Jaws of Life

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Last Saturday my husband and I found a homeless woman in our bed. It had been raining all day, and at around six I ran up to the Blockbuster on Market. When I came back, our swollen front door was wide open, not having shut behind me as it usually did. The rain spattering dark spots on the Sisal rug that lines our front hall.

When I walked into the living room, I asked David if he had stock in PG&E.

“I hope not.”

“The front door’s been open this whole time,” I said.

“You shouldn’t leave it open. It’s raining out.”

“How did you not notice?”

“Born wrong,” he said.

I put the movie in and sat down. He packed the bong and handed it over. I took my time pulling down a few dainty hits and then gave it back. He fixed himself one while the trailers started. When the movie was over, I stood and said I was going to bed. My face felt rubbery and fat from exhaustion. He nodded and picked up the Harpers and put his feet on the couch where I had been sitting.

I felt along the cool surface of the bedroom wall until I found the light switch and clicked it on. I was still high, and wouldn’t have noticed her if I hadn’t made the bed that day. But there she was: Sandra, Poetess of the Streets. Sandra, Out of Work Paralegal. Sandra, a sopping wet human being in our bed. Her eyes squeezed tight, like a child faking sleep. Her thatchy Mohawk with a few days growth on the shaved parts. On the floor: a red sweat shirt, a large leather purse dark from rain, and two spanking-white -- like she had gone swimming with them on-- sneakers, cheap imitations of cheap imitations.

“How?” I said.

She didn’t answer, and I flick the light a few times. “Excuse me. Hello. Hello.” She finally sighed, then faked a yawn, and pulled the blankets tighter, rolling over so she was facing the wall. Her boney shoulder blade stuck up from the covers. She was brittle skinny. If she wasn’t armed, I could take her.
“Who are you?” I asked.

No answer.

I yelled down the hall for David.

“What?”


“What?” he replied.

“There’s a woman in here.”

“A what?”

“Get off the couch and get in here. I’m serious.”

She turned back to me. “He said I could sleep here.”

“David?”

“He took me here and said go to bed.” I promised myself right there, that if this was David’s idea of a joke, we were over. I turned back toward the living room.

“Did you do this?” I screamed.

His feet hit the floor and finally he was at the end of the hall.

“There’s a woman in our bed,” I said. “Did you put her here?”

“You’re kidding?”

“She says someone did.”

“Dude, no. Seriously, no.” He hurried the rest of the hall.

She turned and put her face into the pillow. The bed seemed wetter than it should from just a wet body. The comforter was translucent and you could make out the dark clumps of goose feathers. It was like someone had turned a hose on it. David, now in the doorway with me, looked at her: “Holy shit.”

She looked back up. She blinked her eyes, Betty Boopsy-like, like she was just waking up and not sure where she was. Ob my what a surprise? There was a disturbance by her head where she had used our five-hundred-and-twenty thread count pillowcase as a napkin. Her mouth looked like she had tried to eat a stick of lipstick.

“What are you doing here?” David asked her.

“Sleeping.”

“Who said you could?”

“We need permission to take a nap?”

“You’re in our bed,” I said.

David and I looked at each other, and it clicked. Who wouldn’t try to get out of that weather? The freezing cold rain. An open door.

There are some mistakes you can’t learn from. And then there are some that teach you something new everyday for the rest of your life. David has taught me how to cook, to not be nervous around Ivy League grads, and how to live
in disillusionment. We go forward by constantly changing, but never attaining, mediocre dreams. This month’s dream is to move to Portugal. He’s blockhead handsome—some think, too handsome to have gone to Harvard. He’s got sandy hair, big shallow-set brown-green eyes, and a large face, which makes him picture well. Until a year into our marriage, he was muscular in that slightly unattractive gym-built way urban men can be. But he’s lost the tone, and is now just big and warm. My smart friends say he’s a catch and my dumb friends (mainly Joliet) would fuck him if unmonitored. But his handsomeness makes him insecure. And he’s been telling me once a week how great our lives will be when his company brings the new and improved Jaws of Life to market. We’ll retire. Move to Portugal, live by the water, and eat mussels and *tapas*. He’ll pick up classical guitar making, learn *bossa nova*, and I’ll do something other than buy media slots for the California Beef Council.

