

KEEPER OF THE VISUAL ROLODEX

Why It's So Natural for Him
to Look and So Hard to Forget
What He's Seen

*Even happily married men struggle
with being pulled toward live and
recollected images of other women.*

Scene One: Doug, a successful businessman with a wife and kids, has traveled to California for a business deal. The conference room fills with top executives, so each one can give him a presentation. The first executive, a very attractive woman, walks to the whiteboard. She has a great figure, Doug notices, and her well-fitted suit shows it off tastefully. As she begins her presentation, the woman is friendly but all business.

Scene Two: I'm talking to a series of randomly selected Christian men who are serious about their faith and (if they're married) genuinely devoted to their wives. I describe Scene One above and tell them it is straight out of my novel *The Lights of Tenth Street*. Then I ask each man a question: "If you were Doug, what would be going through your mind as the female executive makes her presentation?"

Here are some of their answers:

- "Great body... Stop it! What am I thinking?"
- "I check to see if she's wearing a wedding ring."
- "I wonder if she finds me attractive."
- "I feel an instant tightening in my gut."
- "I bet she's using those curves to sell this deal."
- "Look at her face, look at her face, look at her face..."
- "It is hard for me to concentrate on her presentation because I'm trying so hard to look at her face and not her body."
- "I have to be ruthless about pushing back these images—and they keep intruding."
- "I wonder what's under that nice suit? Stop it. Concentrate on the presentation."
- "About two minutes into her talk, I'd be remembering a scene from a porn video I saw when I was fifteen."

- “If I’m not careful, a few minutes later I might be wondering what she’s like in bed.”

If you had been with me, listening to those men, what would *you* be thinking? I confess that their answers both amazed and dismayed me. Yet as I heard men I trusted reveal similar reactions over and over, I realized that this must be *normal*.

Although I’d always heard that men are visual, I had never really understood what that actually *meant*. I had been totally oblivious.

WHAT “MEN ARE VISUAL” MEANS

Here’s the insight I stumbled on by accident, which has radically reshaped my understanding of men:

Even happily married men are instinctively pulled to visually “consume” attractive women, and these images can be just as alluring whether they are live or recollected.

Two areas of this “men are visual” thing surfaced that I, at least, didn’t really get before:

- First, a woman with a great body is an “eye magnet” that is incredibly difficult to avoid, and even if a

man forces himself not to look, he is acutely aware of her presence.

- Second, even when no such eye magnet is present, each man has a “mental Rolodex” of stored images that can intrude into his thoughts without warning or can be called up at will.

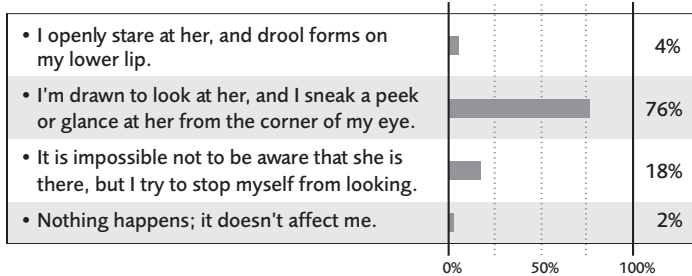
If you’re among the 25 percent of women who describe themselves as “visual,” this “revelation” may not seem surprising. But for the rest of us, it may seem a mystery—or worse. We might even experience it as a personal failure on our part (for not being enough of a woman to keep his attention) or as a personal betrayal on his (why would a loving and committed husband have to push back images of other women *at all?*).

Thankfully, as we delve deeper, discovering how hard-wired this compulsion is—and how *little* it has to do with us—is oddly encouraging. Actually, it is *two* separate but related compulsions. Let’s keep an open mind and look at them, together.

Compulsion #1: A man can’t *not* want to look.

In the survey, we created a scene similar to Doug’s and asked men to predict their responses. Consider the results:

Imagine you are sitting alone in a train station and a woman with a great body walks in and stands in a nearby line. What is your reaction to the woman? [Choose One Answer]



The first fact is that a whopping 98 percent of men put their response to an eye-catching woman in “can’t *not* be attracted” categories (only 2 percent were unaffected by a woman with a great body). Interestingly, the results were essentially the same for men who described themselves as happily married believers.

