

NEAL LULOFS

Posing

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

“They’re at it again,” Steven called out, peering through the bedroom blinds. A bright light had flashed from his neighbor’s house, lighting up an entire room. He had had to squint, but in that instant he had seen a lamp on an end table and a painting on a wall.

“Christ,” Carol said from the bathroom across the hall, “are you gawking out the window again?” Without seeing her, he knew that his wife of 23 years was sitting on the toilet lid, removing her make-up, smoking her last cigarette of the day. When she would come to bed, she would smell of smoke and moisturizing cream—a smell that Steven found both familiar and unpleasant.

“I don’t gawk,” he told her defensively. “I’m just curious.” He said this latter part quietly, almost as much to himself as to his wife. He adjusted the waistband of his underwear and began doing push-ups on the bedroom carpet, making it to 12 before falling to his stomach, his upper arms burning. “I thought you said that guy was a pilot.” He leaned on his elbows, waiting for his wife’s reply, and it occurred to him how many of their conversations took place from different rooms. “Did you hear me?” Smoke hovered in the hallway, almost unmoving.

“He *is* a pilot,” Carol said impatiently.

“You’d think he was a photographer with all the film he uses.”

He heard Carol tap her cigarette against her ashtray. “You don’t know that they’re taking pictures,” she said.

“What else would they be doing?”

“How should I know? Maybe it’s just the TV flickering.”

He stood up and looked through the blinds again. The house was dark. “I know the difference between a flash and flicker,” he said. Through the open window he heard a loud car speeding through the subdivision, but he didn’t take his eyes off the house. He had been watching the flashes for the past three weeks, since the couple had moved in. They were a pilot and stewardess accord-

ing to Carol, a realtor, who had been told this by the agent who had sold the couple the house. Steven concentrated on the room as if willing it to light up again, his nose and forehead pressed against the sharp edges of the blinds.

“Are you going to stand there all night?” Carol said, suddenly behind him.

Startled, he jerked his hand away, the blinds rattling loudly. “Jesus,” he said. “Scared the hell out of me.”

She laughed, then dropped her robe on a chair and climbed into bed, watching her husband.

He held his stomach in as he walked to the bathroom, releasing it only when he was safely out of her sight. He weighed himself on the scale: 193. He had gained 12 pounds since losing his job, five in the last month. He cupped his hands under the running faucet and drank, his bent-over position causing him to swallow loudly. Finally, he urinated and washed up, finishing off with a shot of deodorant under each arm.

“How come Rebecca’s not home yet?” he said, sitting on the edge of their queen-size bed.

“She’s at a movie with Tom,” Carol said into her pillow, her back to Steven. “She should be home soon.”

“You let her go out on a school night?”

“A moment of weakness.”

Steven sighed and turned off the lamp at the side of the bed. He pulled the sheet up to his waist, his hands folded behind his head. “Aren’t you dying to see what they’re doing?”

“They’re just at a movie, Steven.”

“No, I mean our neighbors.”

Carol groaned. “They’re newlyweds. It’s none of our business.”

He turned onto his side and kissed his wife on her earlobe, her neck. “I don’t remember behaving like that when we were first married,” he said coyly, wrapping his leg around her leg, his groin pressing into her buttock.

“I have to work in the morning,” she told him.

He hesitated, then rolled away, his back to her. As if to fuel his anger, he thought about the night five months earlier when he and Carol had had dinner at her mother’s, only days after he had lost his job at the ad agency. He had asked his wife not to say anything about it, but during the meal she had announced that he had quit his job to become a full-time freelance writer. It had caught him off guard, the way she had masked her voice, the way she had smiled

as she spoke, but he went along with her lie and he never said anything to her about it afterward, nor did she to him.

The next morning he was submerged in bath water up to his neck, his head resting on the wall, his eyes closed. He was perfectly still, the only sound that of the soap bubbles in his bath water popping almost imperceptibly. It sounded just like the soft drops of a spring rain landing on his lawn.

Then Carol stepped into the bathroom, her high-heeled shoes snapping on the tile floor. Steven lifted his head slightly and watched his wife go through her morning routine. She set her half-eaten piece of wheat toast on top of the toilet tank and began to comb her short auburn hair in quick strokes. Below the edge of her navy-blue pin-striped skirt, her calf muscles flexed with each movement. She was a big woman, nearly as big as Steven, and although she was pretty, what he liked most about her appearance was her size. It made him feel secure, comfortable.

