

Thorns

She closed the door, a final click from the latch. Deep breath. Long, slow out. It was the first time that she had been alone since he died. In front of her were chairs, table, the same old. The same old pictures on the walls. Across the mantelpiece were all the flowers, roses and lillies mostly. She didn't have enough vases so some were in pots. Their sickly, floral smell hung around her.

The afternoon had been a struggle, full of words: the wonderful man he had been, his work, his family. They had set his golf clubs in one corner, sung his favourite hymn. She pulled at her sleeve with one hand, an old habit coming back, her brow wrinkling.

The house was full of him. There was his armchair; his line of Terry Pratchetts in the bookcase; Mahler's Second still in the CD player. When she breathed in she smelt him, the muddy outdoors when he came back from the golf course, his medication. His voice clung to the walls, his harsh words, the tantrums, curses, screaming rage. She felt him still, holding her, kissing her, her skin crumpling under him, splitting apart, the pain, the blinding pain. She was black and blue again, putting on layer after layer of foundation.

She was unsettled by the difference between the words of the day and her memories. There had been no reference to the great secret that all their friends knew but would not mention. The minister, who knew him better than most, had blessed him and prayed for his soul. Never speak ill of the dead. Never call a spade a spade. Never inscribe, "Wifebeater," on a gravestone.

She stepped forward into the room, now her room. The biggest vase held roses, pink buds just blooming. With a sudden jerk she reached inside and grasped them. She pulled upwards, tearing her hand on the ripe thorns, and dropped the whole, dripping mess directly where she stood. Spilled water ran across the ledge and fell to the floor. Drops of blood ran down her fingers, staining the pinkness of the petals a deep red.