

# Tracey Slaughter

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## the names in the garden

**I do the flowers. I've always done them. They asked me not to this time, they took me aside and they told me, but I still had the key, so I let myself in. I lay them out on the bench like I've always done. I go by feel, I've never known the names. So I lay them all out. To look at which ones can take the weight and which will have to drape. There are some that can stand for days and some can only trail. Some are tough, but then the limp ones could be where the beauty is. But you work that into it. That all comes in to how you see. They're out on the sink and you take a long look and you can see where the backbone is and where there's just threads. Or whispers, I don't know. Bits that catch the light, that's what I'm trying to get at. It just comes to me, when I take a slow look at them, spread that way. The centre stands out, the bloom that takes the eye right down into it, the place that needs to be the heart that all the rest weave round. There's always one that you don't notice in the cutting, that rises out when you take them all in. Even if it takes me a while to find it, I stay calm and just keep watch. And then you see it lift itself out from the rest, and the others just nest in around it where they need to, or link at the base and spray.**

But I'd had to let myself in. And the talk with the pastor had been hard, that they didn't want me to go on doing it. And so I made a mess of it. When I wanted to show them. I wanted to do something that made them stop and hold their breath. And for that young couple, something they could join their hands beside on the day and we could look up from the pews and it would be like the front wall poured with flowers and the whole church could feel white spilling all round from what I'd made. I thought I would. I had the key, and I told myself, I'll do what I always do, and I'll lay them in the good light out the back and if I watch them long enough they'll fall into their shape. I thought I would see, glowing there right on the sink, the core of the thing. I could pick out the soul of it. But I hadn't been let in to the gardens. The people that usually let me come round and do the cutting had said no. The pastor had told me. He said, people were uncomfortable. The families. I said, but nothing was proven. And he said, but as things stand, it looks bad. So I asked if I could just take the ones near the gates. I wouldn't even go in. They wouldn't even have to see me –

though they always used to wave at me when I did the cutting, they used to send their little ones out to help me pick and to carry and they used to chatter away. But the pastor said no, that a clean break was best now for everybody. The families entrusted him to make it clear to me. And I said then I would just kneel down by the fence, where there's even lovely heads that poke out through the bars and I could snip them off and no one would even know I'd been. And when he got short with me I said, my husband never sets foot. He's never even in the same street. It's only me in the gardens. I said, please. It's only ever me.

But he made it clear I couldn't go. Not even near. It was what they all wanted. It had been decided. All those gardens, where they used to let me in to take anything I'd need. All those blooms and the green and the little girls dancing out to keep me company while I moved the fronds and lent down deep to cut low through the stems.

And so when I laid them out I couldn't see it. I did what I always do. But it wouldn't come to me. I took down the bowls and the traps and the oasis and I stared at them too. It was very quiet, except for the long line of humming that comes off the new light. It makes that back room very bright and true, it's a good light for doing the flowers in, but it does get up under the lids of your eyes, a white line of it that feels like grit. After a while, it seems to press right round the back of them, the buzz of it. So you blink and blink. And the bowls don't help too. They have some beautiful vases, my church. So heavy. Like offerings. Some of them you have to pick up and hold like children, the colour of pearls. There's one I like, that's got some finish on it, running down its sides like oil, only white, white oil with a kind of silver clearness that gives you the shivers. Or at least it does me. Like freezing silk to touch. But then it's a chore to pick up. It's a beauty, but a dead weight, and it slips. Or at least I get full of the fear that it will and my heartbeat gets into my hands and makes them dizzy. And once it's packed out, then I have to get help in to do the lifting onto the altar. With all the weight of the flowers wired in, it's too much for an old body like me. I don't have a chance of raising it up.

So I don't know what I was thinking, letting myself in, trying to change what they thought of me. It's just that I'd always done the flowers. So it didn't seem like it could be the end. I hadn't thought

it through, but then I never need to think the flowers through. They just come to me, where they should be, and whether they should push up into crooked knots or they should hang down like a net, and whether they want to drift out and touch lightly as froth or they want to shoot and be twisted. They've always joined for me, in my eye, before I even started to touch them. And I thought for a moment that a flash did come, of how to work it, like the ripples of a star if you were too close into it, like its glory would make you weep but also had a sting to it. But then it went out. Just out, like the dark in its place in my head had always been there. A cold black I couldn't shift was just waiting in my head behind all the beautiful things I used to see. Then I found that I couldn't keep myself steady. There wasn't any calm left.

