

“Naked at Lunch is a total joy.”

—Meghan Daum -

NAKED



MARK  
HASKELL  
SMITH



**A RELUCTANT NUDIST'S ADVENTURES  
IN THE CLOTHING-OPTIONAL WORLD**

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# **Naked at Lunch**

*A Reluctant Nudist's Adventures  
in the Clothing-Optional World*

**Mark Haskell Smith**



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For David L. Ulin and Tod Goldberg

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*You're born naked and the rest is drag.*

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—RuPaul

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# I'm on a Boat

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We are safely away and you can now enjoy a . . .”

There was a pause, as if the cruise director was having trouble choosing what, exactly, I should call what was about to happen. Finally he said, “. . . a carefree environment.”

The announcement was still reverberating through the ship when the scrotum airing began in earnest; shorts and shirts dropped to the ground and penises dangled in the South Florida sun. Permission had been granted. Now buttocks could swing from side to side without restriction, and breasts—finally released from the prison of blouse and brassiere—burst into the open, to be caressed by soft tropical breezes. We were on a boat. One thousand eight hundred and sixty-six nudists living the “anti-textile” dream.

Not that some of them weren't almost nude before the cruise director gave the all clear. Many were in various states of undress, itching to toss their clothes aside. A skeletal man in his eighties wandered around the ship wearing only a fluorescent thong, his loose skin draped around his bones in cascades that looked like freckled frosting, and a gigantic, barrel-chested man—he looked like he'd eaten an actual barrel—lumbered around the lido deck on an industrial-strength cane wearing only a loincloth. A few people soaked in Jacuzzis, surreptitiously slipping out of their swimsuits, while the lewdly rebellious sat by the pool, looking somewhat forlorn, waiting for the green light. These were nudists, after all. And they had paid big bucks to frolic in the buff. When the all clear was sounded, they didn't hesitate.

I had never been on a cruise ship before—I'd never even been interested in being on a cruise ship—but this wasn't just any cruise, this was the Big Nude Boat, a special charter offered by Bare Necessities, the premier “nakation”\* travel agency. Not only that, the cruise was on board the *Nieuw Amsterdam*, one of the Holland America Line's more luxurious ships, which meant this wasn't a backwoods RV-park nudist resort or Hippie Hollow down by the lake; this was the deluxe version of nonsexual social nude recreation. Meaning nudism. Or naturism. Depending on who you ask. There are several theories floating around about which word means what—historically speaking there are some actual distinctions—but the reality was that I was on a boat with almost two thousand people who weren't wearing clothes.

I am fascinated by subcultures: the Dead Heads and Juggalos who've built unique cultures out of following their favorite bands as they tour the country, the amateur mechanical engineers who build robots in their garages, the home brewers who experiment with beer in their kitchens, and the foodies who eat at illegal restaurants in people's homes. People do strange things. They collect stamps and watch trains, they dress their pets to look like famous characters from movies, they dress themselves to look like anime characters, they go to conventions in woodland animal costumes and have group sex in “plushie piles.” All of these activities have their own culture, a network of people who speak a specific kind of lingo that outsiders don't understand. I'm especially fascinated by subcultures that are deemed morally suspect or quasi-legal: the people who pursue their passion even if it means possible imprisonment or stigmatization by society. I can't help it. I like the true believers. The fanatics.

My first nonfiction book was about the culture of cannabis connoisseurs and the underground botanists who source heirloom varietals of marijuana from all over the world. Cannabis culture has a rich history filled with colorful characters. These are men and women who defy oppressive antidrug

laws and good-naturedly don't give a fuck about societal norms. It wasn't much of a leap for me to become intrigued by the world of nudism. Or as my wife said, "First you're stoned all the time and now you're going to be naked? Why can't you write a book about cheese? You like cheese."

The loudspeaker on the ship crackled to life and the cruise director added a caveat: "I would like to remind you that you must wear a cover-up in the dining areas."

Which didn't really keep anyone from being naked in the dining areas. Or in the bars. Or anywhere for that matter. They were naked on deck and in the screening room, the library, the casino, and the buffet line. Nudists crowded around the piano bar and requested songs by Elton John and Billy Joel. The large theater where stage shows were presented was filled with naked men and women. They were in the elevators, walking down the corridors, playing Ping-Pong, lifting weights in the gym, and guzzling cocktails by the pool.

In the fitness center someone asked the ship's in-house yoga teacher if people had to wear clothes in the yoga classes. The teacher gave her a curious look and then, as the true reality of the question sunk in—what I can only imagine was the image of a roomful of naked people doing down dog—flashing through her head—her face bloomed in panic and she said, "Oh yeah. In the class. Clothes. You have to wear clothes."

But other than the yoga class, everywhere you looked, testicles and breasts hung low and pendulous, swaying side to side as the boat rocked in the open ocean; billows of bulbous flesh spilling off torsos, flowing earthward like the goop inside a lava lamp. The entire human body presented in all its natural nature was unavoidably on display.

I was sitting at what was called the Ocean Bar that first evening when I overheard a man, a silver-haired smoothy, complain loudly that there were too many old people on the cruise.\*\* "I'm guessing the median age is sixty-five," he said. He was sixty-two.

When old people complain that there are too many old people, then you really know there are too many old people.

Most of the passengers were retirees and most of them were American. Which is to say that there were a lot of overweight people strutting around in their birthday suits. That they did so unself-consciously, without any hint of the neurotic body obsession that has created generations of diet-obsessed, bulimic, anorexic, or just plain miserable people, was something that I found almost inspirational. They weren't ashamed of their bodies, they seemed to accept themselves and one another for who they are and what they were, and, best of all, they had fun doing it.

Not all of them were retired. I met a Harvard professor, a radiologist, a tool salesman, and a couple of people serving in the armed forces. There were pharmaceutical sales reps, retail clerks, photographers, scientists, doctors, corporate executives, teachers, lawyers, paralegals, and people who really didn't want to talk about work while they were on vacation.

And of course not everyone was fat and saggy. There was a large LGBT contingent who were on the healthy end of the body mass index, and there were some actual bona fide young people, trim and tattooed men and women in their twenties who clung together as if the naked retirees were harbingers of some sort of terrifying apocalypse. The naked twentysomethings gazed at the naked seventysomethings as if they could suddenly see the future, like a portal had opened in the time-space continuum and revealed a dystopian world where gravity and a sedentary lifestyle conspired to make everyone expand and sag. It was heartbreakingly inevitable. Perhaps this glimpse into the abyss explained some of the uninhibited alcohol consumption among the younger set.