"I've got a meeting with a recruiter this afternoon," he told her.

"Do they have anything for you?"

"I don't know. They specialize in placing ad people. Maybe they'll send me on a couple of interviews. I don't know." At 46, Steven had more than 20 years of experience as a copywriter and creative director. He was good at his work, but his months of unemployment had filled him with self-doubt: His age and his salary requirements were more than most agencies were looking for, and Steven had begun seriously thinking of changing professions, though what he would do he didn't know.

Carol peered past her chin and picked at loose strands of hair on her suit coat. "Can you remember to look at the vacuum cleaner today? The carpeting is getting awful."

He pressed his feet against the shower wall on either side of the faucet. "They're having a blood drive at our bank today," he said. "I've never given blood before." He gathered suds with his arms so that an island floated above his stomach. "They say every unit of blood you give saves something like four lives. Isn't that incredible?" He sat up, a little bath water splashing over the edge of the tub. "I read that the FDA has approved the licensing of blood-storage centers where people can actually freeze their own blood to use later. With AIDS and hepatitis and things like that, this could be something to look into. From an investment standpoint, I mean."

Carol put on her make-up, her face close to the mirror. A housewife for most of her marriage, it had only been four years earlier that she had gotten her realtor's license. Steven was the one who had suggested she do it after their son had been killed in a motorcycle accident. For months he had watched his wife trudge through her days in slow-motion, the grief seeming to overwhelm her. A career had been just what she needed: focus, purpose, hard work, rewards. He wasn't surprised at her success—twice in her first year she had been named sales person of the month—but he was hurt that she never thanked him for it, that she never gave him any credit for the idea.

He had thought about joining Carol in real estate, and had even mentioned the idea to her. "You're a copywriter," she had told him. "It's too late to start over now." Somehow he knew she was right. He was still thrilled at seeing one of his ads in print or hearing his copy broadcast on the radio. It was what he did best, and he wanted to be doing it again. Then he would feel useful, and his wife and daughter would depend on him, as they had before Randy died.

Carol leaned closer to the mirror to do her lashes. "You're serious about investing in these blood places, aren't you?"

"Just an idea," he said.

"Do me a favor. Before you start another career, could you try to start our vacuum?" She put her make-up away and faced him. "Could you do that for me today?"

Steven ate his breakfast on the couch, wearing a white bath robe, watching *Wheel of Fortune*. To see clearly, he had to lean forward and squint.

Rebecca came down the stairs and opened the refrigerator door, staring inside as if at a mystery. The light illuminated her eyes, her lips, her cheekbones. He found his daughter beautiful. At 17, she was just beginning, a life full of choices ahead of her. If he could, Steven would trade places with her in a minute.

"Aren't you going to be late for school?" he asked.

She moved aside some things in the refrigerator before finally selecting an orange. She tossed it into the air, snatching it at its apex, her palm smacking loudly against the rind. "Probably," she said, sitting down in a rocking chair by her father's side. Today, her long, dark hair had streaks of pink in it. She was dressed in a black sleeveless t-shirt, the straps of her bra visible on her shoulders, a

tight black skirt that came to the middle of her thighs, white ankle socks, black high-top Reeboks. Her lipstick was bright red, the color of her earrings.

Steven wiped the corners of his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. "Why is everything black with you?" he said. "Don't you own any clothes that are a little more optimistic?"

"I like black," she said. "It matches my mood."

"You must feel depressed when you wake up in the morning."

She looked down at her outfit. "They're just clothes. I don't try to fit everything in my life into some narrow-minded, pre-ordained plan."

"Yet another biting comment intended to expose your father's hypocrisy?"

"Just a statement." She rolled the orange back and forth in her hands. "If it convicts you, you must feel guilty about something."

On television, an overweight woman gave the wheel a spin, the fat under her arms bouncing as she clapped. "I'm serious," he said, "aren't you late for school?"

"It's the last week," she told him. "It doesn't matter if you're there or not."

"They won't let you go through the graduation ceremony."

Rebecca pressed the bottoms of her shoes on the edge of the coffee table, legs bent at the knees, bouncing. "You're as bad as Mom. I've already told both of you: I'm not going to graduation."

