

Jaws of Life · *David Edwards*

EVELYN TAKES A REST from putting the Christmas tree back in its box. She sits at her dinette by the front window of her 14 × 60 Marlette Expando. She's sitting in her swivel high-backed chair which faces the Mediterranean style console television that angles across one corner of the room. Her back is to the refrigerator, sink, stove, and cupboards. She's gotten most of the ornaments wrapped and back in their own box. She's having a hot chocolate and a piece of homemade cheesecake left over from last night when she and Harold, her boyfriend, celebrated New Year's Eve.

Evelyn is an attractive woman with thick, dark hair done in large curls close to her scalp. She's wearing a loose red sweatshirt and black stretch slacks. The snug fit of the slacks accentuates the smallness of her lower legs and the largeness of her upper legs, thighs and belly. She wears a bra that shapes her breasts into pointed cones and holds them erect. She has tiny hands and feet but likes large rings; one, a large turquoise stone in an elaborate silver setting, covers the fingers of her right hand that guides a fork with cheesecake toward her lips. Her lips are full and sensuous even without the help of lipstick. Naked, she is a remarkable landscape and, somehow, reminds Harold, a Swede, of his ancestral home, which he's never seen except in photographs.

Evelyn gets up and slides the tree toward the couch away from the large window between the couch and TV. Now she can see out back, too. She looks out the back window and sees an open expanse of white that over the past few weeks has covered the stubble of harvested corn surrounding her trailer on three sides. Her garden plot is nearly buried, too, except for the bulbous, gnarled stalks of frozen Brussel sprouts. Nearly a quarter of a mile away is the edge of Bill Hodges' woodlot, which appears and disappears as the wind blows snow across the field. As the wind drives the snow, the dark limbs and trunks of the sugar maple and beech streak and fade only to reappear a second later. Evelyn is mesmerized by the snow, and from her tropical environment, she imagines her window as another type of TV or she imagines her dinette as a table in the VIP dining car. The wind catches in the metal siding of the Marlette. It whistles and sighs. The woodlot fades, disappears, and reappears. For her it is almost like paradise.

At any rate, she knows that the next few months are as close to paradise as she'll get right now. The propane tank is full, her TV works, the trailer skirting is tight, and the guy wires on the antenna tower just outside the window are taut.

From her chair at the dinette she presses the "on" button of her remote control box and flips through all four channels as if she were leafing through a magazine. She finds a clear picture on each one, and, satisfied, switches the set off.

Besides, the ten o'clock news is over on the radio and it's time for WLDR's "Instant Ads" program. Not that she needs anything. She's listening for Harold who's looking for a pair of fifteen inch tires for his truck and some snowmobile parts, mainly a new track for his old Bombardier Ski-Doo. But for herself, she listens to the voices of the callers, and if she hears a Lake Ann exchange, she tries to figure out who it might be. It's as much fun as a game show, and she has the phone book right there so she can check and see if she's right.

Now that she's settled in for the winter, there's only one problem left to solve: how to get her hair done. That problem, which she is anxious to get out of the way, prompts her to think of calling Virgie. Before she picks up the phone, it rings, and it's Virgie. Evelyn says, "Why, I was just reachin' for the phone to call you! Sometimes I wonder why I even have a phone."

"Well, I suppose we won't be seein' you till spring," Virgie begins. "No," says Evelyn. "I'm gettin' settled in all right. And I'm ready, believe me. Them holidays nearly wore me out."

Virgie has a whiny voice. She runs through a litany of ailments, some due to overeating, some due to the weather, and some due to old age. Evelyn humors her and gives her what advice she can. "Take aspirin" she says. "They thin your blood, and they're good for your arthritis, too." Her voice is calm and sympathetic.

"I just don't see how you can live way out there all by yourself. And don't expect me to come see you neither, the roads the way they are," says Virgie, off on a tangent. Virgie lives by herself in a big drafty house in the village of Lake Ann. She never can afford to keep it warm enough.