The guests on the nude cruise were predominantly Caucasian, although there were a few South Asians, East Asians, and African Americans in the clothes-free contingent. They came from all over



Some were trying to escape the polar vortex that was bringing freezing wind and record snowfalls to cities like Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Boston; others were from warm climates like Tampa, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and San Diego; nudists from Kansas, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Texas represented the heartland. There were foreign nudists too: Canadians from Toronto and Quebec, and real outliers, people from far-flung countries like Finland, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands. All these people, coming all this way, for the express purpose of standing around on the lido deck of a cruise ship and letting it all hang out.

Some clutched their daily drink specials in fluorescent plastic cocktail glasses, some relaxed in lounge chairs, others danced to the thumping sound system, a few cavorted in the hot tub, but most of them were just talking and laughing and being extremely friendly with one another.

And no one wore clothes.

What would make seemingly ordinary people spend thousands of dollars for the opportunity to waggle their penises around other waggling penises? What were they thinking? What's the appeal? Were they getting some kind of exhibitionistic thrill? Or were they voyeurs? Did the topless women playing blackjack feel empowered? What was happening?

That's what I was here to find out. The idea of eating a slice of pizza and drinking a beer naked on the deck of a cruise ship with hundreds of other naked people seemed bizarre to me. At the very least, it made me uncomfortable; and I really like pizza and beer. But if I wanted to experience the culture of nudism, if I wanted to understand what made someone risk their job or their freedom or even their reputation to do this, well, I had to get naked like everybody else.

\* "Nakation" is a portmanteau of "naked" and "vacation," but you probably figured that out on your own.

\*\* He had an alarming obsession with photographing women's vulvas. To his credit, he always asked for permission.

# Interview with a Nudist

Apparently, there are rules for being a nudist. It's not enough to drop trou and waggle your genitals in the sunshine. That might be fun—or, depending where you are, get you arrested—but it's not nudism. You can take off your clothes and run across a football field, but that's not nudism, that's streaking. Jump in a lake and frolic naked with several of your friends? That's skinny-dipping. Fun, but not nudism. Even bathing in a Japanese *onsen* isn't nudism. Sure you're naked and with a bunch of other naked people in a hot spring, but after you've cleaned and soaked and refreshed in the cold plunge, you get dressed and go out for ramen. A nudist would eat noodles naked, with other naked people.

I am not a nudist. Except for a few occasions of teenage skinny-dipping, I have mostly kept my genitals covered. At least when I'm in public. I don't practice "social nudism" or "backyard naturism" or any kind of nudism, really, but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy being naked. I sleep in the nude, take baths and showers in the nude, and I happily cavort au naturel in the privacy of my own bedroom. I'm not a prude; I just don't hang around with other people without wearing some kind of clothing. Except for with my wife, but she's used to me.

I have never felt an impulse to shed my clothes in public. In fact, I feel a strong compulsion to keep my clothes on and to be around other people who also keep their clothes on. I even try to wear a combination of clothing that approximates something I think of as *style*. You can blame it on social conditioning, but I know I'm not alone in this. The body image issues that advertising and media inoculated me with from an early age—those feelings of inadequacy, the fears of being ridiculed for being pudgy or hairy or circumcised or just, you know, uncool—are deeply embedded in my consciousness and shared by most of the people I know.

So what is a nudist? In his eccentric omnibus *The Nudist Idea*, historian Cec Cinder provides a kind of kitchen sink definition: "the nudist idea is the foundation of a distinct, entire and wholesome philosophy, one much, much larger in scope than simple collective nakedness, one that embraces sexual sanity, anti-militarism, good health, robust conditioning, inter-gender respect, political libertarianism, religious tolerance, animal rights, First Amendment political freedoms, population reduction and shrinking government and bureaucracies."<sup>1</sup>

I'm not sure that nudism is about animal rights or population reduction or shrinking the size of the government—those sound like an author tacking on some political talking points—but then again, I'm just getting started looking at nudism; maybe it is all those things.

Social nudism came to the United States from Germany in 1929, and since that time various nudist and nudist groups have struggled to define what constitutes nudism. For some it's a lifestyle choice that includes healthy eating habits, exercise, and an appreciation of nature. Others take a more philosophical view and look at nudism as a political stance against a repressive "textile-centric" society that promotes consumerism and rapacious capitalist growth at the expense of our environment and mental health. Some nudists like the fact that their bodies are accepted for how they really are and not what fashion and advertising say they should look like. Some folks just like the way it feels to relax in the sun without any clothes on.

But while various groups have different agendas and interpretations, they all pretty much agree that nudism is a social activity. If you're alone without any clothes on, you're just naked, but if you are

a mixed group of men and women engaged in the conscious practice of standing around in the buff. Then you are a nudist practicing nudism.<sup>2</sup>

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So why do some people like to get naked and hang out with other naked people? What's the attraction? Is it some kind of primal urge? If society didn't tell us we had to wear clothes, would we all just strip down and frolic in the fields?

My son Jules, when he was a toddler, used to race around the house wearing nothing but a small superhero cape made out of a counterfeit Hermès scarf. I would tie it around his neck and it seemed to propel him, like it gave him actual superpowers. He'd splutter rocket sounds as he ran, trying to go fast enough to make the scarf billow in his slipstream like a proper superhero's cape. Sometimes he would turn his head to admire his cape as he ran, which was not always sensible, but the occasional collisions with furniture or walls or trees only seemed to make him more determined.

Naturally the cape was the only thing he wore and he refused to wear clothes when he was home. No shoes, no diaper, no T-shirt. It was hard to argue with him. We lived in Southern California and it wasn't like he needed clothing to stay warm. So he ran and played and terrorized his older sister on playdates and watched television wearing nothing more than his faux Hermès scarf. Was he just pretending to be a superhero? Or is it deeper than that? Is there some kind of innate impulse to be naked that society has shamed out of us?\*\*\* Even in the Bible it says that Adam and Eve "were born naked, yet they felt no shame." So, like, what happened? When did hanging out in the nude become illegal? When did it become something that only weirdos and hippies did?

I decided that a good place to start was to talk to a real red-blooded card-carrying American nudist, so I arranged an interview with prominent American naturist Mark Storey and bought a ticket to Seattle. Not only is Mark Storey a board member of the Naturist Action Committee and founding member of the Body Freedom Collaborative, a group that advocates for clothing-optional beaches and started World Naked Gardening Day, but he's also an editor at *N*, *The Magazine of Naturist Living* and author of the book *Cinema Au Naturel: A History of Nudist Film* and editor of *Theatre au Naturel: A Collection of Naturist Plays*. In addition to that, he's written prolifically on the history of nudism, civil disobedience, and legal issues involving public nudity.