Many men explained the power of this desire to look, even when they tried *not* to or when the attractive woman in question left their line of sight. One faithful husband whom I highly trust confessed, “If I see a woman with a great body walk into Home Depot and I close my eyes or turn away until she passes, for the next half hour I’m keenly aware that she’s in there somewhere. I’m ashamed to say that, more than once, I’ve gone looking down the aisles, hoping to catch a glimpse.”

“More than once, I’ve gone looking down the aisles, hoping to catch a glimpse.”

I’d love to think that this man was an aberration—except that all the men I shared his quote with said, “That’s *exactly* right!”

Another husband with a happy twenty-year marriage described another typical scenario: “My wife and I recently went out to dinner at a nice restaurant with some friends. The hostess was extremely attractive with a great figure and that spark that reaches out and grabs a man’s attention. For the rest of the night, it was impossible not to be aware that she was across the restaurant, walking around. Our group had a great time with our lovely wives, but I guarantee you that our wives didn’t know that every man at that table was acutely aware of that woman’s presence and was doing his utmost not to look in that direction.”

Now, think back to the opening of this book. These examples clarify why Jeff would suddenly turn his head as we walked the streets of New York: He was choosing to honor me. He had just seen an attractive woman and was forcing himself to look away so the image would not linger.

And that brings us to the second fact.

Compulsion #2: A man has a mental Rolodex of sensual images.

We've all heard that the male half of the population thinks about sex a lot. What I didn't realize was that they aren't exactly *thinking* about sex (as in, *I wonder if my wife will be in the mood tonight*). Rather, they're *picturing* it, or picturing a sexual image. And those pictures aren't necessarily of their wives. They are often images that have been involuntarily burned in their brains just by living in today's culture—images that can arise without warning.

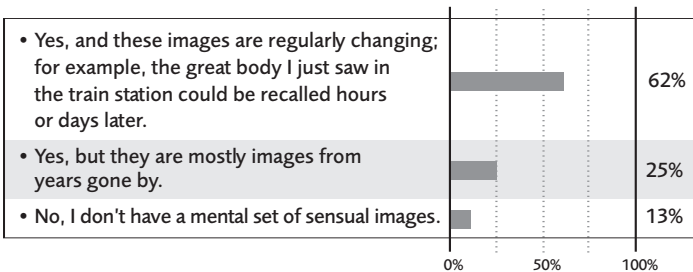
You might be wondering, *What kinds of images?* Apparently just about anything: the memory of an intimate time with you (good) or the memory of a *Playboy* magazine (bad). It could be a recollection of the shapely woman who walked through the parking lot two minutes ago or an on-line porn site he saw two years ago. These images often arise without warning, even if the guy doesn't want them. Or specific images can be recalled on purpose. As several men put it, "I have an unending supply of images in my head, stretching back to my teens."



Images often arise without warning, even if the guy doesn't want them.

The survey results were clear:

Many men have a mental set of sensual images that rise up or can be conjured up in their minds. Does this apply to you? [Choose One Answer]



In total, 87 percent of men say these images pop up in their heads. When you break down the demographics, it is roughly the same across the board—whether men are old or young, happily married or single, religious or not.

The Tom Cruise conversation

One day, during the time I was trying to come to terms with these findings, Jeff and I were riding in the car, discussing what I was discovering. Jeff confessed that he didn't understand why I was so surprised. Here's how our conversation went from there:

Jeff: “But you knew men are visual, right?”

Me: “Well, yes, of course. But since most women

aren't, I just didn't get it. I just don't experience things the same way you do."

Jeff: "See, I'm not sure I really believe that."

Me: "Well, it's true!"

Jeff: "Maybe we just use different language to describe it. For example, think of a movie star that you find physically attractive—Tom Cruise, say. After we've seen one of his movies, how many times will that attractive image rise up in your mind the next day?"

Me: "Never."

Jeff: "I must not be explaining myself correctly. I mean, how many times will a thought of what he looked like with his shirt off just sort of pop up in your head?"

Me: "Never."

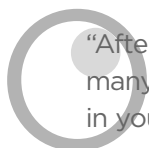
Jeff: "Never—as in *never*?"