"Why, Virgie, it's livelier than anything out here. It's a regular party. Bill Hodges stops by for coffee when he brings my mail; Harold's out here every Tuesday; and I got my TV, radio, the monitor, and the phone. Sometimes I just have to unplug everything for a while and take a nice long nap.

“Just a minute, Virgie,” Evelyn says. She sets the phone down and tilts over toward the radio. She quickly jots down a number on a piece of paper. “Okay,” she says, “I just had to get a number from the radio for Harold. Look, Virgie, do you think you could drive Beth out here in a week or so to set my hair?” Evelyn asks.

“Who’s going to see you way out there?” Virgie plays with her now that she’s got an angle.

“I never let my hair go, and I ain’t going to start now. Beth’s always done it, but she ain’t got a car anymore. The county keeps the road plowed, and Harold keeps my drive open. You can drive right up to the landing, and I’ll get Harold to buy the right kit. And I’ll make up the best lunch.”

“I hear Beth ain’t feelin’ very good,” says Virgie.

“She never is feelin’ very good,” says Evelyn.

“What might you cook?”

“I’ll surprise you,” says Evelyn.

I don’t know why you just can’t get Bill or Harold to bring you to town and get your hair done like a normal person.”

“Sweetie, I’ll fix you a dinner you won’t forget. With dessert, of course.”

“Well, I can’t promise when, but if we get a break in the weather, and the roads clear off, and I can get the car backed out the garage, I’ll bring her out,” says Virgie.

“You’re a sweetheart,” says Evelyn. She’s pleased because she knows that’s as committed as Virgie ever gets.

“And if I’m still alive,” says Virgie.

“Me, too,” says Evelyn with a hearty laugh. “But even if I ain’t, I’d still need my hair done.”

“Especially then,” says Virgie and she laughs, finally, in spite of herself.

Evelyn puts her hands palm down on the wood grain dinette and pushes herself up from the chair. All she has to do is turn around with her cup and plate in her hand and she is at the sink where she rinses them and sets them in the drainer.

She looks out the little aluminum window above the sink. She sees the plowed banks of Hodges Road and the circle drive that curves off it and leads right up to the front steps of her wrought iron landing. She smiles, happy that she’ll be able to get her hair done.

She walks over by the front door to the hallway that leads to her

bedroom and checks the thermostat. She keeps it a tropical 78 degrees. Then she goes down the aisle behind the couch toward the door to the expando unit. She keeps her deep freeze out there, and she thinks she'll pull out a beef roast to thaw for supper. She opens the sliding glass door to what used to be the living room but now is just a summer porch and storage room. She lifts the cover of the chest freezer and fumbles around the white, wrapped packages. In addition to the meat, the box is stacked with frozen vegetables from her garden. She takes a bag of green beans, too, shivers, and slides the glass door shut behind her. Just inside the glass door, is a large closet with two louvered bi-fold doors. After Mick, her husband, died, she had it converted into a pantry. She takes the meat and beans and sets them in the sink; then she comes back to the pantry and opens one of the doors. The rich glow of fruits and vegetables stored and sealed in glass pint and quart jars, envelopes her. She must have put up fifty quarts of tomatoes alone. She reaches for one. The red and orange glow is reflected in her face and gives it a lifeglow normally reserved for the faces of saints or the Virgin Mary.

Evelyn feels that almost everything she does the rest of the year is just so she can enjoy the next three months, and the bulging pantry and full freezer are a testament. What slack there is in her own sources she takes up by purchasing cases of canned goods such as mushrooms, lima beans, and pork and beans at the Spartan Harvest Sale each October. She stores winter squash, onions, potatoes, and carrots back in her cool sewing room. She buys a hundred pound sack of sugar, and a fifty pound sack of flour. The resulting abundance seems better than any bank account.