In other words: he's a nudist's nudist.

...

Seattle is, on a good day, a cool and drippy climate; a place where lichen grows abundantly, the flora is lush and verdant, and the light is tinged with a soft gray quality—one of those subtle, almost institutional colors, like something you might find on the walls of the Swedish Institute for Depression Studies. I used to live in Seattle so I came prepared for a certain amount of moisture. But an unusual cold front had moved in and temperatures had dropped to near freezing. I tightened my scarf and pulled my beanie down over my ears as I stood shivering in the drizzle at a bus stop, wondering how many days a nudist in the Pacific Northwest gets to be outdoors without developing hypothermia.

Storey had agreed to meet me at Bauhaus Books and Coffee, a groovy espresso bar stuck in a kind of no-man's-land between Seattle's downtown and the hip Capitol Hill neighborhood. To be honest, I didn't know what to expect from this meeting. Would he be some kind of freaky evangelist for nudism? The Johnny Appleseed of skinny-dipping, the Che Guevara of weenie wagging? Would he be wearing clothes? Worse, would he insist I take my clothes off to interview him? It was way too cool for that.

I found the coffee shop without a problem; in fact I used to live a couple of blocks away, but the

was years ago, when the word “barista” was just a twinkle in some marketing executive’s eye. Bauhaus has large windows that face the street and let in enough light to keep you from feeling that you’re going to get seasonal affective disorder and a wall of shelves that give the place a Goth library vibe. It also has a second floor, a loftlike space, which is where I found Mark Storey sitting at a table surrounded by stylish young people sipping coffee and staring intently at digital devices.

Storey has a handsome, expressive face, and he shifts easily between open laughter and thoughtful introspection. He is also tall, six foot three, which makes him a large nudist. And for someone whose day job is teaching philosophy at a local college, he looks like he’s pretty athletic.

“I got into the cliché nudist volleyball, and started touring western states doing the nudist volleyball tournaments. That was fun.”

Apparently the bump, set, and spike used to be quite popular among nudists.

“Oh yeah. I have gotten to referee the National Nudist Women’s Volleyball Tournament. That is something no one can take away from me. That was an amazing thing.”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or serious, until I realize he’s both. Although being a nude volleyball player is not without perils, as illustrated when Storey described the hiring process for his current teaching position.

“The very week that I’m going through the interview process, getting my first full-time job at a school I really wanted to teach at, the magazine I work for decided at that time to put me on the cover full frontal, blocking the volleyball. It was the volleyball issue. I thought, ‘Oh, this is going to screw me up so bad.’”

“Maybe they didn’t look at your face,” I suggested.

He shrugged. “Later, I’m chair of the department and I’m having to deal with an adjunct instructor. I take him out to lunch, we’re chatting. He tells me his tale of woe or whatever. It was all academic stuff. And then he said, ‘Well, it’s nothing like your story.’ I go, ‘What are you talking about?’ And he said, ‘Well, the magazine. You with the volleyball cover.’ I said, ‘You know about that?’ And he says ‘Everybody knew about that!’”

“Maybe that kind of thing is expected from philosophers.”

He smiled. “I work with some cool people.”

We paused and sipped our coffees. I had to admit that Bauhaus made a pretty good cup. Fortified with a jolt of caffeine, I cut to the chase.

“So how did you get into naturism? I’m assuming you didn’t wake up one morning and decide to stop wearing clothes.”

Storey laughed. “Everybody’s got their own story, but for me, my dad would take my brother and me fishing in the Sierra mountains. My dad was totally cheap. If we hooked a lure on a log in the stream, we had to go get it. For the first few years, I would do it, but I’d be all wet the rest of the day. He paused and took another sip of coffee. “We were out in the boondocks, there was nobody around. And one time I decided I’m going to take my jeans and shirt off to go in. As soon as I got in the water because I’m in sixth, seventh grade, I’m thinking, ‘This is the coolest thing in the world.’ I started hooking lures like crazy thereafter, just so I could go in there and go capture them. My dad could not figure out why I was snagging lures all the time. Then, of course, I got to sit out and dry off. ‘Why am I sitting here drying off, might as well go explore the forest.’” He sipped his coffee. “This is as good as a teenager.”

“You just did it because it felt good?”

He nodded. “Then I think when I was about twenty, I remember this vividly. I was laying in bed on a Saturday morning, thinking, ‘I want to do something I’ve never done before.’ Don’t have a clue what

it would be. Wash the dishes, anything. Then I thought, 'I'll go to a nudist camp.'"

His early lure retrieval sounds a lot like my son's cape wearing. "Do you think there's kind of an innate impulse in people to be naked?" I asked.

He paused, shifting in his seat before answering. "I do, but I haven't seen it written anywhere and haven't written it myself yet. But I do. I have come to believe this. This just comes out of my Aristotelian totalism, if you will. I just love Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Confucius. These guys would say that we're fundamentally, essentially social beings. Natural beings. I think once people start skinny-dipping, particularly with others—I'm not talking about sexual situations, but particularly with nonsexualized social nudity—I think people are opening themselves to each other in a way that is incredibly, almost lifesaving for some."

I admit I was skeptical of this. I cocked an eyebrow. "Social nudity saves lives?"

Storey nodded. "I've seen them start crying. They can just feel this big release, because they feel alienated. I actually think that social nudity can reduce alienation, and to the degree we're less alienated from one another, we're able to flourish as human beings."

I realized he was being totally serious. I tried to imagine a bunch of naked people sitting around sobbing—which just sounds like something ripped from my nightmares—while he continued. "Not that I need to be naked to flourish. That would be absurd. That's kind of like broccoli. You don't need broccoli for health, but it's a contributing factor towards health, and I think that social nudity can be a contributing factor towards de-alienation."

I'm not sure being naked with other people will make me feel less alienated, in fact I think it would make me feel even more alienated, so I ask him to clarify what he means.

"A lot of the makeup we wear, the clothes we put on, is just to hide who we are. We don't like who we are so we have to hide things from other people."

That reminded me of a convention I attended once in Philadelphia where I saw herds of men and women, all looking uniform and comfortably corporate in primary-colored polo shirts sporting identical logos. They had ceased to look like individuals and had become extensions of corporate branding strategies. Add in the penchant for khakis and cell phone holsters and suddenly a pod-people *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* scenario emerges.