Steven had never felt that he had much control over his daughter, and he was certain this time wouldn't be any different. He was amazed at the way she had turned out: independent, rambunctious, free-spirited. His complete opposite. Randy, her older brother by three years, had had the same rebellious characteristics—he had kept his long hair in a pony tail, he had worn two tiny crucifix earrings, and, a few months before the accident, he had gotten "Born to be Wild" tattooed on his forearm.

When the children were first born, Steven had imagined there would be special moments throughout their lives when he'd sit down with them to explain important things, to impart the wisdom of his experience, and that those moments would somehow help to form the foundation of their characters. But those moments never really came. Instead, their personalities seemed to have been formed by simply observing the things around them every day, from brief glimpses of the good and bad, and at some point Steven had recognized that it was too late, that his children were basically

already who they were going to be. Sometimes he felt he had failed as a parent, not because he wasn't proud of his children but because he felt he never quite knew them.

It was more than a year after Randy's death—when Steven and Carol had finally mustered the resolve to clean out his room—that they had discovered in one of his dresser drawers a small plastic bag containing marijuana and some rolling papers. Steven had whispered "Sweet Jesus," but other than that nothing was said. They cried in silence, Carol sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, Steven on Randy's bed, the discovery as terse as a slap. Steven had kept the bag; he hid it in a box in the basement. Every so often he would retrieve it, hold it in his hands, breathe in its scent, imagine Randy doing the same. The bag had somehow come to represent Randy's absence, and Steven was reluctant to part with it.

Rebecca tossed her orange into the air again. "Time to fly," she said.

"You should go to graduation," Steven said, not willing to let the matter lie. "It would be nice for your mother and me."

Rebecca stood up. "Good-bye," she said. "Have a wonderful and meaningless day." The screen door slammed behind her. Steven made a mental note to adjust the tension.

He carried his tool box and the upright vacuum cleaner to the patio. It was an unusually warm day for late May, the first time that year he had worn shorts. His thin legs were a brilliant white, spotted with freckles. He turned the vacuum cleaner over and knelt next to it, wiping his forehead with the shoulder of his t-shirt. Using a screwdriver, he removed the bottom metal plate to reveal a thick ball of gray-brown hair and lint wound tightly around the belt.

He stood up and stretched, arms straight above his head, and surveyed his backyard: the bird bath standing at a slight angle, the tall purple martin house in the rear corner, the hedgerow he had planted the previous year for privacy that was as yet too short and thin to have any effect. His backyard butted up against the Johnsons' backyard—the pilot and stewardess with the fondness for flashbulbs. He hadn't had a chance to meet them yet, but, having watched their house so closely for the previous few weeks, he felt as if he knew them.

His reflection in the Johnsons' sliding glass door was blurry and distorted. The effect reminded Steven of looking into a carnival

mirror, seeing something real but not true. He turned to look at his profile, but at that moment the door slid open. A young blonde woman wearing a bright turquoise bikini stepped onto the deck. Steven squinted to see her, shielding the sun with his hand. He was surprised at how tall and skinny she was—not at all what he had pictured. But still, she was pretty, and the thought of her late at night in front of a camera seemed to make his blood pump faster. She looked up at the sun, turned a reclining lawn chair into its rays, and lay down, donning a pair of mirrored sunglasses. He waved at her, but she made no response. He couldn't tell if she noticed him or not.

He was embarrassed about fixing the vacuum cleaner in her sight, but he wanted to stay outside where he could see her and she him, so he decided to mow the backyard even though he had just done it two days earlier.

He retrieved the red push mower from the garage and started mowing near the back of the house, working his way in a straight line toward his back hedge. As he approached the hedge, he saw the woman's cleavage and the outline of her rib cage, and because she was his neighbor and liked to sun bathe, and because summer was just starting, he felt giddy. He turned by the hedge, his back to her, pushing the lawn mower quickly, and said, "Be still my beating heart." He said this loudly and smiled, knowing he could get away with it because of the lawn mower's volume. On the return trip, watching the stewardess, he accidentally veered from the path the mower had made and almost ran into the bird bath. After correcting his course, he imagined the stewardess waving him over for lemonade, inviting him in to look at her photo album. "My husband and I like to take pictures," she would say and wink at him. Then she would hand him a camera, smile, and lead him into her bedroom.