Me: "Zero times. It just doesn't happen."

Jeff: (After a long pause) "Wow."

That was the end of that conversation, but it wasn't the end of the issue. When my husband recently told this story to our home group, he confessed that at first he thought I was embarrassed to admit that I really might have pictures of Tom Cruise in my head! It wasn't until he watched me tell

the story to a group of women, and watched most of the woman say “never” right along with me, that the lightning bolt hit.



“After we’ve seen one of his movies, how many times will that attractive image rise up in your mind the next day?”

Our little exchange did more to teach Jeff and me how each of us is wired—and *not* wired—than almost anything else. And I hope my new understanding is helping me be more supportive and protective of my husband in today’s culture.

It’s a minefield out there...

For those of us who aren’t visual, it’s hard to imagine that a man could have no control over something popping up in his head. We also may not recognize that in our sex-saturated culture, the very act of living is a minefield of possible triggers and potential images that could be recalled days or years later.

To use a common example, prime-time television commercials often flash sensual two-second images—say, of a woman undressing—that are up on the screen and gone before the man can look away. Nothing he can do. *Boom*, it’s added to the mental Rolodex, whether he wants it or not.

Mental Rolodexes on speed-dial

When I asked men how often a sensual thought or image barged into their consciousness, many of them said something like “all the time.” Of course, I wanted to know what “all the time” meant!

“If you’re talking about a teenage boy, ‘all the time’ means *all the time*,” one forty-year-old man explained. “It would be fairly unusual for a teenage guy to go a couple of hours without an involuntary image—and then when he does, he could spend half an hour straight on the subject. A twenty-something man also has a pretty difficult time. Once you reach your thirties and forties, you’re a little more settled and those thoughts are more often triggered by something.”

But once those thoughts are triggered, he and others clarified, an image could rise up two or three times a minute! And they also said that if the man is highly visually oriented, and if that temptation is entertained *at all*, it is even more difficult to get rid of.


THIS IS NORMAL?

Okay, let’s take a deep breath for a second. For some of us, this is a lot to take in. For others, it’s no big deal. Also, if you are “visual,” you may more readily understand your husband’s struggle. And don’t worry—you’re normal. But it’s

important for the rest of us to realize that our men are normal too. As the national survey showed, this temptation is common to every man. And as my interviewees emphasized, it has *no* bearing on their devotion to their wives.

Before we go any further, we should make a critical distinction: Temptations are *not* sins. (The Bible states that “Jesus was tempted in every way.”) What we *do* with those temptations is the issue, and we’ll get to that in a moment.

For now, let’s sort out the progression of male responses to see which are involuntary and which most definitely are not.



Temptations are *not* sins. What we *do* with those temptations is the issue.

Step 1: For every man, sensual images and thoughts arrive involuntarily.

Daniel Weiss, the media and sexuality analyst at Focus on the Family, told me, “I would emphasize to women that, yes, men do have these thoughts whether they want them or not.”

In addition, the man’s initial temptation is often not only unintentional, but automatic. If the stimulus is there (a great figure in a tight outfit), so is the response. As one man put it, “It doesn’t even register that I thought *great*

body until two seconds later!” A man cannot prevent those *initial* thoughts or images from intruding.

Don’t believe me? Let me illustrate.

Don’t read this.

No really, don’t read it. Just look at the letters.

Impossible, isn’t it? There is no way to just notice the letters without reading the word. That’s what it’s like for a guy. His brain reads “good body” without his even realizing it.

One man provided this analogy. “If you are nearsighted, everything is fuzzy without glasses. With your glasses, everything is in sharp focus. If a babe walks into Starbucks, other women sort of see fuzzy—all they see is that a woman is there. But all the men in the room suddenly have their ‘glasses’ on—that woman is in sharp focus, and it’s really hard not to stare at her.”

This distinction actually debunks the popular assumption that all the trouble starts because “men have roving eyes.” A better understanding is that there are roving women—and men can’t not notice their existence!

Step 2: Every man’s involuntary physical impulse is to enjoy the feelings associated with these thoughts and images.