Of course the flip side of logo wear is the label-spouting snobbery of fashionistas who define who they are by the cost of the clothes on their backs.

I found myself agreeing with Mark Storey about a lot of things. He is persuasive. People do hide themselves, their true selves, in the clothes they wear. Uniforms are a good example. They identify a person's role in society, not as an individual, but as a police officer or firefighter or soldier or FedEx delivery woman.

I can see why clothing can be alienating or, at the very least, depersonalizing, but does shedding your clothes really de-alienate you?

"Certainly. If you just drop trou and walk a hundred yards out in the woods, you'll feel closer to nature."

Or closer to being arrested for indecent exposure.

Storey continued. "I believe it's kind of grounded in our nature as social beings, that this openness to others, when it's in a safe, comforting kind of context, it can kind of be life affirming. Whether people recognize it or not, I actually think that's oftentimes what's happening. Everyone who's been skinny-dipping the first time says it's absolutely fabulous."

"I like to skinny-dip," I said.

Which is a bit of an exaggeration, to be honest. What I really mean is that I enjoyed skinny-dipping

with my high school girlfriend at a lake near where I grew up in Kansas City, but then I was seventeen and madly in lust and probably would've walked across hot coals or handled rattlesnakes if it meant I got to be naked with her. But I don't tell this to Storey.

He leaned forward and looked at me. I could sense a philosophical inquiry coming on.

"Well, why do you like it?"

I started to answer, but he interrupted. "Yeah, there's a kind of surface physicality. It's sensual, it's pleasant. But there are a lot of things that are sensual and pleasant that we don't put our jobs on the line for, or put friendships on the line for. Somehow this is more important to a lot of people. I've been trying for years to figure out what it is. Why do people actually do this kind of stuff and put their jobs on the line for it. You can go to jail. Montana can give you life imprisonment for skinny-dipping a third time."

He's not joking about Montana's laws. A first offense can get you up to six months in jail, a second offense up to a year, and by the time you've been caught with your pants off a third time, the minimum sentence is five years, with the possibility of life in prison.

I took a sip of my coffee and looked around at all the twentysomething hipsters staring at their digital screens. They didn't seem interested in connecting with other people, not in the flesh anyway. Their brows were furrowed in concentration, and it occurred to me that having two boisterous dudes talking about frolicking naked in the sunshine while they sat in the chill and gloom of a January afternoon in Seattle might have a disturbing effect on their ability to focus.

I turned back to Storey. "Humans are sensual beings, your skin is a sense organ, so isn't nudism more of a kind of hedonism?" I am not ashamed to admit that I am a hedonist, not in a self-indulgent sense, but in the classic definition of hedonism as the belief that pleasure and happiness are the highest good. That means that I find as much or more happiness in a good cup of coffee or a fresh mango or a walk in the park as some people feel when they make a lot of money or their team wins the championship. Simple pleasure is underrated. In fact I'm considering joining Hedonist International.

I looked at Storey. "I mean that as a good thing."

He nodded. "There can be that. It can be good or bad. It can go either way. But if what we truly are is rational, social beings, like Aristotle would say, then anything that is allowing me to develop my rational nature and develop my social nature is going to be prima facie good. Anything that keeps me from socializing with people in a good way would be alienating me from others."

"So you're saying the impulse to be naked is more of a social impulse, not a personal one?"

"If we do have an essential nature of being social, and clothing does do something toward alienating us from each other, nudity helps break down alienation. I think that's why so many people like it. Whether they recognize that's why they like it or not."

He took a sip of coffee before he looked at me, almost apologetically.

"This isn't a developed argument, but you asked. I don't know of anybody else saying that. Usually you get the most naive, dingbat answers, like, 'I'm doing this because it's a sense of freedom. Freedom from what? To what?'" He held out his hands and shrugged. "Usually it's just a cliché people have heard once."

As I've begun to look into why people would want to take off their clothes and socialize with other people who want to take off their clothes, I've heard all the clichés. The freedom that nudism theoretically provides is freedom from the paradigm of body image worship that the culture has foisted on us, the bullshit that tells people that their worth as humans depends on how young, fit, and beautiful they are. Multibillion-dollar-a-year mega-industries that constantly remind us through carpet-bombing advertisements that we need to remove unwanted hair, bleach our teeth with las

beams, suck unwanted fat deposits out of our bodies with liposuction, insert saline pouches into our breasts, and go on the Paleo diet, the South Beach diet, the Atkins diet, and whatever new diet someone will invent next. The last thing the diet-industrial complex needs is a bunch of de-alienated people with positive body images. Maybe taking off your clothes and frolicking in the forest can dislodge the cultural brainwash that makes so many people so completely miserable.

I looked at Storey. “I don’t want to sound cynical but do you think that’s really the reason people enjoy being naked?”

He shrugged. “The answer could be rich. It could be different for different people.”

\*\*\* Even though he now lives in San Francisco, Jules no longer runs naked through the streets in a superhero cape. At least, not to my knowledge.

# Skin in the Game

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I don't know where the expression "skin in the game" comes from, but if I was going to get a understanding of nudist culture I'd have to be willing to visit nudist resorts and clothing-option beaches in my birthday suit. Despite whatever awkwardness I might feel being naked in front of other naked people and then doing whatever it is that naked people do when they're naked together, I was also going to be exposed in another way; I'd be putting some skin in the game. Specifically, my pasty pink, easily sunburned skin.

There's a reason why I slather on sunscreen before driving to the grocery store and why I prefer to go to the beach and watch a sunset rather than go in the middle of the day. The old Coppertone ad that said, "Tan . . . don't burn," doesn't seem to apply to me. All I do is burn.

I wondered if I had any kind of genetic disposition, any built-in protection, against chronic sunburn, so I drooled into a tube provided by the recreational genetic testing company 23andMe and sent the saliva to a lab. Despite a promising start—I was 0.7 percent Native American and in the subgroup of E1b1b1a, which meant I had a distant connection to North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula—it turned out that my ancestors were predominantly British, Irish, and "non-specific Northern European." Which meant I needed some professional advice before I dropped trou in broad daylight.

I live in northeast Los Angeles, not far from downtown and the hipster enclave of Highland Park. My dermatologist used to have her office in Pasadena, just a quick ten-minute drive from my house, but she's since moved, so I made an appointment to see her and schlepped across town, toward the ocean and her office in Pacific Palisades.

