't out to my family, so it might be weird to bring my supposed roommate to my uncle's fake funeral. Mia understood. Anyway, I wasn't exactly desperate to bring her to this showcase of family dysfunction.

"Death..." the minister intones, "is an important part of life."

I assume she *knows* this is fake. Once, Uncle Bill neglected to inform the minister, who understandably panicked when Bill burst upright in his coffin during the minute of silence.

The minister continues. "Death reminds us of what's important – love and family."

I glance around. Most of the attendees are staring at their phones or watches. My cousin Jenny is chatting amiably with the funeral home attendant. I look at my phone, but the screen is blank.

"It's not about you coming out," Mia had said. "It's more than that – I want to meet your family, and chat over stale Scotch Fingers at the next weird fake wedding, or whatever. I don't care if they call me your roommate. I just want to be in your life, know the people who are most important to you."

I should have said, "You are the person who is most important to me." But I tried to make a joke about it instead. "I could never inflict that on you."

Mia didn't say anything.

“I think Bill would be glad to look around this room today, and know it is filled with love.”

I fidget. My stockings itch. My phone is silent.

After the service, we move to the reception, where Bill’s coffin has been wheeled. My family gathers around it halfheartedly. Aunt Susan offers biscuits. Some crumbs fall onto Uncle Bill, but he lies still, committed.

“Shouldn’t he be up and about by now?” someone murmurs.

“What a lovely service,” my mother says.

“She wasn’t bad,” Grandma muses. “Jack, get her details for my funeral.”

“What she said about love? Beautiful.”

“I’m gay.”

I don’t realise I’ve spoken until everyone turns to look at me.

I swallow. Abigail reaches out and squeezes my hand.

“I’m gay. Mia isn’t my roommate, she’s my girlfriend. I love her. She should be here today, but I didn’t ask her. And I should have.”

There’s a long pause.

“Oh,” Grandma says. “Well, this is more interesting than the usual funeral fare. Congratulations, darling.”

Mum grabs my other hand. “Thank you for telling us, sweetheart.”

“Mia’s wonderful,” Dad says.

“I just wish Bill was here to see this,” Aunt Susan sniffs.

Everyone ignores her.

There’s movement in the coffin.

Dad glances at his watch. “Is it that time?”

Uncle Bill flings his arms wide. “Surprise! I live!” he cries.

“For God’s sake, Bill, give it up,” Grandma snaps.

The reception picks up after that. I find myself smiling more than is appropriate for a funeral. Uncle Bill stands by me.

“You should invite your girlfriend to my next funeral,” Bill says. “Funerals are a time for family, after all.”

The room is full of my ridiculous family. I picture Mia there, in a neat black suit, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she laughs. “Yeah. Thanks, Uncle Bill.”

Bill pats me on the shoulder. I walk outside, into the sunshine.

I take out my phone and call Mia. The sky is powder blue above me, like a suit. It is a beautiful day for a funeral.