Who knows what I was thinking, but I said she could stay one night.

The next morning David and I were out on the living room couch, awake. We had given her our bedroom. I had my head on his chest, listening to the th-thunk th-thunk of his Ivy League heart, kind of wishing he had put her in there, thinking we smoke too much pot.

Sandra walked in with her shirt off. Her tiny breasts looked like fried eggs and the crinkly skin above them like avalanched snow. The tattoo on her right shoulder was either a sunset or a sea monster climbing out of the water.

“You people are very cool. That was a really nice thing,” she said.

“It’s ok,” David answered, opening his eyes. “The rain must have been miserable.”

“While I was sleeping I dreamt a poem about you. Both of you.”

“A poem?” he said.

“I do this for the special ones. Do you want to hear it?”

Who wouldn’t?

Poem for the People who Live In the Land of the Brightest Love.

Your hearts are disease-free bathhouses.
Your minds are the new gardens of Antarctica.
Vishnu is the issue.
But you are life-time BART passes if BART was life.

For a few seconds she looked like she was thinking of the next line, then dramatically claimed, “The End.” She closed her eyes, dropped her chin, and crossed her arms over her naked chest.

The thing about homeless people is they often seem like normal people un-
til you start talking to them. Then they seem crazy. Sometimes they talk in big loops and say every single thing that pops into their head. Sometimes they get stuck in tight little loops and can't find a way off the most inconsequential inane topic. We took her out to breakfast and she couldn't not tell us her version of her life story. She had been a paralegal until her boss got the hots for her. She didn't like the shelter because the big women were jealous of her tattoos and kept raping her. She was trying to save up enough from panhandling to move to Santa Fe where her younger brother lived with his French wife and ran a ranch with horses that had tails the color of butter. She herself had had marriages but only one was serious.

Since David has gotten involved with the Jaws of Life project, the 'guitar room' has only been a place to lean his guitars. We had an REI blow-up mattress. We told her she could stay for a few days if she wanted.

The Jaws of Life headquarters is an office in the Embarcadero Building, but they have a warehouse in South San Francisco where they test prototypes. On the weekends we get stoned and go rip-apart junkyard Toyotas. We're like ants, cutting doors from cars like leaves from trees.

The big improvement is that it runs on batteries. The existing Jaws of Life are pneumatic. The Hurst Company of Lancaster, Pennsylvania invented the original and quickly cornered the market in 1972 after years of making jacks for race cars. But there is a big problem with pneumatic Jaws of Life: They are tethered to an air compressor that's connected to a combustible engine. The user can only venture as far as the air hose allows and wherever the Jaws of Life go, you also need to hump a 150-pound generator. This makes them useless for entering burning buildings to lift a fallen brace off a person or for climbing down into a ravine to dislodge someone from a crumpled minivan. With a battery-powered Jaws of Life, you can go anywhere to save people.

A GM engineer in Lake Forest came up with the design five or six years ago after an abandoned coalmine gave out while being explored by his little boy. The man and his neighborhood watched and listened helplessly for over two hours as a trestle squeezed the son lifeless. The engineer had worked with electric cars at GM and got a prototype together on the weekends in his basement. But he couldn't attract any seed money until 9/11 came and renewed interest in the emergency medical tools industry. For a few hundred thousand dollars, David's company bought the rights to his Jaws of Life. The GM engineer was quickly replaced and the headquarters moved out here where they could keep an eye on things.

A world bracing for disaster is ripe, and if they get it to market, David's company will sell the new and improved Jaws of Life at over $20,000 a piece to the
We both had to work on Monday. Before going to bed that night, we flat-out asked her if she was going to steal from us while we were gone.

"I wouldn't steal from you unless someone had a gun to my head."

"You can't let anyone else in either."

"I wouldn't do that. People don't come where I go."

"Okay. We're going to give you a key, but if you screw us, you're screwing the People who Live In the Land of the Brightest Love. Those are the people you don't screw. You know?"