Evelyn has lived like this since Mick died five years ago February. He had come in from shoveling snow, and then sat in his chair to watch a hockey game. He appeared to doze off. When Evelyn couldn't wake him for dinner, she called the Rescue Squad. Seconds later, she heard the call come over the monitor that Mick kept by the TV. He was a volunteer fireman and responded to nearly every call. When she heard the call over the monitor which began as a series of electronic yelps and barks of varying pitches, she thought or hoped that Mick would suddenly jump up and grab his felt packs and Carhart jacket. He'd run out and warm the truck while she listened for the location of the call. Then she'd open the trailer door and yell out the address; Mick would speed away, the yellow flasher on top of his pickup throwing light on the snow.

But as Mick sat in his chair, and the dispatcher's voice said, "Hodges Road, Mick Cranston place, Rescue Squad only," Evelyn felt hollow. For the first time ever, she felt claustrophobic and chilled inside the metal Marlette that always seemed so lively when the monitor began to yelp.

At Mick's funeral, the fire chief told Evelyn that she could keep the monitor "for company," and it sits as before on the corner shelf above the TV. On top of the monitor is a picture of Mick kneeling and smiling beside a gutted eight-point buck. Mick holds an antler in each hand and lifts the head as if he were making the deer look at the camera.

Evelyn never learned to drive. After Mick died, she sold his pickup and began walking down to the mailbox to get her mail even in the worst weather. Her box was about a half mile down Hodges Road at the corner of C. R. 643. Both she and Bill Hodges had their boxes there. She'd take her time getting dressed to go out, and then slowly and carefully walk down the snow-packed, icy gravel road. The round trip could take an hour and a half.

But one day in March, just a year after Mick died, when she had to stretch across the dirty, icy snowbank and reach way back in to fish out a letter, she slipped and down she went. She lay by the edge of the road unable to right herself. Then Bill Hodges came along in his red International pickup. He went by her about two hundred feet, then hit the brakes. Evelyn could hear him ram it into reverse. Evelyn had on her red car coat and black suede boots with white fur trim. She'd bought them at Meijer's last time Virgie had taken her shopping in Traverse City. Bill left his truck idle in the middle of the road.

"Brightest spot of color I've seen in a long time," said Bill. He offered Evelyn his hand and tried to help her up. He was tall and wiry and couldn't get a good footing. "Let me get a better grip," he said, embarrassed, as Evelyn settled back onto the side of the road. "Didn't bust nothin' when you went down, did you?"

"Just can't get my legs under me is all." said Evelyn. She had a white fur hat pulled down to her eyebrows. Her brown eyes looked helplessly at Bill.

"Damn," he said, "I gotta get some help." He went to his truck and pulled an old army blanket from behind the seat. He helped her sit up with her back against the snowbank. "Let me push this under you," he said. He gingerly shoved the blanket under her legs.

“Could you gather my mail?” she asked.

He gathered up the small scatter of paper and envelopes and handed them to her. “My ass is nearly froze, Bill, so hurry up.”

He took small, quick steps on the icy road to get around to his truck; “Be right back,” he said. He spun his tires and fishtailed down the road.

Fifteen minutes later, Evelyn saw him coming back with his tractor with the front end loader. He had it in high gear, and the bucket was bouncing up and down. He’d put on his hunter orange snowmobile suit.

Evelyn rested against the snowbank and read the Spartan store sale flyer and one of the feature stories in the Lake Ann Ad-visor about a young couple in Interlochen that had adopted a wild burro. She thought that was a pretty nice thing for a young couple to do. Bill raised the bucket of his tractor up in the air and pulled to the side of the road so that the bucket was over Evelyn’s head.

He set the brake and got off the tractor. He took a wide strap with a big metal ring on each end from behind the tractor seat. Then he pulled off a short section of towing chain. “Have you up in a jiffy,” he said cheerfully and began working the strap around her middle.

“Quit your fumbling, damn you,” she giggled and grabbed his hand.

Bill grinned. “I gotta get this around you.” He brought the two rings together behind her back. He looped the chain through both rings and then fastened the chain to the bucket. “Ready?” he asked.