I'm not a huge fan of doctors, I have to say—I typically go to a Chinese doctor, an acupuncturist, for any medical issues—but I really like my dermatologist. Dr. Dana Jo Grenier has a wry sense of humor, she's funny and fun to talk to, but she also has the kind of detail-obsessed personality that you often find with people who run long distances as fast as they can for fun. Which she used to do. Still, still looks like a long-distance runner, she's lean and wiry, and when she puts on her magnifying glasses to examine your skin, she looks a bit like a praying mantis.

As I took off my clothes for the exam—I didn't know at the time that this would mark the beginning of a year of undressing in front of people—I explained what I was planning to do. She laughed and shook her head.

"When I was first starting out we had a patient who was a nudist and he liked to do headstands in his backyard."

She began examining me, putting her face a few inches from my body, slowly scrutinizing my dermis like a Belgian diamond appraiser examining a stone.

"How long can someone stand on their head in the sun?"

She lifted my arm and stared at it.

"Long enough to develop squamous cell carcinoma on the underside of his scrotum."

She said this matter-of-factly, as if it's information she's just passing along and not some kind of freaky cautionary tale. I wondered how someone could get a sunburn on the underside of his scrotum and then go out the next day and do it again and again. Isn't once enough? Isn't a toasted nutsack a warning sign?



I tried to remain calm. “I’m not planning on doing any inversions in the sun. I’m not even planning on laying out in the sun.”

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She lifted her magnifying goggles and gave me a twisted smile that was a mix of bemusement and genuine concern. “That’s good because genital skin is extremely sensitive.”

Which is sort of the point of genital skin, am I right? But I didn’t say that. Instead I said, “I’ve got that spray-on sunscreen. I can cover all sensitive areas.”

She nodded. “Remember the spray comes out as particles. You’ve got to rub it on. And you need at least SPF 30.”

She made a note in my file, which I’m guessing recommended I seek psychiatric help, and then she looked at me. “And reapply every two hours.”

...

In my personal hierarchy of the arbitrary importance of organs, I usually think of the brain or heart or genitals as my most important organ depending on what I’m doing at the time. But if I really think about it, skin is the most interesting organ. It’s the biggest and, no offense to the spleen, most aesthetically pleasing. Skin function is complex: it’s relatively durable and protects us from germs and infection, it holds our guts inside our skeleton, it stretches to accommodate us through our daily grind of bends and twists and exertions, and it’s a profoundly acute sense organ.

While the collective attributes of skin are important—most people would say that keeping our organs inside our body was enough—it’s our sense of touch that gives meaning and value to the world. We are sensual animals. We like textures. We place a premium on things that feel good. Cashmere, silk, and Egyptian cotton are valuable commodities not because they smell nice or taste good, but because of how soft they feel against our skin. Pressing your skin against someone else’s skin generally feels good and our brain takes this sensation and gives it emotion. Touch creates intimacy. It’s how babies bond with their parents.

Which makes it kind of weird that we spend so much of our lives keeping our skin covered. We are born naked and before we even take our first breath we are swaddled, bound up in cloth as if our skin might somehow peel off if it makes contact with air. It’s our first barrier to intimacy and connection, and it sets in motion a progression of textiles, through diapers and jumpers to dresses and jeans, until we attain adulthood and proudly hang the symbols of modern civilization, Coco Chanel’s Little Black Dress or a classic Navy Blazer, in our closet. Then comes a series of jeans and khakis and skirts and capris and pajamas and bathrobes until we finally get around to kicking the bucket and are laid to rest in our Sunday best or wrapped in a shroud and immolated.

No wonder babies are born screaming.

No wonder we are obsessed with skin.

Western society equates skin with sex. When we’re consciously trying to be sexy, we wear clothes that “hug our bodies” and “show some skin.” Plunging necklines, backless dresses, miniskirts, and fishnet stockings all reveal ample amounts of skin and are considered evocative of sexuality. Our celebrity culture feeds on flesh; hemlines and cleavage and nipple slips are analyzed and dissected by pundits on television and in magazines. People are judged by how much skin they show and how they show it. And in Los Angeles, people are judged by their tattoos and how they show them. It’s skin as a mobile art gallery.

The dark side of this is when a woman who is “showing some skin” is sexually assaulted and then accused of “asking for it” because of the way she was dressed. On January 24, 2011, a law enforcement officer in Toronto, Canada, famously advised victims of sexual assault to “avoid dressing

like sluts.” Which is a stupid thing to say, obviously, and launched a wave of protests called “slut walks,” where women march against victim blaming and “slut shaming” by dressing however the hell they want. If you listen to what the fashion industry says, what the media tells us, what the obsession with self-portraits plastered on social media reveals, then you could be brainwashed into believing that looking sexy is the ultimate achievement of a human being alive in the twenty-first century. But if something bad happens to you, it’s your fault because of the way you were dressed. That is a fucked up kind of thinking.

Strip away the marketing campaigns designed to sell you stuff for your skin, ignore the television ads and reality programs where showing skin is a sign of sexuality, and look at skin as the simple sense organ it is, and you quickly realize that skin is the gateway to hedonism. Of course it is. Skin looks good, it feels good; you want to touch it, you want to be touched. Which explains why some societies find it threatening; too much skin is too much connection, too much intimacy, too much sex. I think of the burka and niqab as examples of extreme anti-skin apparel, though to be fair, every culture has dress codes.

This compulsion to keep our skin covered is a relatively recent development in human evolution. According to archaeologists, we didn’t start wearing jeans or haute couture or velour tracksuits or any kind of clothing until about forty thousand years ago. For the hundred or so thousand years that preceded that moment, humans lived in tropical climates and wore very little except the skin they were born with. There are still indigenous peoples living this way in the world: the Zo’é people of the northern Amazon rain forest, the Mursi and Himba tribes of Ethiopia, and the Kombai of Papua New Guinea are just a few of roughly a dozen societies that live textile free. Which is not to say they don’t accessorize their bodies with various piercings, tattoos, lip extensions, body paints, and penis gourds—even an isolated tribe likes to have style.

