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## THE HUSBANDS

BY ERIKA KROUSE

I like to sleep with other women's husbands. I try not to like this. It's not a healthy thing to do, either mentally or hygienically. I see a shrink. I see a gynecologist. But then I sleep with the husbands anyway.

I started big, with my own sister's husband, Patrick. She had always been the stupider one, the uglier one, and she had lost her virginity first. I couldn't let her get away with that one. The first time I slept with Patrick, I seduced him in a bathroom at a party.

I slept with my best friend's husband, Norton. This did not make me feel like a woman. I slept with my librarian's husband, while she was at work, shelving books. Friends, acquaintances, co-workers. All husbands.

After I started sleeping with my sister's husband, she asked if I was seeing anyone special. I said, "Unique, anyway."

She smiled. "What's he like?"

"Oh, you know. Like a man. Male." She kept waiting for more information, so I said, "A mailman."

"Maggie, get serious. Don't you want to find someone? The One?"

"I don't believe in the One."

"Don't you want security?"

I stared at her and then laughed. She laughed, too.

I told her, "I'm the girl in the movies where the guy marries the other girl, the really nice and less slutty one."

My sister and Patrick got married when she was twenty-three. I had dated him first, for nine months, in high school. She had dated him for the rest of high school, and then in college. She had never been with another man.

"Tell me details," she said, eyes shiny. "I need stories of adventure."

"It's not all that exciting. Probably just like what you and Patrick do," I said.

I live across the street from a halfway house. I wave at the inmates at night ("Hi, guys!"). There are squirrels inside

my walls; they run around in the early hours, hiding nuts or whatever. A previous tenant had set fire to a corner of the carpet. My landlord has a tattoo on his face. It says "Jail Sucks."

My sister and Patrick live in a mansion. They have a wall of cabinets dedicated to their crystal and china, with display cases for the prettiest plates. They have three Afghan hounds, petulant as cats. My sister sometimes holds up a tablecloth and says, "Only a hundred bucks! Can you imagine?" She invites me over for dinner and shows me all the things she's bought since she saw me last. While I look at these things, I let the wine pool in the side of my cheek before I swallow it. I'm older than she is by two years.

My sister's name is Sarah Allison Brown. She did not keep her maiden name when she married Patrick. She isn't a particularly interesting sister, but she's mine. Nobody gets to make fun of her but me. I'd kill for her.

I'd also kill her. Growing up, she drove me crazy—so needy and sad. Our parents died in a car crash when she was sixteen and I was eighteen. Our parents were both only children; besides a stray great-aunt, we had nobody at all.

My shrink says that this is why I sleep with the husbands. My shrink says that I have an extreme fear of intimacy, yet I'm fascinated by it, so I choose to witness it risk-free. She says that the husbands represent things to me—fathers, sons, women, power.

My last real boyfriend, the one I introduced to Sarah, wasn't a husband. He was an astrophysicist. When I broke up with him, Sarah shook my shoulders lightly and said, "But there's nothing *wrong* with him."

Sarah told me stories about Patrick. How he wore his socks to bed every night, black ones, even in the summer when the air-conditioning was on the

blink. How he gave her flowers (only) when he was sorry.

Patrick told me stories about Sarah: long, whiny stories about how she had put his suit in the washing machine, or how she baked his birthday cake a day early. Then he'd stop short, saying, "Oh, sorry, she's your sister."

It's hard to love, and it's hard not to. I'm better at the *not* part. Sarah loves enough for both of us. She's one big heart, that thrusting muscle. She's small prey, watching all the time, for only one thing: danger.

Sarah booked a cruise around the Virgin Islands. "It'll be just the two of us, like sisters."

"Bad idea," I had said, but she bought my ticket, so I told my boss that I was going to be sick for a week in April.

I'm a makeup artist for opera singers. I like my job—I like the exaggeration of it. I like painting an eye so that it says, "Yes. This is an eye." An eye for people with myopia—an eye for those of you in the cheap seats.

