

The Half-Painted Ceiling

written by Guest Contributor | January 8, 2019



My husband died on a Tuesday morning. It was around eleven when I finished painting the first half of my bedroom ceiling and decided to take a break. I made coffee and was sitting in the dining room watching the previous night's episode of *The Daily Show* on a laptop when the cop knocked on my door. I paused the show and never finished it. The ceiling remained half-painted for two years. It would be at least a month before I could watch TV or read a short magazine article, and longer still before I could follow the plot of a book or movie. Anything that required focus or concentration was impossible. My mind was scattered, frantic, obsessively thinking about how to do this or that: get a job, find babysitters, pay bills, acquire health insurance, make funeral arrangements, thank people for the food they kept dropping off that I couldn't eat. There was so much to do and none of it was what I wanted to do. What I wanted to do was go into a medically-induced coma for a few months until things quieted down.

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When I opened the door and saw the cop standing there, before he had a chance to speak, I had a split second to think. I thought, "Has my inspection sticker expired?" Then I had the terrible thought that something had happened to one of my kids at school. So it was a relief when he said, "Is your husband Jack Spicer?" Jack's car had been towed a few weeks before for some sort of parking violation and in my mind the cop was here to ask me about that.

"Yes, why?"

It never crossed my mind in that split second that Jack had hanged himself in

a hotel room in Connecticut. In fact, if I had been given days and days to think and thousands of guesses, I would never have guessed that. Even if the cop had given me a hint I would never have guessed that. When people say things like, "it floored me," or "the rug was swept out from under me," I think this is exactly what they are talking about.

The cop said, "He took his own life."

It's an odd phrase, "took his own life," as if you could take something that's already yours. And by taking it, essentially end yourself. It's the last thing you can take, your own life. It sounds a little bit passive, and too gentle for what it is. The verb isn't right: *to take*. *Taking* implies possessing or keeping something. Taking your own life is more akin to releasing it, pushing it away, letting it go, although all of those sound gentle too. I get that saying *took his own life* is meant to soften the blow, like saying someone *passed away*, rather than died, but that blow can't be softened with semantics. My husband didn't *take his own life* or *pass away*. He killed himself.

I crumpled. Let me say that I'm not one for dramatic reactions. I come from a family of stoics. Sure, we laugh and cry and get excited about things. We're not robots. But we're not prone to overblown displays of emotion either. We don't shriek with joy or roll on the floor laughing or sob in public. So in a somewhat controlled manner, I folded in half, bent my knees, and lowered myself to the floor. The cop just stood there in my dining room, watching me. I immediately felt terrible for him. This poor guy, a small-town cop in his late-20s who came in to work expecting to respond to some calls, maybe a report of a broken window on Argilla Road; a complaint of loud music in the apartment complex on High Street; or he'd have to move a group of loitering teenagers away from the front of Richdale's. I wondered if he was the guy who drew the short straw. The rookie cop who had to go tell the lady that her husband just killed himself. I wondered if he knocked on the door hoping I wouldn't be home, hoping that he could finish his shift and pass this unpleasant task along to the next guy.

I told him he could leave. He told me it was police policy that he stay with me until someone else came. My immediate thought was to call my husband. That would happen a lot over the first few weeks. I'd be dealing without something very difficult, like purchasing health insurance or getting out of a car lease, and think, "I have to call Jack to help figure this out," and then I'd remember that he was dead.

I know that I tried to dispute what the cop was saying, that my husband had killed himself. I'm sure I said, *that can't be right*, and *are you sure?* I know I asked where and when and how, but not why. Even in my shattered state, I knew that wasn't a question a cop could answer. I both wanted, and didn't want, the details. In the following days, I would gather more details than I could process. I would learn that Jack was wearing a pale blue button-down oxford shirt and tan chinos, socks but no shoes, and a watch on each wrist when he hanged himself, a Cartier and a Rolex. He had carefully packed for a three week business trip and this was only the second day. Would he have bothered to take all those clothes with him if he was planning to kill

himself? I didn't think so. I would learn, when I received the contents of his wallet the next day, that he purchased a Caesar salad at a Panera in New Haven the evening before he died. Was that his last meal, a Panera salad? Is that really what a person who intended to kill himself the next morning would choose to eat? With no dessert? I didn't think so. I would also learn that Jack bought a 30 day supply of expensive vitamins two days before he killed himself. I was desperate for any sign that his suicide was impulsive, not planned. If it was a rash act, then I was somehow less culpable. I hadn't missed the signs because there hadn't been any. Even Jack hadn't seen it coming.

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The cop had shifted a few feet back and now stood in the doorway of the dining room as if to prevent my escape. He seemed not to know what to do with his hands, so he kept crossing his arms and then swinging them back down to rest his thumbs lightly in his belt loops. I called my mother. The owner of the art supply store where she worked part-time told me she was helping a customer and put me on hold. The cop met my eyes briefly, then looked away. He was expressionless, mouth tightly shut in a straight line, lips barely visible, the sort of look you see in official military photos. I waited. After a period of time that could have been anywhere from 30 seconds to 10 minutes, my mother came on the line.

"Hey Jan, what's up?"

There is no easy way to relay this kind of news, no preliminary conversation that's fitting.

"Jack killed himself!" I blurted out.

It was around one when my mother arrived. The cop stood watch while we embraced, both sobbing. He waited a polite few minutes in the room and then told us both he was sorry for our loss, bowed slightly, and backed out the door.



Janet Spicer is a freelance writer who lives in Ipswich, Massachusetts with two teenagers, two cats, and one boyfriend. She spends her time exploring foreign grocery stores, ranting about politics, reading fashion magazines, and drinking wine. Janet recently started a travel blog to avoid working on her novel: janetspicergoes.blogspot.com.