“I been ready,” she said huffily. He stood back by the hydraulic levers. With a groan the bucket slowly lifted, and the chain tightened on the strap. Evelyn involuntarily grunted as the belt tightened on her middle and slowly lifted her. The strap forced her arms away from her body and pushed her breasts up to her chin.

“Easy does it,” yelled Bill. Evelyn ignored him and got her legs under her.

“Okay, okay. Stop this thing. I’m up.”

Bill lowered the bucket a little to make some slack and unhitched Evelyn. She brushed herself off and started making small talk about the mail. “Hardly worth walkin’ down for anyway.”

“Sit here in the bucket,” he said, “and I’ll give you a lift home.” He came around to the bucket and made a cushion out of the army blanket.

“Thank you,” she said. He lowered the bucket; she sat down. He tilted the bucket back and lifted it a little. She sat there dangling her legs like a schoolgirl.

She had him in for coffee, a shot of brandy, and a hearty piece of lemon meringue pie.

“Not a word,” she said to Bill as he left.

“I’ll pick up your mail from now on,” he said. “Not a word, I promise.”

And he didn’t say a word either. At least, it never got back to Evelyn. It would have for sure had he told. He started to bring her mail at first snowfall and kept bringing it until she’d tell him that she’d get her own, usually, late March or early April.

Evelyn’s days blend into each other until the idea of a day seems too trivial to bother with. Once a week she pulls another limb off the Christmas tree and puts it into the box. The whole front side is nearly done except for a couple of lower limbs which are hard for her to reach. By the time she fixes three meals a day, does the dishes, and watches a little TV, she’s tired enough to sleep forever. That Virgie, she thinks, is always complaining about how bored she is. Nothing to do but eat, sleep, and watch TV! To which Evelyn can just sigh because for her, sleep, that long, slow, measured pleasure of rest, is what winter means. She and Harold have an agreement: he never sleeps over, but she’ll eagerly lead him to bed. You can make love together, she tells him, but how can you make sleep together?

Evelyn yawns as the last aerial shot of the Falcon Crest vineyards fades from the TV screen, and picking up the switch box from the coffee table, she makes the whole screen fizzle blank. Beth has done Evelyn’s hair, and she looks nice. She takes the multicolored crocheted afghan from her lap; pushing herself up, she helps her pale pink nightgown settle around her. She arranges the pillows and puts the afghan across the back of the couch. She fusses around the living room, straightens the chairs at the dinette, then slowly moves down the hall to her bedroom.

The furnace switches on as she enters the pink glow of her bedroom. The large bed with a pink chenille bedspread is built into the far corner. She turns on the electric blanket, pulls the covers back, sits down, and lets her slippers slide from her small feet. Leaning back slowly, she rolls into bed, settles on her back, and pulls the covers over her.

Evelyn closes her eyes. The blower on the furnace switches on, and the electric blanket switches off. She thinks of Mick, as if unburdening her

mind, preparing for sleep; just as her feet, unburdened, feel as if they are floating. He was good to her when he was alive; and dead, he'd left her forty acres, the Marlette, and nearly eight hundred dollars a month in a pension and social security. He gave her nearly everything she wanted. Probably the only time he crossed her was when they bought the Marlette and she wanted oversize doors. When they went to see it at the lot, she could get in and out all right, but she had to turn sideways; sometimes her breasts would snag on the door jamb or her belly would push her butt into the side and she'd have to back up and start over. That just didn't seem to be any way for a lady to make her exits and entrances. Mick called it cosmetic, and the cost was two thousand dollars more; in fact, it was a whole different model from the one they had already picked out. He just couldn't see it, so they took the regular doors. He promised to modify the bedroom and bathroom doors, which he did. Evelyn pouted over it, and he made it up some way, she'd forgotten how, but somehow, and she was nice to him again, too.

The electric blanket switches on. Evelyn's face muscles relax; her lower jaw loosens and swings her mouth open slightly; her chin settles in folds onto her chest.