Patrick and I got bolder. We paid for hotel rooms with his credit card. I went with him to Texas for the weekend and lounged around the room in my underwear while he met with clients. At night, in his slightly fleshy arms, I said, "I don't want to go on a cruise."

"Maybe you'll meet someone," Patrick said.

I sat up by planting my elbow on his stomach. "Oof," he said. "You're so sexy." He rolled over, exposing a triangle of back hair where his shoulder blades met. It had been spreading like a fungus since he was a teen-ager, and he didn't have the courage to wax it, the dexterity to shave it.

Patrick: a quasi-honest man who tried hard, or at least that's how he marketed himself. Sometimes he broke character—rented a porno, didn't bother



*Erika Krouse at the Liberty Landing Marina, in Liberty State Park, New Jersey. Photograph by Katharina Bosse.*

to recycle, slept with his wife's sister.

Once he was walking down the street, holding a small purple rock to give to his niece, when he saw a fat squirrel about ten yards away. He threw the rock and beaned the squirrel on the head, perfectly. He felt guilty when he saw the squirrel, confused, tottering off toward a tree to figure it out or maybe die. But he was proud of the shot, right on the sloped forehead. He was half in love with that shot.

I don't sleep with the husbands for this kind of inside information, or for the compliments or the attention. I guess I do it because the only thing I'm good at is being different. I'm the one who's not the wife, not remotely the wife. Not remotely anyone's wife, ever. That's exactly what I'm good at.

The cruise ship had a bubble-covered tennis court, a lounge called The Lizard, a swimming pool, and one of those shuffleboard games where you slide a puck with a stick for points. The ship got going. We waved goodbye from the deck, although we had nobody to wave goodbye to. Sarah clutched a red silk handkerchief and flapped it.

"You've got to be kidding," I said.

"Patrick bought it for me. He said, 'Wave it and think of me, even though I'm in Duluth.'" She looked at me. "Business trip."

Sarah wouldn't stop pointing out men. "How about that one? Standing outside the ladies' room? Oh, looks like his wife just came out. How about that one with the tie?"

"I don't like his teeth."

"His *teeth*, Maggie? What does that matter?"

"You have to be picky in the beginning, because after you fall in love, you don't care anymore."

"So? Then you're happy, and together."

"God, Sarah. You don't stay that way."

We shared a cubby-size room with a double bed, which was all Sarah could get on short notice. That night, after dinner and a mixer (which I sat out), Sarah read a book with her back to me as I lay there, sleepless, watching the light bulb burn, so steadily for something so fragile.

The next morning, we disembarked for a day at the beach. A suited boy carried around a sign with a bell on it that said "Remember Sunscreen!" Sarah emerged from the room wearing a pink

straw hat and a cotton dress, the kind with the waist down by the hips. She stopped when she saw my bikini top.

"You're wearing just that?" she asked. "Your belly-button ring, Maggie. I mean, this is a conservative environment. There are Republicans everywhere."

I went back for a T-shirt.

The beaches were so beautiful that they looked fake. All truly beautiful things look fake. I had been to Alaska—fake. Greece—fake, fake. They look like reproductions of themselves.

Sarah and I lay on our beach towels and slapped lotion on each other's back. I felt strange doing that. I realized that I hadn't touched my sister since I was a kid, when we used to play with each other's hair or pick each other's scabs. Now her skin felt strangely familiar, yet not. Her body had changed in ways that seemed like a betrayal. Her thighs had become enormous, with puffs of cellulite puckering the backs. The tops of her arms wobbled. We were in our early thirties. I wanted to blow a whistle and make her do pushups.

"This is fun. Isn't it?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah." I watched the ocean.

"I wish we did more sister stuff together."

"What is sister stuff?"

