

The Bathers
By Greg Zeck
C. 2350 words

We come in off the lake, and the first thing I see is Carl standing on the beach and waving his hands up and down. Sheila's in the bow and I'm in the stern, and we're shearing the blue waters of the bay, and I think of those old black and white war films with the guy on the aircraft carrier waving the planes in to a safe landing. My wife Lucy, who works for a big insurance company, is building a sand castle with Carl and Sheila's baby Jill, but Carl sees nothing but me and Sheila and he's jumping up and down and waving frantically.

I know what the score is already. Sheila said she talked to him last night in bed. She talked to him and told him this was her last chance to have fun on the lake. Carl and I had been fishing every day, she said, but now it was her turn to have some fun. "Don't worry, Carl," she told him, "I don't behave like an animal," and she should know 'cause she's a veterinarian at the zoo who fixes everything that could go wrong, and does, in all the animals she deals with, from aardvarks to zebras.

If I believed in such stuff I'd say Sheila's the earth mother type, but this is the day and age of the technical and professional, and I'll leave Jung to Carl, who eats him up, plus poets and philosophers and theologians too, he's quite the reader and the house husband too. On the way out, Sheila and I round the corner of the island and pull the canoe up onto a rock shelf. On a dare, hers or mine it doesn't matter, she takes off her shorts and top, and Jesus! Sheila's plump, voluptuous, and doe-shy. She tiptoes to the edge of the rock, jiggling nicely, and cannonballs into the blue water.

We went out without bathing suits is the deal, intending just to paddle around the lake, and while I turn my back and get down to my BVDs, Sheila's stripping, and when I wheel around she's perched on the edge of the rock, flesh quivering, muscular and unshaved legs tensed, and then splash! she's in and I throw off my undies and I dive in after.

It's the horns Carl's worried about. The horns if you can believe it, after all the time we've known one another. All the years we've loved one another, me looking into his olive-colored face. All the times, buzzed on wine and dinner talk, me singing Puccini, Lucy accompanying, and suddenly Carl grabs my nuts and I almost make high C. The idea that if someone sees Sheila or Diana in the bath, he might as well be copulating her.

The water is cool, but not too cool. It's blue, but not too blue. The lake is a jewel, only two hundred acres, split by a strait, limnologically speaking, into a large cup and a ball. Besides the eight cabins of Judd's resort, where we're staying, there are only two, three other habitations on the lake. The forest of evergreen and aspen sweeps down to the water on all sides, except to the north where a sheer cliff rises sixty or seventy feet and an osprey tumbles in the air.

I teach dumbdumb English at Sky-U-Mah U, and to salve my soul I chase women and study art. Lucy works downtown, in charge of a gaggle of claims examiners, work that is valued and paid far more handsomely than mine. We have two careers and no worries, you might say — not until we get up here to these blue waters and green woods anyway. I'm doing the breast-stroke and just across the bay I see the beaver lodge where in the evening Lucy and I paddled out and saw a beaver, thumping the water with his tail, diving and coming up, chortling no doubt at the city slickers, on the other side of the canoe. We glided up to a mother loon and watched her scoot into the strait and yodel to draw us away from her chicks. Our first full day up here, Carl and I went out at dawn, and while Carl was squatting in the dew, taking his first dump of the day, a two-thousand-pound ten-point moose crashed through the forest just ten steps away. Carl shit all right and damn near had a heart attack, while like the best of friends I simply laughed my ass off.

Now I fling myself into this blue lake and think, foolishly, but I think I'm king! The water is cool on my naked skin, and I glide through the water till I'm well over my head and then I look over and see Sheila breach. Twenty feet away she's come up for air, and all I see against the sapphire of the sun is an expanse of pale buttock and thigh and then the queen of the lake is submerged once more.

I dive down and touch the mucky, duck-dear bottom, counting to thirty, and when I come up, all in one motion I launch myself out of the water and lower myself, gently, onto the baking shelf of stone at water's edge.

If I were duck, and only duck, I'd dive down and muck about for hours. I'd feed among the weeds, I'd gorge on fish and other filth and come back to the nest, if I were that kind of ducky daddy, and feed my quacking nestlings.

But that's Carl and Sheila's job, not mine. Jilly is a year old, blonde, lovey-dovey, smiley, inescapable. For a moment, yes, Sheila's eluded Jill's squalls and cries for food, soothing, love; Jill's smiles, for binding mom to her all the days of her life; Jill's smelly diapers and food-plastered face. Momentarily Sheila has eluded Carl, too, whose job it is, back in the city, to stay home, cook, launder, and take care of baby while mama's at the zoo making good money repairing herniated iguanas or extracting semen from Siberian tigers.

“How the hell do you do take semen from a tiger?” I asked last winter, when animal insemination came up at one of Carl's dinner parties. We were ravening on his ravioli, peasant salad, and flat bread, whilst guzzling merlot, and as the company of professionals and friends held its breath — lawyers, professors, insurance managers — Sheila wiped her mouth with her napkin and looked out at us from beneath her crown of curly blonde hair and said, “Very carefully.”

Which is how I'm supposed to act, I know, when I'm lying naked on a hot rock with my best friend's wife naked and just ten feet away. I try to be as dispassionate, you see, as a pedant who uncovers a grammar error or a zoo vet who's knocked out a four hundred pound Siberian and is sticking an electrojaculator up his rectum.