Humans are relatively hairless compared with other hominids—chimpanzees and gorillas, for example—because, evolutionarily speaking, we were meant to live in a tropical climate. This whole cold-weather, reindeer-sweatered, fondue thing is an aberration. Unlike other animals, we developed the ability to process the heat and humidity of equatorial regions. In other words: we sweat. Anthropologist Nina G. Jablonski states in her book *Skin: A Natural History*, “For an active primate living in a hot environment, having a functionally naked and actively sweating skin is the best way to maintain a steady body temperature and—literally—to keep a cool head.”<sup>4</sup>

Most animals have very few sweat glands and are wrapped in fur that insulates them. For example, a dog can only cool itself by panting, which is why they tend to overheat in hot weather. Our ability to sweat gave us the evolutionary edge, keeping our bodies cool and allowing early humans to go about the hard work of foraging for food, often covering large distances. This cooling function gave us the physical stamina for what’s called persistence hunting—basically chasing antelope or other furry animals on a sweltering day and annoying them until they dropped dead of heat stroke. Some evolutionary anthropologists have theorized that persistence hunting led to an increase of protein-rich foods in human diets, which led to brain development, which led to technological innovations like bronze and iron, which led to Coco Chanel and her Little Black Dress or, if you’re so inclined, the velour tracksuit. For those who take a more faith-based approach to human development, you could say that God put Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden—implying that the Garden of Eden must’ve been somewhere in the tropics—but they were still naked, hairless, and sweaty.

However, none of these evolutionary theories means that I’m going to run naked through the streets of Los Angeles persistence hunting my favorite taco truck. That would be crazy. I could get sunburned on my genitals.

Aside from being a sophisticated cooling system, our skin allows our bodies to absorb vitamin D, which is essential for calcium assimilation and healthy bone development. Without adequate exposure to sunlight, a person can develop rickets, a disease that creates a softening and deformity of the bones and can lead to bowleggedness and other abnormalities. When the industrial revolution began cranking up its smokestacks and people crowded into coal-smogged cities to work in factories, rickets became rampant.

In 1875 a Scottish missionary and physician named Theobald Palm moved to the city of Niigata, Japan, where he engaged in the traditional missionary work of healing the sick and converting the locals to Christianity. Trained at the Edinburgh University School of Medicine, Palm had seen firsthand the toll taken by rickets, which, at the time, affected an estimated 60 to 80 percent of children in the United Kingdom. But in Japan, rickets was virtually nonexistent. Palm was intrigued by this and began writing to doctors and missionaries in countries around the world, compiling a study of rickets based on geography.

Medical science in the nineteenth century had a lot of theories, but doctors didn't really know what caused the disease. They speculated that rickets was an infection, or maybe a congenital condition, something caused by urban crowding and air pollution, or perhaps it could have something to do with a lack of vitamins, like scurvy.

Theobald Palm made it his mission to figure it out.

Not that he didn't have other things to do too. He also had to convert heathens to Christianity, which, in a predominantly Buddhist country, didn't go as smoothly as he'd hoped. In the summer of 1879, a crowd attacked Palm and destroyed his "preaching-place" because they felt that a cholera epidemic was caused by Christians.<sup>5</sup>

In 1885 he returned to northwest England and was again struck by the prevalence of children with rickets in the cities. But Palm had lived for a time in Tokyo, which, while a crowded urban environment, didn't have incidents of the disease, so he knew that the cause wasn't as simple as overcrowding, it was simpler. Studying maps and the anecdotal accounts he'd gathered from missionaries around the world, Palm posited that the main difference between areas that had rickets and areas that did not was sunlight.

In 1890 he published a paper called "The Geographic Distribution and Etiology of Rickets" in a medical journal called *Practitioner*. Of course in 1890 no one understood how sunlight caused the synthesis of vitamin D, and the medical establishment largely ignored Palm's observations.<sup>6</sup>

But other researchers were looking into the benefits of sunlight, and in 1903 the Danish scientist Niels Ryberg Finsen won the Nobel Prize for his work on light therapy and its ability to inhibit bacteria growth—in other words, sunlight as an antibiotic—and by the time 1920 rolled around a doctor named Auguste Rollier had opened "sunshine schools" in Switzerland. Early photos of these schools show shirtless children sitting outdoors, their desks arranged in neat rows as they studied and tanned at the same time. Heliotherapy—after Helios, Greek god of the sun—soon became the rage. Daniel Freund, in his excellent book on the subject, *American Sunshine: Diseases of Darkness and the Quest for Natural Light*, quotes a typically gushing article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1927 describing "the curative effects of sunlight therapy on dry and scaly skin, asthma, tuberculosis, bladder conditions, runny ears, polio, and of course, rickets."<sup>7</sup>

Nowadays we don't worry too much about rickets, although a 2012 report from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health in England suggests we should, warning that cases of rickets have risen fourfold since the mid-1990s.<sup>8</sup> This new outbreak is blamed on a number of factors, such as children spending the majority of their time watching television and playing on their computers, and

in a 2013 BBC News report, a six-year-old boy in Leicestershire developed rickets because his mother constantly slathered him in SPF 50 sunblock.<sup>9</sup> Of course not getting enough sunshine is only one of the problems related to the disease; poverty and malnutrition play major roles as well.

Then there's seasonal affective disorder (SAD), which is a kind of moody depression and ennui that affects people who live in northern climates with extremely long dark winters. It's more common in extreme places like Finland and northern Alaska, but has been known to affect people in New England and the Pacific Northwest. One effective treatment for SAD is to spend a few hours a day getting bombarded by bright lights and UV radiation. Obviously humans need a certain amount of sunlight to thrive both physically and mentally but, just like really tasty cocktails or an unlimited amount of free gelato, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing.

It used to be that lying out in the sun was supposed to be good for you—sunshine gave you a healthy glow. People would slather cocoa butter or baby oil on their bodies with the intention of broiling themselves a rich mahogany color. But as these glowing, healthy tans began to age, signs of solar wear and tear became evident. The deeply bronzed sex appeal of George Hamilton and the sun-kissed vigor of girls in bikinis gave way to precancerous growths, crinkled skin, and leathery hide. The Saint-Tropez tan has gone the way of the cigarette and the three-martini lunch. Things once considered glamorous are now suspect habits and health risks.\*\*\*\* You'd be nuts to tan like that in this day and age. Now a sunburn is more than just a painful and unpleasant condition; overexposure to ultraviolet radiation from sunlight can damage cellular DNA and lead to all kinds of skin problems. As Jablonski says, "UVA has been implicated as a major culprit in the premature aging of skin caused by sun exposure (known as photoaging), and it has been associated in epidemiological studies with the most dangerous form of skin cancer, malignant melanoma."<sup>10</sup>

Back in the examination room, Dr. Grenier lifted my arm and peered at some freckles. She took out her magnifying glasses and looked at me. "You know, this is a dangerous assignment. Any damage you do, you'll live with for the rest of your life."