The mower suddenly bumped into the base of his hedge, the blades grinding to an instant stop as they dug into the edge of a piece of sod. The sudden silence left Steven feeling as if he was being watched, as if he had just been caught at something.

The stewardess turned her head toward him, no more than 15 feet from where he stood. He could see his distorted reflection in each of her lenses. After a moment, she rolled her head the other way, as if asleep.

The circular gouge left by the mower had cut clean through to the dirt, save for a small island of green in the center. The giddy-

ness had left Steven, and he just felt silly, old. He slowly pulled the silent lawn mower behind him, retreating across his backyard, the tips of his tennis shoes stained green from the grass.

Looking away, Steven flinched as the nurse stuck the needle in his arm.

"Everything all right?" she said.

He nodded.

"Give this a squeeze every so often." She handed him a blue rubber ball and turned her attention to another donor.

A clear plastic tube extended from his arm. It began to turn a deep red as his blood slowly made its way down to the small plastic bag located somewhere below his reclining chair. As he squeezed the rubber ball, he imagined that the blood flowing from him carried his personality, his sense of humor, his intelligence, his optimism, and that he was somehow passing these things on to whoever the recipient would be. Wouldn't it be nice if it were that easy, he thought, if, like motor oil in a car, you could change your blood every few months as things started building up, as things started going wrong?

Thinking about this helped him to forget about his interview with the recruiter, which had been discouraging. "You've got too much experience," she had told him. "You mean I'm too old," he had replied, to which she had only smiled.

He gave the rubber ball another squeeze. Four reclining lawn chairs were set up in a square, and the nurse, her chair on wheels, rolled back and forth between them, checking the progress of each donor. A young man who had started after Steven was finished already, his arm up in the air, his free hand pressing a cotton ball on the spot where the needle had been. The man was dressed in blue jeans and boots—a construction worker, Steven thought. He wondered how the man could afford to take the time off from his job. There were others, some sitting at a recovery area drinking juice, some filling out forms. Steven felt good being a part of something so worthwhile, so selfless.

His spirits lifted, he decided to stop at Gulliver's, a bar next door to his old agency, a bar he and his coworkers used to frequent. He was still dressed in the suit he had worn to the interview. His coworkers would probably think that he was coming from work. He would let them think that, he decided.

Before entering the bar, he called home from the pay phone in

the foyer to let Carol know he'd be a little late. After four rings their answering machine clicked on. "It's me," he said. "I'm still downtown. I ran into some friends from the agency. Don't hold dinner for me. I won't be too late, I promise."

The bar was dark and full of smoke. At first Steven couldn't see anything. He stood inside the doorway, searching the room. Above the noise of music he heard a steady roar of voices, and then he saw them around a cocktail table, some sitting on tall bar stools, others standing. What came to his mind first was not their names but their titles: art director, senior account executive, junior copywriter, media planner, creative director. One of them spotted him and waved him over.

Steven shook hands with everyone and sat down on an empty stool. The waitress brought him a vodka and tonic, and he toasted everyone. "Do not go gentle into that good night," he recited. "Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

"How poetic," the young woman sitting next to him said, smiling and sipping her white wine. She had been introduced to Steven as a new copywriter. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and vibrant blue eyes with perfect little half-circle bags puffed beneath them like two pillows. He smiled back at her, but he was thinking that she probably had his old office.

"You're looking sharp," one of the men said. "What are you doing these days?"

Steven set his glass down on the table. "Actually, Carol and I just bought a company," he said, surprising himself almost at the same time the words were coming out of his mouth. "It's a frozen blood-storage center. We freeze blood for people who want to store it should they ever need it in an emergency. It's a new concept. Just approved by the FDA."

Before anyone could ask him too much about it, he changed the conversation by asking how the agency was doing. This led to several stories about accounts that had come and gone, projects that had turned into fiascos, and one about an account executive who was rumored to be sleeping with his client contact.

By his third drink, Steven was feeling light-headed. He could tell that his speech was getting louder, and he was laughing at virtually everything that was said.

The waitress returned with another round of drinks. Steven insisted on paying for it. He stood and reached across the table to

give the woman his money. When he sat back down, he sat on something hard: it was the hand of the blonde sitting next to him—her wrist, actually. He realized this when he felt her fingers close around his crotch.