"You know what I was thinking yesterday? I was thinking that we have such different memories of growing up. Like, what I remember, you don't, and vice versa. So, when bad things happen, the other person doesn't learn from it, she just moves on, and you're the one who's left sad or mad or whatever." Sarah picked her tooth with a pinkie nail, then examined the opaque peach polish for chips.

"Are you mad at me for something?"

I asked.

"I a little bit resent that you used to hide my Raggedy Ann doll."

"I didn't do that."

"See?"

Sarah was quiet for a minute, then said, "But you beat up that boy who was making fun of my glasses. You were my hero."

I suddenly felt sick. I rolled over and stared at a plastic bucket until it slowly came into focus.

It's not true what they say, that when you lose family you cling to what remains. No, you weed out the desire. You



*"It's from the children. They'd like us to let them in."*

attack the need for family. You replace it, like smoking, with something else: carrots, or jogging, or even sex.

Still, there is the way you are when you're sisters. You laugh at each other's jokes, even when they're stupid. You know not only what she's saying but every single thing that lies beneath it; you understand the placement of the strings on the piano you're playing. I can tolerate it for about ten minutes.

On a cruise, there are many, many husbands. I know how to get them. First, the look. Like you don't care, which you don't. Shiny clothes help. Men are like crows—they like to pick up bright things, take them back to their nests, and poke at them with their beaks.

You can play the klutz: "Oh, I'm sorry I bumped into you, is that tie ruined? Let me take care of the dry cleaning—no, I insist, give it to me, you can get a new one in your room. Oh, what a nice, nice room, nice bed..." Or the concerned neighbor: "Is your wife really seasick? I have the perfect medicine in my room, it's herbal..." Or anything, really, anything at all. They meet you halfway, and walk you home.

At dinner, Sarah and I sat at a round table with a doctor and his wife. The wife was pretty and cloying. Sarah adored her. "That's so very true," she said every time the wife finished a sentence. Or, "I can't wait to tell Patrick about that."

An annoying habit of Sarah's: she thinks about everything a second time. Sometimes she'll say something, then mouth the words to herself. She doesn't know she does this. If she ever wanted to be a spy, she'd have to work on that.

The wife sold Amway, and Sarah said, "I've been meaning to get into that. It sounds like an ideal life style." Then she mouthed, *Ideal life style*. I asked her silently, *Who are you?*

The doctor husband was from Iowa—no, Ohio. I ate with my left hand in his lap.

As we all headed out after dinner, the husband said, pointedly, "I'll be in touch about that back problem you mentioned. I'm in room 407. Four-oh-seven."

I was careful not to look at the wife, but Sarah stared, with her mouth open.

"Tom. Well, I never," the wife hissed.



*"The majority of voters disapprove of the way you handled the former environment."*

Then she took his arm, and they were gone.

"Maybe if you did, he wouldn't," I said.

Sarah's mouth was still open. Then, "Jesus, Maggie."

"Sarah, why do you judge me so much?"

"Someone has to." She adjusted her bra strap. She looked at her rings. She sniffed her wrists, her own perfume.

We returned to the room, and Sarah struggled into her nightgown. I put on a T-shirt. Sarah brushed her hair. I brushed my teeth. We lay down. She fell asleep, and I didn't, as usual. I never have slept well. Instead, I think about things: exotic menus, what life would be like if I were a princess, a jockey, a cowboy. Now I thought about Sarah, sleeping next to me. I thought, This is the person who is closest to me, genetically. There is nobody more similar to me than her. And nobody I understand less.