And I made the mess when I stopped looking and I started to handle them. Because I don't know the names in the gardens where I've always gone, but I know them all by feel. And it was hard to find anything, when they said I couldn't come. I had no sense where to go. I had to go creeping all over, and it didn't seem like anything good was growing. Not where I could get to it, not without asking. And the way the pastor had made it sound to me, everyone felt the same, and I wouldn't be wanted even outside of the gardens, even strangers would know when they looked at me, they would have heard the stories. Only he said, the news, not the stories. As if it had turned into truth already. When it hasn't. I saw that news too. I stood by our letterbox on the day it came and opened the page and it was like the sun went out, and the words had shadows that rushed right through our front yard and I knew when I turned around they'd be all over our house and they'd be there too when I looked down our street. The thick ugly words they use in their headlines, moving down the street like weeds. I think I said that to the pastor even. I said, I knew those stories were spreading like weeds. But I didn't think they would get into the church. But he said he had a duty, he said the feelings of the decent community would be with the poor little girl. So I walked around after that looking for blooms and I couldn't bring myself to ask even when I saw what I needed, not if it meant I had to look at doors opening and decent people staring down in my face and thinking ugly things of me. So I wasn't left with much. And when I found something that gave me some hope it was down in the gully on the river end of our street where I've always shrunk from going. I've never had to go because the gardens were open to me. But now, being shut out, it seemed like the only thing I could do was go down in that gulf. So I made myself cross over. And the fence into it had been broken. And the trees were thick and cramped

me, and the smell soaked into my clothes. And the cold feel got deeper. And the dirt plugged up my shoes and they weren't even dry when I let myself into church later, so I walked it in with me, the smell of that swamp. It was steep down, so everything felt tipped on a slant. I wasn't dressed for it and I tore something I'd kept nice for years. And I had a hard time not getting slumped right into the muck. But I did find flowers there. I'd always known that I would. I'd just never looked.

So I let myself in. And I still had hope, that I'd see something shining come up in my eyes when I looked at them, that I'd bring it from my eyes down into my hands. They hadn't looked in such a poor state, on their bank. They'd looked hardy enough, quite stubby, and they had a rich leaf and a sprinkle of gold in the head. But I could see from the start when I let myself in, that something had happened to them. I don't know when. They were lovely, but you could see that the light had leaked out. There were breaks all through them, and juice came out the crushes in their stalks. The damage was done. It must have been moving them. I didn't notice. I wasn't ready to give up though. And I thought I could anchor them, and make them prop each other up, I thought I could stake them so they didn't give way. So I started to wire them. But the wire seemed to mash right through the stems, and all I had was tangles of wet. I kept sweeping through them and trying to find one more I could brace. Then the next one turned to waste. And all I had made was a pile of shreds. And my hands were stained with the white sap that leached out of it.

I knew that was the end then. It was that slimy milk that came off the plants. You couldn't scour it off. It stained. I just wanted all the foul things gone. I started to push the whole mob of flowers down the bin. They were useless. But I couldn't take the sickly feel of them sliding down my fingers. It showed up in the creases of my hands like it did on the stems, the glint of it sticking in the bruises. And then somehow I started thinking of the day when I married my husband and of how we'd been standing in a halo of stiff white flowers and it was lovely but then he couldn't get the ring to fit. And everyone was looking and he was annoyed and had to get hold of my wrist and push and push and I watched the skin of my finger lift up in red bands and it stung and I bit down under my veil until it slid.

But then I came round. And it wasn't clean out back of church in the good light. The flowers had bled and bled. And I just wanted all the good things kept away from them. Their wet and their stink. And that's when it happened. Because I was in a rush. I wanted all the offerings back in their place again. I wanted to know that at least I'd kept sacred things

safe. And the roar of the bowl blowing open seemed to pound through my ears when I never even felt the sides slip. Everything seemed to go backwards through my wet hands, and my eyes were a shatter of sharp white when I don't know if I ever really watched its body smashing open at my feet.

But if I did, I left the mess. I don't know how, I just left it. And I don't know how I got home, but once I got there I knew that he was gone. I did check. I walked through all the rooms, looking for a sign of what he'd left, and what he'd taken. And nothing had changed. He hadn't touched a single thing. But you could feel that he was gone. He'd just moved out, after all these years, and hadn't paid anything for all the time he's stayed here, like a bad tenant leaving in the night.

So I went outside to the shed where I knew my husband would be. To tell him God was gone. But of course, he was gone as well. Although he had left me to clean up. And they made more headlines out of him too. Perhaps he thought he'd put a stop to that. He could kill the words off along with him. But the words go on and on. The black weeds, there's no end to them. They're like the things they've been bringing up out of that gully, terrible dark arrangements that don't have names. And now there's no place for me, I can't keep them back with white flowers.

I never went back to the church to clean up my mess. But then neither did God.

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