Soon she's unaware of all the sounds that measure time; the furnace, the clock, the wind, the refrigerator switching on, then off with a slight shudder. Even the beat of her own heart and the slow steady, sonorous passage of air in and out of her body is forgotten.

She knows she goes somewhere when she sleeps. It's a comfortable, warm-colored, roomy place, and she seems to be always falling slowly or floating slowly upward, comfortably surrounded. It's a peace and a pleasure and whether given by floating or falling, how long and why, it never occurred to her to ask.

And it isn't death, either. Death is a different door next to sleeping and waking. She saw it once and felt herself floating toward it. But it seemed distant, hardly a door at all, more like a suggestion that a door might be there. When she missed Mick the most, that's when she saw it, and couldn't help feeling that maybe he wasn't that far away, after all.

She loved this world of sleep as much as she loved the world of waking. Both were large and real; and in each, once she had surrendered her thoughts to the one thought of forever—I want to sleep forever or, love me, Harold, forever—she would, like an air bubble trapped under water,

under the leaf of a lily, slowly rise inexorably to the surface, and join the element of the living.

Suddenly it's Tuesday again, and Evelyn prepares dinner for Harold. The snowbanks have dwindled; the circle drive is soft with mud made by the frost coming out of the ground. She can't believe it's the middle of March. Thank God, she thinks, that Easter is late; she feels an anxiety and stirring that has been wonderfully absent for the last two months.

At six she hears Harold's truck pull up near the front door. He kills the engine; then a couple of minutes later, she hears him call: "Heidee, heidee, heidee!" She opens the trailer door and takes one of the bags of groceries from his arms. Harold enters shyly, blinking. He's a big man with boyish features, and large hands. He wears a bright, plaid wool shirt, a watch cap, and a dull down vest over the shirt.

"Evenin', Evelyn," he says. She helps him take off his vest. "Sure smells good in here." He bends down and kisses her cheek. "And you smell good, too," he says.

"Jasmine by Avon," Evelyn says softly.

"Tree's gone too, by God," he says as he walks over to the couch. He settles into the couch while Evelyn sorts through the groceries. She never orders, but he always brings, a fifth of Wild Turkey. She pulls that out first and getting a short glass and two cubes of ice, she pours some whiskey and takes it to Harold.

"Thanks," he says and stretches his legs out in front of him.

Evelyn goes back to the groceries; she's silent until she pulls a small mesh bag of grapefruit from the bottom of one bag. "What's this?" she asks.

"Grapefruit," he says.

"I know that. I didn't order no grapefruit."

"Well they looked so good, I thought you could use a few."

"The only time I eat grapefruit is when I'm on a diet."

"Like I said, they looked good. I didn't mean nothin' by it."

"Well, you're sweet," she said, unconvinced.

"Ain't you drinkin'?" asks Harold.

"I am if you're pourin'. But I suppose it's gettin' time to shed a few pounds."

Harold gets up and walks to the kitchen. "You look nice," he says. He

fixes her a tall glass of whiskey and water; handing it to her, he admires her. She's wearing a white frilly blouse that's open at the collar; over it she has a chain stitch angora vest that hangs open and loose. Harold's looming presence, plus Evelyn and her perfume, not to mention the refrigerator and console TV, make the room cozy.

"Say," says Evelyn, "what was that accident about that came over the monitor this morning?"

"You ain't heard?"

"I heard the monitor start screamin' about five this mornin', but they said somethin' about an accident way over by Interlochen, so I went back to bed."

"Yeah," says Harold, "Bill Hodges rolled his truck way over by Interlochen this mornin'."

"Bill?"

"Damn lucky to be alive."

"Drunk?" she asks.

"Sure, and a good thing, too. Probably only thing that saved him. He laid there trapped in the cab maybe three hours. Upside down, top smashed in. Left the bar at closin'; didn't find him till five in the mornin'."

"Got to use the new 'Jaws of Life' though. Would of had to cut him out with a torch if they wouldn't of had it." Harold pours himself a couple of fingers of whiskey.

"So how is he?" asks Evelyn.