And this gets me to thinking somehow about Renoir and Rubens and Matisse, among others, who were so concerned about “ideal form,” not the morals of the salon or society, and “the problem of the flesh, neither pink nor white, but delicate and resilient.” Tell me these painters stayed anchored to their easels whilst voluptuous nudes lolled before them in the flesh? Tell me they looked and didn’t lech or touch? Tell me something I don’t know about Renoir and his plump young wife at Sorrento, pale as a pearl and her hair apricot-orange? About Rubens taking the drapes off the puckered flesh of the Reformation? About Greek satyrs chasing maenads around a vase?

But this here and now, this rocky islet, is what you might call a fortunate remove. You have the best position in the world, just feet from flesh, an eyeball and yet a world apart. What rides on the film of your eye is a nude lying in the sun, buttocks and back turned to you. You’re at a slight elevation and can see, down on the bed of rock where she lies, her head, the wheaten-blond hair wet and slick; the square dimpled chin, the mole on her left cheek; the unshaved calves and thighs; the dark luxuriance of the pubes; the round breasts and belly spilling, like the water spilling from breasts and belly, into the commodious cup of your eye.

In the sky the sun winks, and you lie completely out of it. You’re splayed on the rock, your thick legs, your thin arms and chest sizzling. You’re a centaur from another century. The lust of the goat is the bounty of God. All you feel is the sun irradiating your flesh. You’re a lizard on the rock. You’re a horse in a sleeping pasture. Your heart beats fifty times per minute.

You hear the waves slap, like a rug being beaten, and when eventually you snap out of it, you prop yourself on your elbows and look at Sheila’s plump butt and breasts. She lies impassively, a Rubens three centuries après studio, and her ample figure has the sweetness of flowing water. The nakedness of woman is the work of God. She doesn’t turn to you or look, and if your vanity is wounded she hasn’t sicced her hounds on you.

The thing about Judd, the resort operator, is he’s a crabby Croatian but harmless enough and well meaning. He’s worn down by work — ‘cause all summer long the tourists, fishers, city-slickers swarm — and when the other day he outfitted Carl and me for our walleye expedition he was sure we’d end up sinking his boat and drowning ourselves and so had his guide, out with another party, keep an eye on us. “Do Not Remove Furniture From Where It Stands! I Am Not Kidding!” one irascible sign in the cabin proclaims. “Do Not Even Think Of Flushing Diapers, Tampons, Paper Towels, Newspapers, Etcetera Down This Toilet!” another warns. But Judd’s a good story-teller, too, and if you go up to the lodge for breakfast he will regale you with stories from the north woods, or stories about his father from the old country.

“Oh, hell yes,” he told us yesterday at breakfast, “we get hundreds of nature nuts up here. Winters they come to track the wolves. Felder, who lives in town, is the world’s wolf authority. He teaches ‘em how to sit silent in the snow and when the time is right how to howl their heads off. It’s the damndest thing. Twelve, fifteen full-grown adults — lawyers, doctors, engineers — howling at the moon.”

Which reminds me of Sheila's dog Gunther, a black lab from hell. And the time two summers ago, before Jill was born, when she and Carl stopped by with the dog in the car. They stopped by and we had about three or four G & T's apiece, and when they left I went out and stuck my head blithely into the rear window and Gunther snarled and bit through my upper lip and they took me to the hospital.

"No kissing tonight," the plastic surgeon said, after some nifty work, as Lucy took me out to the car, Sheila and Carl balling their guilty eyes out. "None of that hanky-panky for a while, Tiger," the surgeon said.

And what if you were a tiger and she were to put you deep under, in the antiseptic OR, and put that gun up your ass and pull the trigger, and your gis shot out, like hot lava, into the waiting cup?

And Judd will chew your ear off at breakfast, if you let him, in the vault-ceilinged knotty-pine lodge. He will tell you how he himself cut and milled the timber for the first two or three cabins on the site; he will tell you how Natural Resources caught him, when he was fourteen, selling minnows without a license; he will tell you how his father, just off the boat from the old country and on the train from New York bought a banana from a vendor and, never having seen one in his life, took a big bite without peeling the fruit.

Which is why every time Judd sees a monkey at the zoo, the kind of monkey that Sheila repairs all the time, he thinks of his old man.

And I'm out on the island with her, a goat, a monkey, and after I've sizzled a bit on the rock my pecker's flopping, like a banana, getting bigger and smarter and swaying, left to right, right to left, and my friend's wife doesn't look at me or take one bite of the fruit.

I'm propped on my elbow contemplating naked nature, the nymphs, the satyrs, when the slap of the waves is answered by a putt-putt-putt and I look back, over my shoulder, and see a flat-bottomed boat with the Illinois couple and their two kids come swinging around the near side of the island. "Jesus, Sheila," I say, "I think we're discovered." And as the Illini are watching, their fishing lines trailing, their eyes wide open, we pull on our shorts and Sheila turns around, a towel over her breasts, and waves a friendly hello.

So that's that. We get dressed, get in the boat, and row back to the dock. We pull the boat up and take out the paddles, life preservers, towels, and so on and trudge up the hill to the cabin. I'm walking with Lucy, who's carrying babbly Jilly, and Sheila's got her arm around Carl and is laughing and telling him about our skinny-dip. Carl's sweating and showing red through his olive-colored face, the face of the man I love and who loves me, and all he can say is "Jesus Christ! I let you alone a few minutes with her and you grow me horns!"

If I were a tiger and each noon could look at Diana, naked at her bath, perhaps I wouldn't be afraid. I wouldn't tremble. Perhaps I would walk into the archaic scene, transcendent and apart. I would pay no mind to the sleeping hounds.