"That is one of the things I know know. I know that with all my heart."

In the morning as I walked to the BART stop on 24th, the fog still lingering above the rooftops of the Mission, I found myself weeping. I had always thought we lived in the Land of Yeast Infections and Small Luxuries Paid for by Constant Anxiety. The last time I had done anything 'good' was when I donated $50 to the Red Cross right after 9/11 and that turned to crap because they put me on their pledge list and spent my entire donation calling and junk-mailing me for more donations. I had paid $50 to kill trees and bug myself.

I was faint with hunger but also felt if I ate a single bite of anything my butt would literally pop. My tears were partially because of my blood-sugar level and partially because it seemed Sandra might be saving us. I like my job in advertising, and our friends are cool, still earnest and comfortable with their credit card debt, but since I turned thirty-three in September, I've felt a tiny distinct emptiness, like there's this small mouth inside my chest, open and closing for want, but I don't know of what. At our last cocktail party, I let one of David's co-workers talk to my breasts about mortgage rates for over an hour. I have found myself thinking about when we'll get the next William-Sonoma catalog. Our lives are clearly shrinking. We're becoming little people. The interesting things are being replaced with necessary. People call us, and we call them, less. The dinner parties are fewer and further between because we never have any new anecdotes. The longer we go without others, the more pressure we feel to have a good time when we're with them. You would think it would make us closer, but the distance between David and I seems to grow in direct proportion to the distance between us and the rest of the world. And this, saving this homeless woman, helping Sandra out, it seemed to me like something that could puff us back up. As I walked by Que Pasa, I pictured our life, our marriage, as that two-story-high balloon creature outside the car dealership on 14th and Valencia being inflated, and Sandra, at the creature's foot, blowing until her cheeks were rosy. We were going to have an incredible dinner party story.
Work that first day went very well. I stayed away from Sherri and Niall. I sat down at my desk, turned off my phone, ignored email, and made a list of the little projects I had been blowing off for months. Then I methodically worked through the list. One task at a time. No skipping around. Staying off the phone. No emails to people I hadn't talked to in four months. No Googling college roommates to make sure they hadn't yet made it. I focused and plowed through the list and at the end of the day it felt, for the first time in weeks, like I had earned my keep.

When I got home, the apartment was full of a warm steam. Every window was covered in condensation. In the kitchen, Sandra stood in front of the stove, a pot of water on each burner, watching them boil. She had shaved off her Mohawk.

"There's a mouse in your house," she whispered, "Shhhhh," then motioned with her eyes toward the wall behind the oven. "Can't get to him with the broom."

"A mouse?"

"Shhh." She tiptoed to the side of the oven, waved me over, and pointed down. There was a wet mouse having difficulties on a glue strip. It was partially hidden by the gas pipes that came from the wall to the oven, but you could see it well enough to see it was shivering with fear. She lifted her eyebrows and put a finger to her lips. Then she took one of the pots of boiling water from the burner and dumped it on the mouse. Steaming grey water sloshed out from under the stove carrying a smooth wooden spoon and dark little islands of lint. After a moment of frantic twisting and shaking, the mouse stopped moving. Sandra got on her knees, reached back in there, and pulled the strip out.

That night after the lights in the guitar room had been off for over an hour, I shook David awake and told him that maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

"It was a mouse," he said. "I'd been meaning to set some traps for months."

"But you wouldn't have poured boiling water on one? That says something about her, doesn't it?"

"It says she's resourceful."

"Or sadistic."

"You want me to kick her out right now?"

"No, but she's got to go soon."

"Well yeah, of course, but let's just give her a few days. Everyone could use a few days off."

I rolled over facing him. He was a lump of comforter up to his chin, then he was a dark delicate silhouette with large heartbreaking lips. His eyes were closed, but I could make out the flickers of his long, almost womanly, eyelashes. He looked so calm and at peace with this. I wanted to curl around him and float on that peace. I wanted to trust everything and felt a slight pang because I didn't.
wasn't being true to our good karma. I was being poison. If this went wrong, it'd be because of my doubt.