"Sore, I imagine, and scared. He hurt his leg, didn't break nothin' though, and he's got a big bruise on the side of his face. Shook 'im up bad. That 'Jaws of Life' is pretty slick. It's got two pieces of steel like a duck's bill shut tight and you slip them into any little opening you can find. It's got its own engine, so you get that revvin'. Then you push the lever and that starts the hydraulic pump that pushes them bills apart. Anything that's up against it just backs away. Why, they got them jaws in between the door and the body of Bill's truck and had that door open in no time even though the top was smashed down to the seat. They screech somethin' awful against that metal. It's the kind of screech that somethin' makes when somethin' that ain't gonna yield has to yield to somethin' that ain't gonna stop till it yields."

Evelyn laughs. "I think you're gettin' your tongue twisted already," she says.

"No," he says, "that's what it's like, by God."

Evelyn and Harold sit on the couch with their TV trays in front of them. Over an hour ago, they finished off pork roast with mashed potatoes, gravy, and creamed corn. Now they're each eating bowls of chocolate ice cream with salted peanuts sprinkled on top.

Harold finishes his and sets the bowl on the TV tray. He leans back, yawns, and stretches his arms along the back of the couch.

"Don't get too comfy," says Evelyn.

"By golly, that was good," he says and scratches his belly. "I only eat that good once a week."

Evelyn begins to get up as if to gather the dishes. Harold reaches over, takes her hand, and pulls her over to him. "Don't you worry about that now," he says.

Evelyn settles next to Harold and eases herself against his shoulder. Her black curls tickle his cheek. With his finger, he lightly traces the curves of her lips. She wets them and touches his finger with her tongue.

Evelyn figures that Bill won't be by, so she decides to go get the mail herself. The sun is out, and the mud glistens wet on the gravel road. The moisture lies in a haze close to the dark wet soil of the corn field.

Evelyn dresses and sits down to pull on her suede boots. Then she puts on her large, red quilted car coat. She opens the front door to the trailer and turning sideways, snags her coat on the frame. "Damn," she says and closes the door. She takes off her coat and opening the door again, she angles an arm and a leg out the door the way she'd seen Harold move her new dining table in; then he turned it in a sort of circle drawing the other legs in behind him.

She tries that with one leg on the landing outside and one arm holding the rail. She tries to make the rest of her body follow, but her ass wedges her belly into the door jamb. At first, she starts to laugh when she thinks how ridiculous she must look, but then she sobers when she realizes that she might be stuck. Someone might really see her. She is more in than out, she reasons. She gets her outside foot against the base of the handrail and pushes. She falls back into the trailer onto her red car coat.

"Lord, lord, lord," she says, breathing heavily. She is so angry with herself that she doesn't eat any lunch, and when dinner time comes, she just heats up a quart of tomatoes, and that's all. She plays with her food and tells herself to chew it slowly. She feels weak all evening and tells herself it is for her own good.

Sleep seems like the only plausible distraction. She turns off the TV early, hurries past the refrigerator, and goes to her bedroom. The pink room glows rosy and makes everything seem okay, but she knows that tomorrow will be another struggle.

At two A.M., just when she's floating the best, the monitor goes off. It yelps in a maniacal frenzy of erratic pitches as if appealing to any living creature. Before she realizes it, Evelyn is in the living room, stunned.

"Rescue Squad, 259 Maple Street; possible stroke victim," the male voice says.

"Beth!" she hisses, recognizing the address.

"259 Maple Street; possible stroke victim."

Evelyn hurries to the bedroom for her robe. On the way past the thermostat, she pushes the lever up, and the furnace responds with a percussive ignition of gas.

"Beth!" Evelyn hisses.

She gets on the phone to Virgie, but she's still in the land of the dead and can't make any sense at all. She calls the hospital and, yes, they say, the Rescue Squad brought Beth in. Stroke? asks Evelyn. Apparently. Bad? asks Evelyn. Don't know, they say.