Because men are hardwired to be sexual hunters, every thought and image related to that pursuit comes associated

with powerful feelings. When a sensual image enters a man's mind (or a great body enters his line of sight), it brings a rush of sexual pleasure—a short-term pleasure that, hopefully, the man denies himself in order to honor God, his wife, or his mental purity and thus establish deeper pleasure down the road.



Hopefully, the man denies himself the short-term pleasure in order to honor his wife.

One married man told me, “It is pleasurable—in a small way—in the same way that sex is pleasurable. And forcing myself to remove that thought from my mind is sometimes as difficult as it would be to stop in the middle of sex.”

Another wrote: “When an image plays on a man's brain or he gazes at an attractive woman, it's not just pure lust. There's a thrill there. And a man can go back to that adrenaline rush by entertaining those images.”

In my clinical research for *The Lights of Tenth Street*, I heard over and over again how much men gravitate toward something that gives them an inner excitement, an illicit thrill—which helps us then understand why some men can get trapped by pornography.

Step 3: But every man can make a choice—to dwell on the images and thoughts, or to dismiss them.

This choice is the critical distinction between temptation and sin. Once an image intrudes in a man's head, he can either linger on it and possibly even start a mental parade, or tear it down immediately and “take every thought captive,” as the Bible puts it.



Men I talked to make rigorous decisions to avoid unwanted visual invitations.

Most of the men I talked to take this choice extremely seriously. They make rigorous decisions to avoid unwanted visual invitations, to turn away from those that arise, and—when unwanted pictures arise anyway—to rip them down with all sorts of diversionary tactics. I heard that mentally running through baseball scores and household projects were popular thought substitutes! Honestly, it sounds exhausting.

So although few men can stop an involuntary image from popping up in their heads, and few men can stop themselves from *wanting* to look, they can (and do) exercise the discipline to stop themselves from actually doing so. On the survey, the biggest factor in whether a man made this choice wasn't whether he was older, married, or happy in

his relationship (all of those mattered, but in small numbers). It was whether he regularly attended religious services. Confirming this, nearly *half* of the men on the follow-up churchgoers survey said they would try to stop themselves from looking.

It is vital that we understand just how much strength and discipline that choice requires so that we can appreciate what our men try to do for us every day in this minefield of a culture.

AND NOW FOR SOME REASSURANCES

It's also vital to recognize that, after all these generalizations, there are several critical reassuring elements which are just as much a part of a man's inner life.



A lot of this is simply about admiring beauty.
It's like looking at a painting.

Reassurance #1: His temptation is often not primarily sexual.

One distinction I heard repeatedly from men was that “wanting to look” often wasn't primarily sexual. Instinctive? Yes. Physical? Sure. But not necessarily sexual.

One man told me, “What you may not realize is that a lot

of this is simply about admiring beauty. It is pleasurable to look at that good-looking woman. It's like looking at a painting. You're not just thinking, *Let's go to a motel and shack up*. Women don't necessarily look at a man and admire him as a thing of beauty, but men will do that. It's like walking through an art gallery. A man may look, despite himself. But it's not necessarily a sexual thing."

Reassurance #2: Every man is different.

Also, because every man is different, every man experiences a different level of visual temptation. For some men, an involuntary sensual image may be little more than a nuisance, while others might find it a real stumbling block.

Here's a comparison that some of us might recognize all too well. At a dessert party, I might struggle for two hours with the fact that a chocolate mousse cake is across the room, calling my name. But the person standing next to me might be able to put that temptation out of her mind. (Don't you just hate those people?!)

Since everyone is different, we shouldn't jump to conclusions or pass blanket judgments.

Reassurance #3: It's not because of you.

Upon learning all of this, some of us may secretly wonder, *What's wrong with me? Am I not attractive enough?* We suspect

that our husband's struggle arises because of our own flaws, not just because he's a man.


But hearing this from every man I interviewed made clear that this truly is—as the title of a popular book puts it—*Every Man's Battle*.

In the biblical book of Job, the title character makes a telling statement: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust upon a young woman.”

Why would Job need to take such a step? God describes him as “the finest man in all the earth—a man of complete integrity” (Job 1:8). Surely, the “finest man in all the earth” wouldn't even *have* this struggle!

But Job was a man. You love your husband as a man, and this is part of what makes him a man. Even if you were a bikini model, your husband would still have this vulnerability.