"Could we not smoke pot for a few weeks?" I asked.

I saw his lips smile. "In exchange for what?

I reached over and into his boxer shorts. "Anything." And gave it a little squeeze.

"Yeah, sure. Let's take a break." He turned to me and I saw the wet glimmer as he opened his eyes. He asked if something was wrong.

"No. No," I said. "This feels like an opportunity, and well, I guess, I just don't want to blow it."

"Sandra?"

"Yeah, this is kind of crazy isn't it? Like joining the Peace Corps or something, just some big thing that could change us."

"We shouldn't change," he said, and lightly ground into my thigh. I pulled myself on top of him, guided him inside, and wrapped around him for a position he calls 'Minimalists in Bed'.

On Tuesday night we took Sandra out for Vietnamese at the Sliding Door. While we were waiting for our drinks, I asked Sandra how her day went. Before we left that morning, she said she was going over to The Church of World Truth in the Tenderloin where she worked sometimes as a custodian.

"I've been thinking about it," she said, "and I think my problem is that I never know a good thing when I see it. I just let life overwhelm me. I always run from the good things. I don't ever have it easy and that can't be from just bad luck. It's got to be my fault. And I think you guys are a good thing and I'm a fool if I don't embrace it. I'm going to stay."

"Stay?" I said.

"Yeah. At first I didn't want to. I was just soaking wet. But I've thought about it and I'd like to stay, for a while. Maybe until I go back to school."

David saw me waiting. "Is our apartment that big? I'm not sure we'd all fit," he said.

"Your apartment? It's huge. It's beautiful. Have you ever lived in a car? A Pacer or one of those foreign jobbies? Or a refrigerator box? Your apartment is great."

"But we might need that room."

"What, more guitars?"

"No," he looked to me, "but," he paused, "we're thinking about a baby." He paused again. "That would be the baby's room. Maybe we can help you get government housing?"

"A baby? You two? You're going to be a mama!" Pointing at me. "That's so
great. When?"

I looked at David. This was his grave. "Well," he answered, "soon."
"When? How far along? God, do I miss my baby."
"Well she's not pregnant yet, but soon."

"I don't want to move in forever. I'm sure I can get back on my feet before the baby shows up. Plus, I know all about babies. I could give you a hand. There's so much to know. You're going to need someone to massage your butt."

"We'll think about it. We'll see," I said, but wondering if that last part was an underhand insult.

Sandra smiled at me, starring a few second too long. I looked away first. David and I needed to huddle before negotiating this one further. We successfully stayed off the topic of her moving in more permanently for the rest of the dinner.

In bed that night David said he'd have another talk with her and if it came to it we'd change the locks. As I waited for him to say something about the proposed baby, my eyes adjusted and the ceiling went from black to grey, and soon his breathing was rhythmic and shallow, and he was asleep.

After Harvard, David had spent a year in Manhattan working as someone's assistant at Merrill Lynch and, as he told me one night during an Ecstasy-fueled truth session, trying to measure his worth by how much trouble he could drink himself into and how many non-Caucasian women he could have sex with. One day after watching a documentary on Solzhenitsyn, he woke up and decided he was going to run a marathon and write a book. He read in a magazine that some incredibly high percentage of Americans say they want to do both. He decided he was going to do both in six months. He stopped going out every night. He broke up with June, who he describes as "one of those really clean, alert Asian gals." He got up at 5:30 and wrote five pages before work and in the evenings trained in Central Park. At the end of six months, he ran the NYC Marathon and had a three-hundred-and-fifty page novel finished. Through a Harvard friend of a Harvard friend he got the novel on the desk of an editor at Grove/Atlantic and miraculously they published Confident They'll Be Mistaken for Gods. I've read it. It's intertwined stories based around different people drowning in one of the Finger Lakes. It's not going to win any prizes, but still... My Husband the Novelist, and he's so smugly blasé about it, it sometimes gives him a Martian quality. Then he drove across the country. After spending a few months bartending in Whitefish, Montana, he ended up here in San Francisco. He had decided the only way he was going to be able to live the life he wanted was if he had money. Montana was nice, but it was nothing if it wasn't a retirement home for college kids. He said
that after the marathon and novel, he suddenly knew he could do anything, so *doing things* couldn't possibly be the point. He said the only reason humans get things done is because they know they're going to die. He didn't want to live like that. He wanted to live as if he wasn't going to die. He wanted to eat well, have lots of sex, and experience beautiful things. With the help of a family friend in New York, he joined Blackboard as an analyst. The *Jaws of Life* is the first project where his arguments were the main impetus for the deal.

