

myself, and I hung on until the spasm passed. And then I began to recreate from memory the contents of the fridge.

## What We Say

I was kneeling at the open door, with the cloth in my right hand and the glass shelf balanced on the palm of my left. She came past at a fast clip, wearing my black shoes and pretending I wasn't there. I spoke sharply to her, from my supplicant's posture.

"Death to mother. Death," she replied, and clapped the gate to behind her.

It had once been a kind of family joke, but I lost the knack of the shelf for a moment and though it didn't break there was quite a bit of blood. After I had cleaned up and put the apron in a bucket to soak, I went to the phone and began to make arrangements.

In Sydney my friend, the old-fashioned sort of friend who works on your visit and wants you to be happy, gave me two tickets to the morning dress rehearsal of *Rigoletto*. I went with Natalie. She knew how to get there and which door to go in. "At your age, you've never been inside the *Opera House*?" Great things and small forged through the blinding water. We hurried, we ran.

At the first interval we went outside. A man I knew said, "I like your shirt. What would you call that colour — hyacinth?" At the second interval we stayed in our seats so we could keep up our conversation which is no more I suppose than exalted gossip but which seems, because of her oblique perceptions, a most delicate, hilarious and ephemeral tissue of mind.

At lunchtime we dashed, puffy-eyed and red-cheeked, into the kitchen of my thoughtful friend. He was standing at the stove, looking up at us over his shoulder and smiling: he likes to teach me things, he likes to see me learning.

"How was it?"

"Fabulous! We cried *buckets!*"

Another man was leaning against the window frame with his arms crossed and his hair standing on end. His skin was pale, as if he had crept out from some burrow where he had lain for a long time in a cramped and twisted position.

"You cried?" he said. "You mean you actually shed tears?"

Look out, I thought; one of these. I was still having to blow my nose, and was ready to ride rough-shod. My friend put the spaghetti on the table and we all sat down.

"I'm starving," said Natalie.

"What a plot," I raved. "So tight you couldn't stick a pin in it."

"What was your worst moment?" said Natalie.

"Oh, when he bends over the sack to gloat, and then from off-stage comes the Duke's voice, singing his song. The way he freezes, in that bent-over posture, over the sack."

The sack, in a sack. I had a best friend once, my intellectual companion of ten years, on paper from land to land and then in person: she was the one who first told me the story of *Rigoletto* and I will never forget the way her voice sank to a thread of horror: "and the murderer gives him his daughter's body on the river-bank, *in a sack*." A river flows: that is its nature. Its sluggish water can work any discarded object loose from the bank and carry it further, lump it lengthwise, nudge it and roll it and shift it, bear it away and along and out of sight.

"Yes, that was bad all right," said Natalie, "but mine was when he realised that his daughter was in the bedchamber with Duke."

We picked up our forks and began to eat. The back door opened on to a narrow concrete yard, but light was bouncing down the grey walls and the air was warm, and as I ate I thought, Why don't I live here? In the sun?

"Also," I said, "I *love* what it's about. About the impossibility of shielding your children from the evil of the world."

There was a pause.

"Well, yes, it is about that," said my tactful friend, "but it's also about the greatest fear men have. Which is the fear of losing their daughters. Of losing them to younger men. Into the world of sex."

We sat at the table quietly eating. Words which people use and pretend to understand floated in silence and bumped among our heads: virgin; treasure; perfect; clean; my darling; anima; soul.

Natalie spoke in her light, courteous voice. "If that's what it's about," she said, "what do you think the women in the audience were responding to?" — for in our bags were two sodden handkerchiefs.

The salad went round.

"I don't know," said my friend. "You tell me."

We said nothing. We looked into our plates.

"That fear men have," said my friend. "Literature and art are full of it."

My skin gave a mutinous prickle. *Your* literature.

"Do women have a fundamental fear?" said my friend.

Natalie and I glanced at each other and back to the tabletop.

"A fear of violation, maybe?" he said. He got up and filled the kettle. The silence was not a silence but a quietness of thinking. I knew what Natalie was thinking. She was wishing the conversation had not taken this particular turn. I was wishing the same thing. Stumped, struck dumb: failed again, failed to think and talk in that pattern they use. I had nothing to say. Nothing came to my mind that had any bearing on the matter.

Should I say "But violation is our destiny?" Or should I say "Nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent"? But before I could open my mouth, a worst moment came to me: the letter arrives from my best friend on the road in a far country: "He was wearing mirror sunglasses which he did not take off, I tried to plead but I could not speak his language, he tore out handfuls of my hair, he kicked me and pushed me out of the car, I crawled to the river, I could smell the water, it was dirty but I washed myself, a farm girl found me, her family is looking after me, I think I will be all right, please answer, above all don't tell my father, love." I got down on my elbows in the yard and put my face into the dirt, I wept, I groaned. That night I went as usual to the lesson. *All I can do is try to make something perfect for you, for your poor body, with my clumsy and ignorant one: I breathed and moved as the teacher showed us, and she came past me in the class and touched me on the head and said, "This must mean a lot to you — you are doing it so beautifully."*

"Violation," said Natalie, as if to gain time.

"It would be necessary," I said, "to examine all of women's writing, to see if the fear of violation is the major theme of it."

"Some feminist theoretician somewhere has probably already done it," said the stranger who had been surprised that *Rigoletto* could draw tears.

"Barbara Baynton, for instance," said my friend. "Have you read that story of hers called 'The Chosen Vessel'? The woman knows the man is outside waiting for dark. She puts the brooch on the table. It's the only valuable thing she owns. She puts it there as an offering — to appease him. She wants to buy him off."

The brooch. The mirror sunglasses. The feeble lock. The weakened wall that gives. What stops these conversations is shame, and grief.

"We don't have a tradition in the way you blokes do," I said.

Everybody laughed, with relief.

"There must be a line of women's writing," said Natalie, "running from the beginning till now."

"It's a shadow tradition," I said. "It's there, but nobody knows what it is."

"We've been trained in *your* tradition," said Natalie. "We're honorary men."

She was not looking at me, nor I at her.

The coffee was ready, and we drank it. Natalie went to pick up her children from school. My friend put in the plug and began to wash the dishes. The stranger tilted his chair back against the wall, and I leaned on the bench.

"What happened to your hand?" he said.

"I cut it on the glass shelf yesterday," I said, "when I was defrosting the fridge."

"There's a packet of band-aids in the fruit bowl," said my friend from the sink.

I stripped off the old plaster and took a fresh one from the dish. But before I could yank its little ripcord and pull it out of its wrapper, the stranger got up from his chair, walked all the way round the table and across the room, and stopped in front of me. He took the bandaid and said,

"Do you want me to put it on for you?"

I drew a breath to say *what we say*: "Oh, it's all right, thanks — I can do it myself."

But instead, I don't know why, I let out my independent breath, and took another. I gave him my hand.

"Do you like dressing wounds?" I said, in a smart tone to cover my surprise.

He did not answer this, but spread out my palm and had a good look at the cut. It was deep and precise, like a freshly dug trench, bloody still at the bottom but with nasty white soggy edges where the plaster had prevented the skin from drying.

"You've made a mess of yourself, haven't you," he said.

"Oh, it's nothing much," I said airily. "It only hurt while it was actually happening."

He was not listening. He was concentrating on the thing. His fingers were pale, square and clean. He peeled off the two protective flaps and laid the sticky bandage across the cut. He pressed one side of it, and then the other, against my skin, smoothed them flat with his thumbs, and let go.