Which sounded dramatic. It's not like I'm headed into a war zone on a mission behind enemy lines. But then I'm not sure I want to be the old geezer who points out misshapen warts and precancerous moles while telling stories about that nudist resort I went to.

I tried to reassure her. "I won't be laying out in the sun. I'll put on lots of sunscreen. And I'll wear a hat."

She didn't seem convinced. She handed me a list of recommended sunscreens and shook her head.

"They should give you combat pay."

\*\*\*\* A two-margarita lunch is, however, perfectly acceptable.

# Gymnophobia

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Gymnophobia” is the technical word for “a severe and abnormal fear of nakedness.” It’s easy to mock sufferers of this phobia, as David Cross did so brilliantly as the character Tobias Fünke in the television series *Arrested Development*. In the show Tobias has “never-nude syndrome” and wears a pair of cut-off denim shorts at all times, with a tube sock underneath so that no one, including himself, ever sees his genitalia. In the show it’s taken to an extreme for comic effect, but for people who really are gymnophobic, just the thought of getting naked can cause shortness of breath, irregular heartbeat, and nausea; the sight of people without clothes can induce a panic attack; and a stroll through a nudist resort could result in a full-blown psychotic episode.

It’s hard to estimate how many people suffer from this phobia because nobody really wants to admit he or she has it. Being gymnophobic can expose you to ridicule and mockery, even if it does come from body image anxieties, shame, and possible sexual trauma. Some psychologists speculate that it is related to obsessive-compulsive disorder.

I think that most of us can relate to the anxiety that arises from being naked in front of other people. Just think back to high school gym class and walking into the showers. Or the locker room at your health club. And how many people prefer to have sex with the lights off? When you start to think about it, it seems like there is a low level of gymnophobia running through almost everyone. Being naked, or seeing someone who’s naked, can be an uncomfortable experience. Unusual, to say the least.

One of the treatments for this phobia is cognitive behavior modification through what’s called “exposure therapy.” It’s pretty much what you think it is.

I can’t say I suffer from gymnophobia. I don’t have a fear of seeing other people naked and I’m not necessarily fearful of being naked myself. Which is not to say I’m immodest. I’m not the guy who struts around the locker room swinging his wang for everyone to look at; I’m adept at wrapping a towel around my waist. But then I had never been to a nudist resort. I had never experienced being naked in front of other naked people in a place where every single person is naked. You can’t not be naked—being nude is the entrance fee, the prerequisite to entering this realm. The gymnophobic need not apply. Or as the sign clearly states: SWIM ATTIRE IS NOT ALLOWED IN THE POOL AREA.

Finding a nudist resort for my first experience of nonsexual social nudism wasn’t as difficult as I thought it might be. Nudism is a predominantly warm-weather activity and in Southern California, where I live, there is a surprising number of places that cater to anyone seeking a little exposure therapy.

Palm Springs is only a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, and with its average temperature of 70 degrees and annual precipitation of less than six inches, it is an ideal spot for nude recreation. The area was originally settled by the Cahuilla Indians who lived near a large lake fed by the Colorado River. The lake dried up a long time ago but that hasn’t stopped people from turning Palm Springs into a swinging resort town. Nowadays it’s an upscale desert oasis dotted with spas and golf courses and tennis courts. People come from all over the world to lie out in the sun and look at palm trees.

I wasn’t particularly surprised to discover that the former playground of Frank Sinatra and his cocktail-quaffing cohorts is also a nude tanning mecca, but I was surprised at how many there were. There are at least a half dozen “clothing-optional” resorts in Palm Springs, but only two that I found that don’t cater exclusively to gay men. I briefly considered going to one of the gay resorts but, I’ll

honest, I am not a gay man, I am shockingly heteronormative.

On its website the Terra Cotta Inn proudly acclaims itself as Palm Springs' "most popular tople and nude sunbathing resort" and cites a *Huffington Post* article proclaiming that the inn is ranked number one of the "Top 11 Nudist Resorts around the World to Visit." It also boasts that it is a great place for your first nudist experience. As the brochure says, "Not a nudist or naturist? Never vacationed at nude beaches before? No problem!"

But when I called to make a reservation there was a problem. I was informed that it was a "couples only" resort. Or as the woman who answered the phone said, "We have a lot of first-timers and we like to reassure the ladies that the men here are all married and with their wives."

As if married men weren't just as capable of gawking and leering at naked women as single men.

"I'm married," I assured her.

"You're more than welcome to come with your wife. We'd be happy to have you." She sounded unnaturally chirpy when she said this.

"But my wife doesn't want to come."

Which was true. She had zero interest in being naked around other naked people. When I told her the Terra Cotta Inn wasn't going to make a reservation unless she came along, she shook her head and said, "No fucking way."

It's not because she doesn't look good naked—I'm biased, but I think she looks fantastic—or that she suffers from any anxiety or hidden fears. She definitely doesn't have gymnophobia. She just doesn't want to try nonsexual social nudism. At least not at a resort in Palm Springs. In fact, she finds it fairly laughable that I'm going to run around naked with other naked people. At least *she* laughs about it.

A lot.

I reminded her that this was all part of the process. You can't study a culture from a distance; you've got to immerse yourself to gain any true understanding.\*\*\*\*\* Like Dian Fossey might've said, if I'm going to study gorillas, I've got to go out into the mist.

I tried again with the reservationist at the Terra Cotta Inn. "It'll be my first time and you guys are famous for first-timers."

I heard a sigh on the other end of the phone.

"Like I said, we're a couples resort." She said this with that resigned there's-nothing-I-can-do-about-it voice and then said good-bye. I found her attitude especially annoying because on the resort website it says, "The Terra Cotta Inn is the best not because we are exclusive and snobby (we jokingly recommend those people to go elsewhere). Quite the contrary, we're the best because we have such a friendly atmosphere and the guests have so much fun. If you naturally have a smile, you will love our nudist resort."

I naturally have a smile, I'm smiling right now, but I guess I'll never grin and bare it at the Terra Cotta Inn.

While the Terra Cotta Inn might be biased against single men seeking a clothing-free experience, the nearby Desert Sun Resort is not in the discrimination business. It welcomes single men and women, but with the excellent caveat: "Behavior requiring an apology is not tolerated."