She calls Virgie back, and she's making sense finally. Virgie, as usual, fears the worst. "Oh, no," says Evelyn and hangs up because she doesn't want to listen.

Evelyn is ravished by hunger and fear. She eats nervously and at random until the soporific effect of a full stomach dulls her. At eight, Virgie calls. Beth is dead. Funeral is Saturday. Family says so.

"They're really going to bury her?" asks Evelyn.

"Ground's thawed," says Virgie.

"Oh God," says Evelyn, and hangs up. She lies down on the couch with a cool, wet wash cloth on her forehead.

Saturday morning Evelyn pulls her black dress from the closet. It's as somber and full as a choir robe. She hooks the dress' hanger over the bathroom door. On the way to the kitchen, she opens the door and pokes her head outside. It's a still, gray day, but the air has a moist, penetrating chill to it. Going to the kitchen, she slowly prepares a grapefruit and some toast without butter.

She sits at the dinette and thinks of Beth alive standing behind her while

Evelyn sat right here in this very chair, with a bath towel over her shoulders. Beth's fingers touched her hair, rolled it into curls, and squeezed the setting solution into the papers. She wonders how Beth will look now with the life gone out of her. She'll know soon enough. Virgie's going to pick her up at one-thirty. Virgie even volunteered, happy to have something to do, even if it is a funeral.

Evelyn's hair is up in curlers. She did it last night while watching TV. She knows the whole town will be there, and she's determined to look good.

At a quarter to one, she picks up the phone and slowly dials the emergency number that she keeps pasted to the back of the receiver. 941-4000. It rings twice.

"Fire and Rescue," a man's voice says.

"Hello, this is Evelyn Cranston. I need the Rescue Squad out here. The furnace is smokin', and I can't get the trailer doors open. It's the only trailer on Hodges Road, yeah, that's right, just before Bill Hodges' place."

Almost before Evelyn hangs up, the monitor above her TV begins to yelp. Once the alert dies, the same man's voice says, "Fire and Rescue to Evelyn Cranston's trailer on Hodges Road. Possible house fire. Woman trapped inside."

As soon as the chartreuse rescue van pulls into her circle drive with its bar of red lights flashing, Evelyn knows that winter is over. Seconds later, the yard fills with an assortment of cars and trucks of the volunteer life supporters and firemen. Then the fire truck arrives and backs in next to the rescue van.

Harold jumps out of the rescue van and is the first one to the trailer door. He pulls on it, and it gives so easily, that he's nearly thrown backwards.

"Jesus, Evelyn, what's goin' on?" he says, lunging into the trailer with as much force as he was thrown backwards. Evelyn closes the door and locks it, ignoring the others that followed Harold up the steps.

"Harold," she says, "I want you to use them 'Jaws of Life' on this door so I can get out of here."

Harold looks at Evelyn and then at the door.

"By God," he says and scratches his head. "I never thought of that. I mean, yeah, sure, I mean, you're sure, aren't you?"

“I’m sure,” says Evelyn.

“What am I going to say?” asks Harold.

“Well, “ says Evelyn, “just say that I got to go to Beth’s funeral and go about your business.” Evelyn turns and goes down the hallway to the bathroom. She enters and closes the door.

Harold steps out onto the wrought iron landing and closes the door behind him. “She’s okay,” he says. “She got scared is all.” He walks down the steps and calls a couple of volunteers to the back of the van. They listen to him and try not to smile. As soon as they can, they break away from Harold and talk to the others who are standing around their cars in loose groups. The farther they are from Harold, the broader the smiles.

Harold unloads the “Jaws of Life” from the back of the van. The engine has chromed heads and chromed, black-knobbed levers. Harold horses the engine over by the landing while a fireman carries the hose and the jaws. The jaws are set into the track on a four foot bar of steel. They’re shut tight together at the one end where the hose connects to the bar. Two handles are welded to the backside of the bar. Harold cranks up the engine. The crowd clusters around the landing.

“Anybody got a short piece of two by four with ‘em?” asks Harold.

“How long?”