He didn't move. He was both surprised and flattered at the same time. The woman continued sipping her wine, looking away from Steven as if nothing were happening. Apparently, she was waiting for some reaction from him. Meanwhile, he could feel himself growing in her hand. It took him a moment, but he finally chose to simply lift his glass and drink. With that, the woman began subtly moving her fingers back and forth. All this time, Steven had avoided making eye contact with her. He had focused his stare at the art director across the table, who must have thought Steven was ill, or perhaps gay, based on Steven's expressions.

He began to feel strange, a peculiar sensation of both pleasure and pain that seemed to emanate from the very center of his being. He couldn't tell if he was going to ejaculate or throw up. He decided he wasn't going to wait to discover which. "Jesus, look at the time," he said loudly, setting his glass down, jarring the table as he stood up. "I better get going."

"Already?" the art director said, visibly disappointed.

Steven made his way past everyone at the table. "I'll stop in again soon," he called out.

In the parking lot, walking quickly toward his car, he turned once to make certain the woman wasn't following him. He still had the erection as he drove away.

It was close to midnight when he arrived home. He parked his car too close to the garage wall. In the struggle to squeeze past the door, he ripped a button off of his white dress shirt. He heard it bounce on the cement floor, roll somewhere under the car. He felt dizzy and thought that he never should have had alcohol after giving blood.

Carol was sitting at the kitchen table, still dressed in her pin-striped suit, the only light coming from the fixture over the sink, her face in shadows. There was an open bottle of wine in front of her, a glass in her hand.

Because Carol rarely drank, Steven knew something was wrong. He assumed she was angry with him for staying out too late, or perhaps for not fixing the vacuum cleaner. "I'm sorry," he said. "I lost track of the time." He turned on the overhead light.

Streaks of black make-up had run down his wife's cheeks. She had the look of someone resolved to defeat.

The thought struck him that his wife was about to leave him. He was surprised at how quickly the realization occurred, how obvious it seemed. Frightened, he sat down and touched her hand. "What's wrong?" he said softly.

She turned her head, her face a perfect oval. "It's Rebecca," she said.

The air of finality in her voice caught Steven off guard. He closed his eyes. Not again, he thought. Please, God, not another one. "What happened?" he heard himself say, and as he said this he remembered his talk with Rebecca that morning, now assigning great significance to it, his last moments with his daughter.

The ice cubes clanged against Carol's glass like tiny bells. "She shaved her head," she told him.

He opened his eyes and looked at his wife, confused.

"It's all gone." She waved her hand over the top of her head. "Just a little strip in the center."

Steven gained back some of his composure. He felt silly for having thought the worst, and was so relieved his daughter was alive he wasn't sure he had understood what his wife had said. "I don't get it. She shaved?"

Carol set her glass down hard on the table, spilling some wine. "She's got a fucking mohawk, Steven. Our daughter decided that if we were going to force her to go through the graduation ceremony, she'd go looking like a goddamn Indian."

Steven laughed. He knew it was the wrong thing to do, but it sounded so trivial to him in light of what he had expected. His wife was crying, and he was laughing.

Carol sat back in her chair. "You're an idiot, you know that? You never used to be, but now you're completely inane. I've been wracking my brain trying to discover what's happened to you, but I haven't a clue." She got up and stood by the kitchen window, staring outside at the blackness. "How on earth has it gotten to this?" she said, as if she were the only person in the room.

Steven couldn't sleep. He was hot and he was angry. He slid out of bed and opened the door to his daughter's bedroom, the light from the hall flooding the room in an arc. Her thick row of hair protruded straight out from the top of her skull, which made her look like some strange bird. He reached out and delicately touched the

hair. It was short and coarse, like the bristles of a brush. Though he didn't understand his daughter, he admired her. He wished he had her courage, her daring.

He couldn't help but enter Randy's room. It felt empty, cold, foreign. The poster of a bikini-clad bimbo modeling snow skis and boots had long been removed from the wall over his bed. On top of the dresser, where Randy had kept his wallet, pocket change, a comb in the form of a mock switchblade, Carol had placed an old picture of the four of them standing in front of the Grand Canyon, the brass frame standing on top of a lace doily. The worn brown bedspread had been replaced by a Shaker quilt, several throw-pillows neatly arranged on top of the bed. Save for the furniture, it could have been the room of a stranger. Suddenly, Steven knew what he was going to do.