Blackboard is full of Ivy Leaguers, but I can tell that my friends, especially my male friends from before our marriage, hold him with contempt for going to Harvard and his seemingly effortless snagging of a well-paying job while most of us temp-ed in one form or another for years when we first got to San Francisco. After a few drinks they defer to him on difficult questions, like *How long does it take to drive to Fallon, Nevada?*, and when he doesn't know, they gloat as if they won a personal victory.

On Wednesday, he beat me home, which is rare. He and Sandra were sitting at the kitchen table drinking a bottle of Zinfandel. There was a lemon-garlic chicken roasting in the oven. Sandra had the course catalog to San Francisco State out. She had called her brother in Santa Fe and if we would talk to him, she thought he would agree to front her the money, as long as he wrote the checks directly to the school. Her voice was crisper and had almost the hint of an English accent. She kept making up words and using big words incorrectly. She was going to *attribute* to our household and take over all the cleaning and cooking. She referred to us as Ms. Nancy and Mr. David.

"This is insane." I said that night in bed.

"That chicken was good. And those carrots? I usually hate carrots."

"Seriously."

"Dude, I don't know, but so far, I think she's fun. Problems are only problems if we can't adapt to them. But it's up to you. If you aren't cool with this, that's fine."

"Fun? The topless poetry?"

"No, just all of it. Watching her try to figure out her life. Listening to her talk. Her life had been so fucked up. It's inspiring. I think it was Paul to the Romans, *We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak.*"

When he said this, he spoke with the same tickled tone that he did when we first met and he used to say, *That's so cool you're from Texas.*

By Thursday morning, her hair had grown in a little. Her skin still had this ashen quality but her thinness and large eyes made her look Eastern European
or a little like a sexy, battle-hardened Sigourney Weaver in Alien. When I was leaving, she asked me if we had a footstool; she wanted to remove the stains on the bathroom ceiling.

I finally told Sherri and Niall about her. They had all kinds of concerns, mainly that she'd kill us. They blamed David, like Sandra was an extension of his vanity. Sherri said, *Helping is tricky. It's a fine line, but there are some people you help and some people you run from.* I told them what David told me. We were embracing the Universal Spirit. We were putting in our two cents. Saying we think people are good. We like people. Except people, like most Republicans, who think people are bad. Those people probably are bad. You've only got yourself to go on. But Sandra clearly wasn't a Republican, and she would be on our good karma vibe and be cool and not steal anything or screw us over, because we were cool. We were the People who Live In the Land of the Brightest Love. By doing this nice thing, we were paving over the possible bad things a homeless crack-head might be capable of doing; we were unbalancing the scales of good and bad.

Later that day Niall sent me an email inviting us to his place for a sushi party on Saturday.

It was pouring on Thursday night. Like the night she arrived, strings of cold rain. We had finished a quiet dinner of home-made gnocchi with okra and caramelized onions that she and David had made. I was feeling a little rundown and didn't talk much during the meal. She was wearing a lime green blouse, which was definitely mine and something I planned on addressing after a little caffeine. As I was getting ready to clear our plates, she poured the dregs of the wine into her glass, stood up and said, "Nancy, we've got to tell you something."

I looked at David and raised my eyebrows. "We?" I asked. David rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"David and I," she said.

"Don't do whatever you're doing," David said.

"We like you a lot. And are glad we've been able to help you, but I think you're ready to get out on your own. We'll give you some money to get you going, but I think you need to try and make it without us," she said. "The little bird needs to spread her wings."

"You're funny, Sandra."

