

One of the cops is standing on a white rose, his standard-issue work shoe crushing the delicate petals. For some reason, this strikes Stuart as the most tragic part of the whole ordeal, that something as beautiful and blameless as that flower could be so casually destroyed.

Since when are you so poetic? he asks himself.

Since the unthinkable occurred, and he saw the shock in his wife's eyes and knew that she would never get over it. Because Dawn's state of mind is as fragile as that white rose, and in one terrifying moment, it has been pulverized by a sturdy hard-soled shoe.

Stuart looks over at his wife, sitting mutely at another table, her trembling visible despite the fleece blanket that has been draped across her shoulders. She is staring off into space, oblivious to the sobbing man seated across from her. The first thing the police had done (after prying the deejay away from his booth and shutting off the music that was, obscenely, still playing) was separate everyone, spreading some of the guests out two to a table and funneling others to an empty ballroom. They've been given strict orders not to communicate with one another, so Stuart and his tablemate, a woman who moments ago had been shamelessly flirting with the best man, keep to themselves. Every so often, they exchange fearful, stunned glances.

"I have to get out of here." A woman at a corner table suddenly rises to her feet, her face a mask of anguish. "I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!" One of the cops rushes over and speaks to her quietly but urgently until she is persuaded to return to her seat. Stuart is disturbed to see that during the entire exchange, the officer's hand rests on the butt of his gun. Would he have drawn his weapon if the lady had refused to cooperate? She has done nothing wrong – only had the misfortune of checking the box next to "Yes, I will attend" and dropping the reply card in the mailbox.

Stuart returns his attention to his wife, who seems to be unaffected by what has just transpired. She is looking up at a chandelier but, Stuart is almost positive, not really seeing it. There is a haunted look to her that he, unfortunately, recognizes, and in that moment, he knows that their marriage is over. Oh, there will be no divorce, but the woman that he married is most certainly gone.

He'd thought that attending the wedding would be a good thing. It had been months since Dawn had left the house to go anywhere other than the cemetery, so when he saw that she'd received an invitation, his first instinct was to throw it away. But she caught him in the act of ripping it open and made her first attempt at a joke since Bobby died.

"That's a federal offense, you know."

Startled, he looked up from his spot at the kitchen island. She was in the doorway, wearing what he'd come to think of as her uniform: holey old college t-shirt, sweatpants, and a pair of their son's gym socks. But for the first time in a long time, Stuart saw a flicker of his wife in the eyes that gazed at him from across the room, and he felt his heart lighten ever so slightly with the first glimmer of hope. Maybe they *could* come back from this. Of course, things would never be the same, and they would have to redefine "normal." But

perhaps they could navigate through the loss of their son without losing each other.

"Are you okay with having a criminal for a husband?" he asked.

"That depends." She joined him at the island, gently pried the envelope out of his hand, and removed the card inside, her eyebrows rising as she read it. "Were you going to tell me about this?"

He floundered on various responses before settling for honesty. "No."

The hand that wasn't holding the invitation reached out to caress his unshaven jaw. "You don't have to walk on eggshells around me. Every little thing doesn't have the potential to send me spiraling into collapse."

As optimistic as the sentiment was, Stuart wasn't so sure of its reality. Dawn had spent months floating through their suddenly silent home like an apparition (that is, when she could bring herself to get out of bed) and the slightest injustice, real or perceived, would result in a meltdown followed by a withdrawal so profound that it bordered on catatonic. "Who are these people, anyway?" Stuart asked to expunge the thought of his wife's breakdown.

"A couple of interns we had a few years ago. They were...interesting."

"Interesting?"

Dawn gave a little laugh. "I guess I was looking for something more politically correct than 'weird.' She apparently practiced some kind of Wiccan religion and he was all 'doom and gloom.' And now they're getting married."

"A match made in Heaven," Stuart said.

"If nothing else, their wedding will be entertaining."

"Are you thinking about going?" He failed to keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"Yeah, why not?" she replied with a shrug. "Aren't you curious? Don't you want to cross 'go to a pagan wedding' off your bucket list?"

He was willing to go to *any* wedding, pagan or otherwise, if it meant that he could have his wife back. And if the bride was dressed like a character from *Macbeth*, all the better.

How foolish he'd been, to think that he – that they – would have a second chance at happiness. A wedding seemed like the perfect event to mark their first step towards healing. Here were two people – around the same age that Dawn and Stuart had been when *they'd* gotten married – who believed they'd found their soulmates. And they wanted to stand up before God (or Whoever) and their friends and family and declare their commitment to one another. How inspiring was that?

Now, as Stuart sits at the table with a stranger, he muses over his own stupidity. Up until the point that things took a horrific turn, he felt that everything was going to be okay. Though the bride had dyed her normally blonde hair jet black and her wedding gown was dark red (Dawn and Stuart concurred that its resemblance to blood was no coincidence), it had been a pretty typical wedding. Dawn had actually seemed disappointed. "I thought they'd at least sacrifice a chicken or something," she whispered to her husband as they swayed on the dancefloor. And he briefly closed his eyes, thanking the Universe that his wife was returning to normal.

Then the young lovebirds did something unimaginable, and Dawn immediately lost her recently-acquired grip on sanity.

A plainclothes officer (Does that mean he's a detective? Stuart wonders) approaches Dawn's table. He heads toward the crying man, seems to think better of it, and pivots toward the mute woman under the blanket. "Ma'am, if you'll come with me..."

Dawn continues her silent perusal of the light fixture overhead.

"Ma'am?"

Still no response.

The cop makes to physically help her up and Stuart finds himself on his feet. "That's my wife," he announces.

"It's okay, sir. We're just going to ask her a few questions."

Can't this moron see that she is in no condition to be interrogated? "But you don't under—"

"Please sit down, sir." A uniformed officer, a woman, materializes out of thin air, a restraining hand on his arm. "We've got this under control."

"But my wife—"

"Your wife's in good hands."

"But she—"

"Sir." The hand on his arm exerts more pressure, and Stuart imagines that her other hand is on her weapon. Reluctantly, he retakes his seat, feeling more impotent than ever, including the keen sense of helplessness that followed his son's accident. The supposed detective directs Dawn toward the door, and she breaks out of her fugue long enough to cast a desperate glance her husband's way.

"Where are you taking her?"

"Please don't interfere with our investigation, sir." A nonsensical response.

Defeated, Stuart slumps down in his chair. Time moves like molasses – the seconds are years; the minutes, decades. Finally it is his turn. "Sir, if you'll come this way..."

If they call him "sir" one more time, he might lose his mind.

A handicapped-accessible commode has been converted into a makeshift interview room. Stuart's nostrils attempt to pinch themselves shut against the cloying aroma of toilet bowl cleaner and perfumed hand soap. He lowers himself into a folding chair. The police officer waiting to take his statement is the same one who had appeared ready to shoot the lady at the corner table. "Can you tell me what happened?"

His mind runs through his entire life, from a foggy memory of falling off his tricycle and splitting his lip to meeting Dawn at a grocery store to the day Bobby was born. And then, inevitably, to the phone call he received from his hysterical wife, telling him that their fourteen-year-old son, the center of their world, was gone. Finally, the blistering anger when he learned that the mother driving carpool that day had been texting behind the wheel. Dawn and Stuart's son lost his life because some vacuous bitch couldn't wait two minutes to ask her husband what he wanted for dinner.

The purpose of the carpool was to keep their child safe. Ironically, they'd thought it was too dangerous for Bobby to walk home after baseball practice.

But that's not what the police officer wants to know.

Stuart takes a deep breath. "I was dancing with my wife when I heard the screams."