“Maybe two feet,” he says. He takes the jaws by the handles and nods at the fireman to push the lever. One jaw slowly and steadily moves up the bar while the other stays fixed. Harold opens the door and puts the fixed jaw against the door jamb. One fellow from the crowd joins him on the landing and holds the two by four against the opposite jamb in line with the approaching jaw.

When the jaw meets the two by four, the pump bears down. The stationary jaw bites into the jamb and pushes the two by four until the metal siding begins to bulge then crumple while studding in the wall breaks; the interior panelling splinters and pops off the wall.

The hinges on the door tear loose, and the door falls away. As the gap widens, the siding begins to strain against the rivets that fasten it to the roof. The roof above the door begins to crease downward until suddenly the siding shrieks loose, and the roof rebounds with a tinny resonance.

Harold signals for the man to back the jaws off. They are nearly at the end of their run, anyway. When the pressure eases, both sides of the door seem to relax slightly. Harold works the jaws free of the torn metal. He

hands the jaws to the fireman who kills the engine and begins to disconnect the hose. A couple of men come over and help him load it back into the van.

Harold steps down among the crowd. He looks at the sharp, ragged pieces of metal and splintered wood. The entrance looks kind of diamond-shaped now as if strong hands had parted an unyielding curtain. "You sure did a number on that door, Harold," a woman next to him says. She has long, stringy hair, wears a nurses' uniform, and over it, has a blue jacket with Rescue Squad written on the back. "What's she doin' in there, anyway?"

"Well, she's probably makin' coffee," says Harold. He goes back onto the landing; with a gloved hand he bends some of the ragged edges of metal out of the way. He kicks at and breaks off a couple of pieces of loose panelling and throws them on the ground. He sees Virgie pull up as close as she can in her 1978 blue Buick Electra. She powers the window down and stares at the ragged hole in the side of Evelyn's Marlette.

Harold goes to the bathroom door and knocks. "Virgie's here," he says.

"Be right there," says Evelyn. The furnace is running continuously now, trying to keep up with the invasion of cold air. "I'll put some Visqueen over the door," Harold calls in.

"You're the best man around," she calls out.

The bathroom door opens wide and the sweet, sad scent of lilac envelopes Harold. He backs down the hallway as Evelyn emerges. She's wearing a small black velvet headpiece with a veil attached to it. It covers her eyes and nose. Harold gets her black wool cape off the couch for her and drapes it over her shoulders. Evelyn pauses by the gaping hole and looks out at the clusters of men and women.

"There's coffee there, Harold; enough for everyone," she says. Her eyes fill with tears, and she fumbles in her cape pocket for a handkerchief. "Thanks, Harold," she says and turns to the doorway.

Evelyn boldly steps out onto the wrought iron landing. She stands there and acknowledges the small groups of men and women standing about their cars. They look at her; the scent of lilac hangs in the still air. She pauses on the landing the way she's seen Nancy Reagan pause for a second before stepping down off Air Force One.

Evelyn turns slightly east, then west before taking the two steps down to the soft ground. She smiles and says "hello" as she passes the volunteers.

Then she walks around the front of Virgie's car to the passenger side and opens the door. She slowly arranges herself on the seat. Virgie stares at her, then puts the Buick in Drive.

A few minutes later, everybody but Harold leaves. He's nailing up Visqueen over the splintered hole. An older brown Chevy pulls in the circle drive. Harold looks at it and sees Bill Hodges' wife driving with Bill in the passenger side.

Bill gets out and limps over to Harold. The bruise on the left side of his face is swollen and purple; the right side looks white and normal. Bill's wearing a black suit and black overcoat. "Where's Evelyn?" he asks, turning the good side of his face toward Harold.

"She ain't here," says Harold as he pounds another nail into the trailer. "She's gone with Virgie."

Bill turns his face away and stares at the cornfield. Harold glances at the bruised side of his face and hardly recognizes him.

"Well," says Bill, "ain't no use me bein' here, then."

He turns and limps slowly back to his wife's car.