Dressed only in his underwear, he retrieved the marijuana and rolling papers from their hiding place in the basement. It had been nearly 20 years since he had rolled a joint, and his hands were trembling, both of which made it a difficult task. When he had finished the crude-looking cigarette, he admired it for a moment, smiling, feeling a bit like a teenager hiding from his parents. He stood in the musty back corner of the basement by the window well, which he opened a crack. Finally, he lit the joint and inhaled. His lungs seemed to explode with the smoke, and he coughed uncontrollably for nearly a minute, his eyes tearing, his heart pounding. "Good shit," he said sarcastically when he was breathing normally again. He took a few more puffs and put the cigarette out on the floor, returning the remainder to the plastic bag, which he then placed in its box.

Upstairs in the kitchen, he was already feeling the effects: a broad grin, a dry mouth, a light sweat in the heat, and a paranoia at being caught. He opened the refrigerator door and closed his eyes, feeling the coolness envelope his body. Then he realized that the light from the refrigerator was shining on him and he looked in the direction of the patio door, fearing that some pervert was staring at him in his underwear.

He pulled out a beer and sat down in the dark living room. With the doors and windows closed it was stuffy. After a moment, he picked up the remote control and turned on the television. He began flipping through the dozens of cable channels and set the remote down when he came across Dr. Ruth Westheimer. In her thick accent, she was talking about masturbation. Her guest was

Leo Buscaglia, a popular author who wrote books on love and marriage. Steven had seen some of his lectures on public television. Dr. Ruth asked Leo what he thought about masturbation and he proceeded to talk about toothpaste, how squeezing from the bottom of the tube or the middle of the tube could affect a marriage. Waving his arms, he said that if it was a big deal to the couple, and if they loved each other, they should buy two tubes of toothpaste, one for each of them. "I mean, for goodness' sake," he said.

Dr. Ruth thanked Leo for his insight and took a call from a young woman who was having problems lubricating.

Steven turned the television off and held the bottle of beer up against his forehead a moment before finishing it. He opened the patio door and pressed his face against the screen, his head spinning slightly from the pot. A dim light glowed in the house behind him, and he thought of the stewardess in her bikini. He strained to look at their deck, to see exactly where it was that he had seen the woman, but his vision was worse at night.

He was about to go back to bed when he saw the vacuum cleaner still lying on the patio. He slipped open the screen and picked up the vacuum, looking around to be certain he was unnoticed. Then he heard a man's voice coming from the pilot's house, and a moment later a brilliant flash lit up a room.

"No, goddammit, keep your elbows up," the pilot said loudly. This was followed by a woman's voice, barely audible.

The room lit up again and Steven found himself setting the vacuum down and trotting across his backyard, the grass cool and damp under his bare feet. He squatted beside the bird bath and looked around. Seeing no one, he sprang over his hedge into the pilot's backyard. As he landed, a neighbor's air conditioner started, and with the sudden noise Steven felt a wave of energy surge through him. Not sure what to do, he ran hunched over until he was crouching beneath the window from where the flashes were coming, alongside the deck. His heart was racing and he was breathing heavily, the hair on his forehead clumped together with sweat. A mosquito bit him on the shoulder and he almost cried out.

"Good," the pilot said. Light flashed onto the yard in front of Steven. "Now dance for me."

"Like this?" the woman asked, laughing.

Steven placed his hands on the window sill and lifted himself up, peering over the edge. The pilot, his back to Steven, was naked except for his captain's hat. The camera was atop a tripod, a thin

black cable extending from it to the pilot's hand. At first it appeared that the stewardess was wearing a wig, but then Steven realized that it was a different woman: in addition to her dark hair, this woman was older than the stewardess and not as pretty. She slipped off a tight black dress, revealing a red bra and panties.

"Take it off," the pilot told her. He snapped another picture.

The woman unhooked her bra and stepped out of her panties. She lifted up her long hair and placed it on top of her head, smiling, teasing the camera. She took the pilot's hat from him and put it on, then lay down on the couch. He joined her, the cable still in his hand, the camera still flashing. The woman's eyes were closed and she had a look of ecstasy on her face that Steven didn't fully understand. He wasn't sure if it was sincere or if she was just posing for the camera.