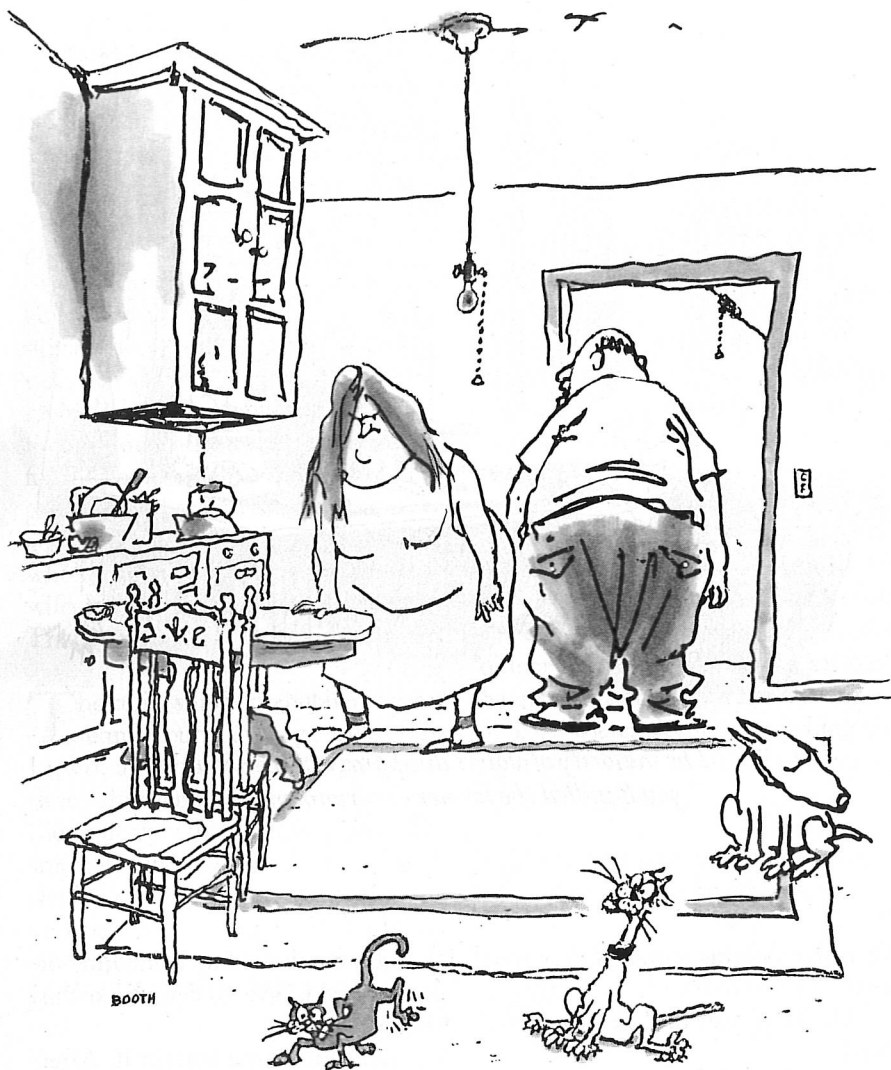
The next day, we went shopping at a Caribbean market. Sarah's pink straw hat again, with a matching purse. We walked past stands ablaze with colors. Turquoise, red, purple, glaring bolts

of cloth. Sarah held up something orange and said, "Would Patrick like this? On me?"

I nodded, so she bought it. Afterward, she unfolded it in the sun; it was a sarong. Her shoulders sagged, and her lips started trembling. "Why did I buy this? I'll never wear it." It drooped in her hand, the bright orange tinting her skin yellow. "I can't pull off something like this. He'll just laugh at me." Her face looked like a cracked windshield. She wanted to be a tropical princess, not a housewife smeared with sunscreen.

"Come on," I said, and grabbed the sarong out of her hand. I draped it around her waist, and made her unbuckle her shorts and drop them to the ground. The sarong stretched over her legs and curved away in the wind, looking like an enormous slice of cantaloupe.

"There you go. You're beautiful, Sarah." She was, almost. I'm not saying that because she's my sister; I'm saying it despite the fact that she's my sister. Sarah started walking through the market, a little clumsily. I leaned my forehead against a tree and took a deep breath. The



*"Do you have any memory of the watering can?"*

inevitables: death, taxes, and family.

