

CAITLIN O'NEIL

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# FLOWERS AFTER THE WEDDING

I am standing in a cemetery holding my bridal bouquet. I think of the day, just after my parents were married, when my father informed my mother that he wanted to be buried in his naval uniform. She agreed, then asked him if they could start their life together before they thought anymore about dying.

My father is buried in that uniform now and buried again this January afternoon under a pristine scrim of snow and ice. My husband of one day goes to the car to grab the ice scraper and clears off the headstone, a gray granite that is flush with the ground, like all the markers in this military cemetery, each so similar from one to the next that at first, we couldn't find my father's stone. I stand holding my bridal bouquet—a mix of white roses, ranunculus, and lilies—that suddenly seems funeral, ready for a different kind of rite, one that I am inventing on this second day of marriage, when the celebration is over and the world has gone solemn and quiet. My husband leans into the scraper, shirring away the ice, revealing my father's name.

This stone wasn't where I was supposed to be standing next to my father. I'd done that walk yesterday without him, my uncle standing in as he had for my mother when she married my father, creating a family tradition that none of us wanted.

I'd spent the six months of my engagement feeling disappointed that my