Furthermore, many men echoed this husband's sentiment: “You have to realize: If men could, most would shut off their temptation to look at other women in a second. We loathe this temptation as much as our wives do!”



Why would Job need to take such a step? God describes him as “the finest man in all the earth.”

Reassurance #4: This doesn't impact his feelings for you!

Finally, and most important, we must grasp this fact: A man's human temptation has, as one man put it, "no impact whatsoever on my feelings for my wife."

A man married more than twenty-five years explained:

There is no relationship with the woman who catches your eye. With your wife, you have a deep and long and meaningful relationship. There is no competition there. Yes, your mind may make the observation that this other woman is twenty years younger and has never had two kids. But that is all it is—an observation. And that observation is immediately offset by other factors, such as the fact that you love your wife!

In one small group interview, all the men agreed with that statement and added, in the words of one, "It is truly just an observation. There is nothing on earth that would be worth the price of going beyond that. I would *never* risk losing my wife."

In fact, if other women seem to want to catch your husband's eye, these men provided an ironic reassurance. One husband explained, "When a guy is married and his wife

loves him, his self-confidence goes way up—and suddenly that makes him more attractive somehow. So if other women are *trying* to catch your man’s eye, it actually means that you are building him up and that he adores you!”

SO WHAT’S A WOMAN TO DO?

For many of us, on these issues it would be so easy to move from understanding, to alarm, to the charge of the light brigade—to get anxious or suspicious of our men and get all fired up to change them. But in the book’s introduction I said that these revelations are meant to change *us*. Yes, men can do things to keep their thought lives pure. Yes, men can do things to honor the women they love. But many books have been written on those issues by expert psychiatrists, marriage counselors, and ministry leaders. This book is for us women, alone.

So what do we do?

Pray for him—and for us

This is the most powerful and meaningful way to partner with the men in our lives, but it’s often the most overlooked. There’s a little verse in Psalm 127: “Unless the LORD protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good.” We can work to help and protect our husband and our marriage, but in the end, that’s the Lord’s job.

Furthermore, ask God to protect *your* heart as well so that instead of feeling anger or hopelessness, you have the encouragement you need to “protect” your husband in prayer from the onslaughts of this culture.

Your husband needs your steadfast prayers more than anything else. And as we do business with the Lord, we will also better understand what He wants from *us*.



Do we love the men in our lives for who they are, or for who we want them to be?

Check your heart

As we consider any changes we need to make in our own lives, we must first take stock of the condition of our hearts and our willingness to support our men in the way *they* need to be supported.

Consider this plea, from the follow-up churchgoers survey:

To accept the struggle I have with lust and encourage me rather than freak out and conclude the worst about me. The more I can reveal my weaknesses without being judged or accused, or without a major crisis in our relationship resulting from my transparency, the more I know I am loved for who I am, not for who she wants me to be.

And that should be at the heart of our response. Do we love the men in our lives for who they are, or for who we want them to be? Do we want to support our husbands, or to change them?

The way you answer those questions makes a world of difference. If you aren't sure you can address the issue with the right heart, you might want to spend some time praying and asking God for *His*, before you do anything.

Determine your involvement level

When someone is dealing with temptation, it is good to have a person to talk to and be accountable to. So once our hearts are in the right place, we need to consider how the man in our life wants to handle his vulnerabilities and whether we even want to be involved.

Just as some men want their wives to be a part of the accountability process and others don't, some women want to be involved and others really don't.

No matter what, marriage counselors tend to believe that although there needs to be an open husband-wife dialogue, the husband's *primary* accountability partner should be male. One male counselor told me, "It would be destructive if the wife becomes the police. Men don't need a critique but an encourager." I'm not sure any of us wants to hear a daily log of our husband's unavoidable temptations.

Become a support

If both you and your husband would like you to be involved to some degree, here are some first-step ideas. These are most appropriate for men who are *not* trapped in a serious struggle with dangerous or addictive behaviors (such cases obviously require more specialized resources, a few of which are listed at www.4-womenonly.com).

First, let your husband know that you are willing to talk about this and that you understand the difficulties he must face every day. Ask what you can do to help. Put yourself on his team to help him win this fight.