"You're funny too Nancy, but you're beginning to cramp our style."

"And you're beginning to need to find the door, you fucking fruitloop," I said.

"Sandra, what's going on?" David asked.

"No David, I'm too tired to deal with this. I want her out. Right now," I
said.

"It curves to the left. We've been doing it," she said to me.

"I'm not kidding around. This is over. You need to leave. This minute," I said.

She slammed her wine glass down on the table and waited like a toddler to see how I would react. She had become beautiful over the week. I could see that. Her skin, which initially looked porous and rubbery, had softened. She glowed, dewy and fresh. She had been delving into my $35 an ounce Clinique moisturizer. I was borderline bulimic with a huge ass. It had to have crossed his mind.

I turned to him. "Get her out. I need her out of here, David. You did this. You encouraged her."

"Everyone should just calm down. Sandra, what's going on?"

"I told you," she said. "I can't live with her anymore. I want to be alone with you. I need to be alone in order to concentrate on school. I need to study."

When you don't care anymore, everything is obvious. You would only get to a place like Portugal by losing what you have. That zero-sum game business. I got up and walked into the guitar room. I picked up her crappy leather purse, her growing pile of clothes and the S.F. State application and brochure. I kicked his '58 Fender until it fell off its stand and wedged against the wall. I continued until the neck crunched. I walked down the front hall and opened the door and tossed her crap into the wet street where it fell lamely three or four feet from our steps.

The biggest hurdle with getting the Jaws of Life to market is proving the product in real-life situations. Your average fireman isn't going to run into a burning building with a beta. Not many station chiefs are willing to tell someone's mother, We were trying something new at your son's apartment.

When I came back, Sandra was standing on our small kitchen table kicking at David. "You just want to fuck me," she kept saying. "I know you. I know all about you." He stood back with his hands up like he was holding a dog at bay.

"Sandra, this is over," he said. "It's okay. But you've got to get some help."

"Oh, you... It's oooookaay." she mimicked him, in a pansy voice. "It's oookaay.... You, out-of-towners are all the same. You all smell alike. You out-of-towners."

She was only addressing David. She was biting her lower lip to hold back laughter. Her face looked like it was going to explode with mirth. Her kicks were getting higher, above her head, inches from the ceiling, like a Rockette or a Cossack. Her arms were slicing the air. It all seemed too big for our little kitchen.

"No kicking," he said.

David cross-armed me away from her, pulling us both to the wall, giving Sandra's dance berth. She was haloed by the ceiling light. And her skin dewy. I was mad and a little frightened, but I couldn't help but appreciate her beauty. As she slowed, a different, less crazy smile crossed her face, knowing she had us, or at least me. She pulled on the blouse with both hands, and the buttons popped off effortlessly and tinged against the stove and walls. Her small breasts had firmed. The tattoo was a sunrise.

"I can make you both feel good," she said. "We could do something interesting."

Would that save us? I thought. She wasn't really a person. Not like Joliet. It wouldn't be adultery.

As if she heard my thoughts: "I won't take your husband. I can serve you both equally."

There will be a minute at the sushi party tonight when David and I jockey over who will tell the story. They're my friends so I'm already better positioned. I won't admit to having considered it. I'll probably glibly end with something obvious: Don't invite schizophrenic homeless people into your apartment, or, Beware of fixes that work for both marital and social problems. Ha, ha, ha. But what will Mr. Ivy League's punch-line be? In convincing Blackboard to get behind the battery-powered Jaws of Life, he had to look at other angles. An obvious one was to lobby for a law that would require every large building be equipped with a Jaws of Life on each floor—like axes used to be—so that in the future when buildings are burning or collapsing, the people inside would have a way past impassable objects. I will look at him as he says, We should have kept her. We all need something to make us feel alive, a pinprick each morning. If people like us, people with resources, don't, then who? My friends know he wrote a novel and let him get away with crazy-talk, but I'll have to say something. Who cares that they're my co-workers. I am your pinprick, I'll say, grabbing his large hand, but you need to be the calm for my furious heart. Let me be your impassable object. Let me be the thing you cannot do.