He imagined he was the pilot and the woman was Carol, their bodies intertwined, exposed, their lovemaking heightened by the clicking of the lens and flashing of the bulb. He closed his eyes, trying to visualize it. But the image didn't work for Steven; he and Carol would never do that. Surprisingly, he wasn't disappointed by this discovery.

He squatted down against the house, the yard before him occasionally lit with flashes of light. For the first time, he saw a light on in his bedroom. Through the blinds, the solitary shadow of his wife moved about the room, left for a minute, and returned, turning off the light.

He wondered if Carol saw the flashes, if she was staring at him at that moment, and if she was, what she must be thinking about him. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to be at home.

He jumped up and began running, another flash flooding the yard. He slipped on the damp grass as he was about to leap over the hedge, and instead he stumbled through it, scratching his ribs and thighs, landing in his yard on his stomach, cutting his left palm on something sharp.

Stepping into the living room, he was met by a wall of heat. His stomach and chest began to itch from his fall. He slowly walked up the dark stairs, trying to breathe through his nose, his hand pressed against his chest as if willing his heart to beat slower, the faint aroma of Randy's marijuana still about him. He heard the bed squeak, then Carol coughed. He wasn't ready to face her, so he stepped into the bathroom, partially closing the door behind him.

He decided he needed a cool bath. As the tub filled, he stepped

out of his underwear and stood naked in front of the mirror. The sight of his disheveled appearance startled him: flushed cheeks, tousled hair, scratched torso. He held his stomach in, but then let it out, sighing like a balloon losing its air. He could see why his wife would call him an idiot. But he could see the real him, too, the man who wanted to do right, the man who wanted to be a good husband and father. He wanted Carol to see this other man, but he wasn't sure how to show him to her.

He leaned over the edge of the tub and shut off the water. The room was suddenly silent, but for the quiet sounds of a few drops falling from the faucet into the bath water. He dipped his hand in to test the temperature, then jerked it out, the cut in his palm stinging.

He looked at his hand and was startled to see Carol in the mirror. She was standing in the doorway. His first thought was to wrap a towel around himself, but he decided not to. He stood up straight in front of his wife, naked, and said nothing.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, squinting in the light.

"Just trying to cool off."

"Don't you think it's a little late for a bath?" she said.

"I couldn't sleep." His palm, hanging by his side, throbbed with pain. He didn't move. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you," he said.

She fiddled with the belt on her robe, drawing it tighter around her.

"That night at your mother's," he said. "Why did you lie?"

She let the ends of her belt drop, her hands hang free. "I don't know." Her voice was soft. "I guess I thought it would be easier for you."

"For me, or for you?"

"You're making too much out of it," she said. "It wasn't anything. Besides, that was months ago."

"Carol," he began, but he wasn't sure what to say. He wanted to tell her that he could be a good man, that he still loved her, that he missed Randy. "We need to talk," he finally said.

"I know."

He looked at the tub filled with clear water. "Take a bath with me."

She smiled and started to speak, but caught herself. She pointed at his hand. "You're bleeding," she told him.

A thin line of blood had trickled from his palm and curled

around his wedding ring, droplets splattered on the ceramic tile beside his foot. "It's just a cut."

"Take your bath," she told him. "I'll wait for you in bed."

He took a short bath and quickly dried himself. He was hopeful and excited, yet nervous, unsure. It reminded him of his wedding night, showering at the hotel, Carol waiting for him in bed, the uncertainty of everything. He wrapped his hand in gauze and turned off the bathroom and hall lights, feeling his way past the bedroom door, his eyes unable to adjust to the dark. His wife lying in bed was little more than a shadow, a silhouette of a figure he could barely recognize. He groped his way along the edge of the mattress and slipped into bed beside her. At first, though he was only inches away, he couldn't see his wife's face, couldn't see if she was smiling or angry, if her eyes were opened or closed. But then a dim, flickering light made its way through the cracks in the blinds. It was the flashes from the pilot's camera. But here in Steven's bedroom the light seemed transformed from something tawdry to something profound, something that belonged in his life as much as the light from the sun that poured through his windows in the morning, despite their distant origins. He could see his wife now, and he began to shiver as if he were a teenager about to make love for the first time. She rolled on top of him, her weight pressing him into the mattress, the warmth of her body quieting his shivers. They made love without speaking as the dull flashing light punctuated the dark.