After I caught up with her, Sarah started chatting about our great-aunt, our only living relative. Our great-aunt had found religion, and was studying the saints. She'd sent me a St. Jude medallion. This is the woman who, when at age five I asked if there was a God, had said, "That depends upon your interpretation."

"Last time I visited, she gave me one of those little pamphlets that say 'Jesus is your pal!'" Sarah said.

"She told me that I needed a husband."

"You do."

Like I need any more husbands, I thought. "Why do you do that?" I asked.

"What?"

"Decide that your life is great and

mine is incomplete just because of Patrick, of all people." I snorted. "Patrick."

"He's a good husband. He provides for me. He's brought many good things to my life."

"Remember your wedding day?" I asked.

I had been her maid of honor. She had a wretched cold, and kept sneezing into her bouquet. I was drunk. Patrick had taken the last-day-of-freedom thing a little too seriously and was flirting with a bridesmaid from Oklahoma before the ceremony. In the dressing room, the bridesmaid told Sarah, as if she weren't the bride, "Keep that guy away from me."

Sarah was miserable. She looked like an enormous dumpling in her tulle dress, which had cost five thousand dol-

lars. She said to me, "I don't think this is such a great idea." I nodded, and pressed Kleenex against her lower eyelids so that she wouldn't mess up her makeup.

Sarah sucked it up, married him quickly, and smiled for the pictures. Three years later, I slept with Patrick for the first time.

"He's my husband," she said now.

"Hey," I said. "Did you know that the phrase 'Always a bridesmaid, never a bride' originated as a Listerine ad?"

"Why don't you get married, Maggie?"

I laughed. "To whom?"

Sarah looked down. "It seems like you're always seeing somebody."

"Maybe it's too late for me. I don't know what I was doing when everyone was pairing up and getting engaged. I missed it somehow."

Sarah wanted to hurry back to the boat to eat the buffet lunch and watch the informational video about the island. I walked her there, then bought a hot dog and went back to the market by myself, watching the tourists try to bargain with the locals.

The doctor husband from dinner approached me on the street and touched my arm, lost. We smiled a lot. He asked if I had seen his wife.

I said that she was probably somewhere on the boat. He agreed. We checked my room first.

I called Patrick from the deserted lounge while Sarah flailed in the yacht pool, taking an Intro to Scuba lesson.

"Hey."

"Hey?" Patrick can't tell the difference between my voice and Sarah's.

"It's Maggie. Cruise. With your wife."

"Are you bonding?"

I thought, as I had before, how strange for this man. How strange to think "in-law" and think "sex." I took a deep breath and said, "I think we should call it off. You and me."

"What? Are you serious?" He actually laughed.

"Don't you ever feel bad, Patrick?"

"No. You do?"

"No. But I'm trying to, Patrick. I think that the least I can do is try. You, too." I looked out the window at a small bird flying toward the boat.

"O.K." But I knew he wouldn't; that

nobody, in the end, would feel bad but Sarah. Then he said, "But you know you'll come crawling back."

Patrick was silent as I watched the bird come closer, then closer, then crash into the window with a thud. It fell, regained its balance in the air, and then flew away crookedly. Patrick was still breathing on the phone, waiting.

The next day was Walk-Around Day. No scheduled activities—we were on our own. There were hiking paths, abandoned roads, a jungle—everything a tourist could need to get completely lost.

While Sarah was at breakfast, I called my shrink long distance and asked her if she thought I was sick. She said that she's a Freudian—either everyone's sick or nobody is. I said, "Sarah's not." Then Sarah showed up at the door.

"I'm not what?" she asked.

"Sick," I said, one hand on the phone.

"I take vitamins," Sarah said. "Let's go."

We disembarked and began our walk, up a road flanked by jungle on either side. The road dipped and rose, and every now and then we saw the ocean or caught a breeze. There was vegetation. Sarah really cared about the vegetation. I wished we had brought a six-pack of something.