Daniel Weiss, from Focus on the Family, gave me great insight on this:

The best thing women can do to help their husbands is to practice two of the most crucial elements of a marriage—openness and honesty. Things that drive anyone dealing with sexual sin are shame, guilt, and secrecy. If the guy has secrecy, if there isn't a safe place to talk about what is a real temptation for guys, then chances are it's going to get worse. The best thing women can do is to let men know that it is all right for them to share their temptation if they want to.

Next, notice and appreciate your husband's efforts to honor you. Keep your antenna up, and you'll be surprised by just how *many* daily choices he must make to keep his thought life pure in this culture.

Now that my radar is on, not only does my husband *not* resent my new awareness; he actually appreciates it. Because now I see the girl with the great figure—and I *notice* when Jeff is tense with the effort of “not looking.” And instead of being upset that he was attracted, I love him for the effort he is making to honor me. Not only will this encourage him; it will encourage you.

It's critical to strike a fine line between affirmation and humiliation. No husband wants to be treated like your son (“What a good boy!”). But you *can* notice if your husband turns away from the latest Victoria's Secret commercial, give him a quick grin, and say “thank you.” (And again, remember that every man is different, so don't jump to conclusions if yours doesn't turn his gaze away. Some are able to handle those commercials just fine.) Many women, when out with their men, will even say things like “What a beautiful girl,” relieving the stress of his effort to “not look.” (Of course, that only works if the attractive woman is like a painting, evoking admiration, not lust!) The key is to understand what is helpful in *your* marriage. Ask him what makes him feel appreciated or makes his struggle easier, and then do it.

A third way to be supportive is to recognize the common factors that make it harder for a man to stay pure in his thought life. Several organizations mention the HALT checklist: **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, **T**ired. If a man is working long hours, is out of sorts with the world (or his spouse), feels unappreciated, feels like a failure as a provider, or is far from home on a business trip—if he is hungry, angry, lonely, or tired—any or all of those things could weaken his resolve. If you've ever found yourself eating the entire box of cookies when you feel unhappy, you can probably understand this dynamic.

Champion modesty in yourself and others

Let's face it, women who are totally clueless about this problem can also thoughtlessly contribute to it. After all, the images in a man's mental Rolodex come from *somewhere*—and it's not just from pictures. The eye magnets on the street are choosing to dress the way they do.



Women who are totally clueless about this problem can also thoughtlessly contribute to it.

Unfortunately, because many women aren't visual, we may not understand what we are doing to the men around us—a fact that men find hard to believe, by the way. One

father asked me why his cautious college-aged daughter dressed in a tight little top and skirt around a particular guy she found attractive. “Surely,” this father said, “surely she knows what she’s doing!”

“Yes,” I agreed, “she knows she looks good. But she doesn’t realize what is actually going on in that guy’s head. What she’s smugly thinking is, *He thinks I’m cute.*”

“Cute has nothing to do with it!” the shocked father replied. “He’s picturing her *naked!*”

And *that* is what we often don’t get. Many women are just longing for male love and attention, not realizing that the resulting attention is the wrong kind and has nothing to do with love. I guarantee you moms out there (and any dads who may be clandestinely reading this book) that your teenage daughter will *not* like the idea that wearing a tight little top encourages her male classmates to picture her naked.


Unfortunately, I can also guarantee that many adult women reading this book are unwitting fodder for the mental Rolodex of some devoted married man just because of how they dress. It’s natural to enjoy being noticed, but he doesn’t *want* you in there. You’re cluttering up a good husband’s mind and tempting him to dishonor his wife.

It is our responsibility to ensure that, as much as it depends on us, this doesn’t happen.

PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE

It used to be that a man had to seek out visual temptations. Today, they are impossible to avoid. So spend your energy helping him fight the temptations of the culture instead of fighting him.

Finally, realize that God doesn't make mistakes. One of my closest friends relates that when she was a new bride at twenty-three years old, she was very shaken up when she discovered that her sweet husband had this thought-life issue. She cried out to God, "Why did You create him like this?" And then she realized: God *did* create him like this, and He said His creation was *good*. We may be fallible, but we are created the way we are for a purpose.



God did create him like this. And He said His creation was good.

And God has something good in mind for you—and for the man you love.