I packed up a variety of suncreening and sunblocking products—creams and sprays and gels and sticks of anti-ultraviolet technology—and threw them in my trusty Subaru Forester along with a hat and some towels. Normally I'm someone who travels with a swimsuit; even if I'm going to Moscow in February I'll pack it because you just never know, you might get invited to jump into a natural hot spring or swim in a hotel pool, so it felt slightly unnerving, like I was courting disaster, to leave m

swim trunks at home.

I kissed my wife good-bye and hit the road.

I know what you're thinking and I have to admit that it did feel strange to be going to a nudist resort to lie around naked with other naked people without her. But I had questions that needed answers. Questions like: What did it feel like to be naked in a social setting? What was the appeal?

I would like to say that the drive from Los Angeles to Palm Springs was, as Joan Didion famously said, "haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains, devastated by the hot dry Santa Ana wind," but really the freeway is a traffic-clogged strip of concrete bordered by an endless barrage of logos and litter—corporate signage for Applebee's and Del Taco and Petco and everyone else who's got some business selling something out there with a sign to prove it—punctuated by the occasional billboard for a "gentlemen's club" and cell phone towers disguised as non-native trees.

It's only after you enter the pass that cuts between the San Jacinto and San Bernadino Mountains that the landscape begins to change. The sprawl of suburban housing developments and shitty fast-food restaurants gives way to scrubby desert, railroad tracks, and a high-end outlet mall where busloads of tourists gorge on discounted luxury goods and designer clothes. The freeway passes the mall and then you're greeted by an architectural aberration, the skyscraperish Morongo Casino, run by the Morongo Band of Mission Indians, which juts out of the surrounding desert like an unwanted boner.

Past the casino, mountains rise up on both sides of the freeway and the road drops down into the Coachella Valley, a vast expanse of brown dotted by more than three thousand windmills, their white blades rotating in the wind. Normally I love seeing the windmills, but this time I got a queasy feeling. Were they a metaphor for my own quixotic quest? Or was this the first hint of heretofore unknown gymophobia?

There's a buzzer at the entrance to the Desert Sun Resort. There are no windows, no flashing neon—just a discreet sign and a large wooden door. A security camera eyeballed me from overhead. I pushed the button, announced myself, and a friendly voice told me to "come on in."

The resort is on one of the main streets just north of downtown Palm Springs, but you wouldn't know it was a clothing-free facility if you walked by. It looks like most of the other Mojave-blasted stucco complexes in the area, only this one has high walls and lush foliage creating a barricade against the outside world.

An affable man in a bright yellow polo shirt checked me in and walked me through a surprisingly extensive list of rules. Many of the rules were typical of any resort—admonitions to shower before entering the pool, to use the hot tub at your own risk, and not to bring pets into the guest rooms. There were some that I had never seen before:

- Overt sexual behavior, or the appearance of overt sexual behavior, is strictly prohibited.
- Proper naturist etiquette requires use of a towel while seated when nude.
- Do not use cell phones/laptops/cameras/stereos anywhere on the resort except for inside hotel rooms. iPads, Kindles, or tablets are permitted on the grounds *if* a Desert Sun Resort business card is taped over the camera lens.
- Do not gawk at guests.
- Do not wear swimming suits/undergarments at any time for any reason. No clothing is necessary at any time, anywhere within the facility.

Which didn't mean that nudity was required everywhere at all times. You can slip on a pair of shorts or a shirt if you really want to. Just not around the pool.

The resort is large and attractive, with villas and courtyard suites set around landscaped ponds and man-made streams. There are tennis courts, a restaurant, a spa, and three separate pool areas. M

room was in what they called the Chaparral Hotel, which turned out to be a classic motel that had been given a cosmetic upgrade and was right next to the activity pool. The room was completely generic—it looked like every motel room in North America and reminded me of the time I got caught in an ice storm and my wife and I were forced to spend Christmas in a Motel 6 in Abilene, Texas—although there were odd touches of Palm Springs glamour like a marble shower and lemongrass shampoo. I opened the cupboard and found a half-eaten bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and six cans of Sprite. Did the previous guest leave them for me? Was the resort a cool ranch kind of place?

Actually, the room was fine, and it's not like people come to nudist resorts to sit in their rooms. I was mostly concerned by the fact that there wasn't a chain or bolt lock on the door and no in-room safe, just the doorknob with a key lock, which anyone who has ever watched an episode of network television knows you open by sliding your credit card between the door and the doorframe. How could I walk outside without a stitch of clothes on and leave my wallet, cell phone, and laptop in a room a twelve-year-old could break into? Or was I using my security fears to keep from leaving the room? I had never been in a nudist resort. I'd never strolled around naked with other naked people, and now that I was in a place where that was not only encouraged but required, I was obsessing about the lack of a deadbolt. Was I just making excuses?

I stood naked in front of a mirror and checked my body. What was I looking for? Gravy stains? Some physical deformation that was so humiliating that I should just call this whole thing off for humanitarian reasons?

I took a canister of spray-on waterproof sunblock and covered my skin with a thick SPF 45 coating. I remembered Dr. Grenier's warning and made sure I sprayed sunblock everywhere; I was not going to get squamous cell carcinoma on *my* scrotum, or anywhere else for that matter.

Satisfied that I had blasted every inch of my body with several layers of sunblock—and really, what was I doing? Putting on sunblock like it was a pair of jeans?—I took a deep breath, opened the door, and walked out of the room. I strolled toward the pool trying to look as normal as I could. Without any clothes on. In public.

I carried a towel and, being an intrepid immersive-style journalist, a mechanical pencil and a Moleskine notebook.

I heard a song start thumping out of the poolside speakers right on cue, as if they knew I was coming, like I had my own theme song. It was "Super Freak" by Rick James, the sound track for my entrance into the world of social nudity.

There was a small brass plaque on the wall that read, ABANDON CLOTHES ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE, and that was pretty much what was going on. There were about twenty naked men and women sitting in chairs and lounges around the pool. And it is not paranoia, I am not making this up, as I walked out by the pool they all turned their heads to look at me.

My first thought wasn't *Wow, we're all naked here!*

No.

My first thought was *Wow, these people are really old!*

They sat blinking at me from behind sunglasses, peering over magazines and books. One man in his early seventies cleared his throat and went back to reading the newspaper. A woman who looked a lot like the actress Maggie Smith<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> took a sip of seltzer water. I caught a whiff of what smelled like something cooking and turned to see a man in his midsixties stretched out in the sun, his skin tanned the color of teak, glistening with cocoa butter.

It could've been a scene from any retirement home in America, except that they were all stark naked. An elderly woman walked past me and smiled. I smiled back. Have you ever seen a seventy-



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