I thought about the husband the day before, the doctor. At first he was impotent, so we both lay with one hand behind our heads as he explained 401(k) plans to me. I had never understood them before. I said they sounded like a very good idea. He agreed.

After the sex, he talked about my body parts, one by one, as if they were the Seven Wonders of the World. The thing about those Seven Wonders is that nobody gets to live there. People visit and send postcards to their real lives—in Cleveland, in Topeka, in the two-bedroom apartment in Pittsburgh that's home, after all, because home is where you spend the useless time in between the events you call your life.

Anyway, he only did this so I would remember him as a great lover.

Sarah and I stopped at a wooden fence at the edge of the road and rested our arms on top of it. Sarah's upper arms creased a little bit. She hiked one foot up on the lower railing.

"Maggie," Sarah said. "Did you bring someone into our room yesterday?"

"What? Why? Yes."

"I had a feeling. There was Brut cologne all over the sheets."

"Do you, um, like Brut?"

"Maggie, what's wrong with you? Where did you meet this guy, in five minutes? Why do you act like that? It's totally disgusting."

"Sarah, you live every situation wondering what Jane Austen would have done." I climbed over the fence and paced on the side of the road.

"How a person could become this way, I don't understand." Her fists found her hips.

"I'll tell you, Sarah. Things are different for me. I don't know why. I see women with husbands and babies, and it seems so amazing that they managed to pull that off. It seems strange that anyone would have someone to . . . I don't know. To keep their history for them, I guess."

"I'll keep your history, Maggie."

"Hell, Sarah, you don't even know half of my history."

"You're my sister."

A car approached on the empty road, with ribbons and flags sprouting from the side panels. There was a loudspeaker attached to the hood, and garbled words came out of it. I was still thinking about the word "sister." The car veered around the curve, and off to the side, aimed straight at me. I didn't think to jump out of its way. Sarah's hand magically clutched my shoulder, reaching over the fence and pulling me close to her. The car sped down the hill, and I stared after it.

"Wow. Good reflexes, Sarah." When I turned to her, Sarah's face was white as salt.

"You idiot. You're part of me, forever," Sarah said. "Just like Patrick is. My husband." She looked away as a rising sound, like thunder, almost drowned

out her last words: "You don't get it."

The road had filled with black bodies, all running toward us in shorts and sneakers. It was a race. It must have been the final stretch. There were so many men that they blurred together, until they were like one body, running fast, the sweat gleaming on their skin.

They were beside us. For a second, I couldn't tell who was moving—them or me. It felt as if they were running into me, their bodies washing through me like dark water or wine, leaving me a little different for the duration. And then they were gone, and there I was again, on the sidelines, one hand on the fence.

Sarah was still looking at me. All of a sudden, I knew that she knew about Patrick. She had always known. I knew this the way that she knew. How you just do, when you're sisters.

For the first time since I was a child, I was scared. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "It's over now."

"God damn it."

"I'm so sorry." I covered my mouth with my hand and talked through it. "Sarah. I'm so sorry."

"Why, Maggie?" Sarah's face was turned toward me, as if someone were holding her chin in place, forcing her to look. But she stood there, and I realized that, even though I was older, she was the bigger, stronger one. She could break me.

"You tell me why, Maggie," she said.

I remembered how I used to braid Sarah's hair for school when we were little girls. And how sometimes, when I fell down, she cried.

"Honestly," I said softly, "I just don't know."

Sarah reached an arm across the fence and I closed my eyes. Then I felt the weight of a hand that could have reached for my throat but chose, instead, to rest on my shoulder.

"I don't understand, Maggie." She was crying, hard, the way I used to. "You all just run, and run, and run."

We turned away from each other, two sisters. Still crying, Sarah looked uphill at the trees, the road turning upon itself like a snake. I looked down at the fading backs of the men, running as if they would explode, toward whatever line they had drawn in the sand to call it the end. ♦

