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The Naked Truth

It took one woman being naked in public to make her appreciate her own body.

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"What if, in a landscape filled with brand-new bodies, we looked at each other and decided to broaden our horizons?"

My foray into public nudity didn't begin well. For years, I had wanted to visit the hot tubs at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Perched on a cliff overlooking the Pacific, they're the world's most gorgeously situated baths. But there, after flying cross-country to see them, I stood clutching my towel in the unisex changing room, staring miserably at my feet. Suddenly, the 3,000 miles I'd traveled felt like nothing compared with the 20 feet I was about to walk — stark naked — to the baths.

Finally, peer pressure overcame prudery, and I joined the masses in the "clothing optional" tubs. I slid in gingerly, mumbling polite hellos, and leaned back with my eyes closed. The water, sun, and waves crashing below began to ease my anxiety. Soon, I was totally content.

When the bell rang for supper, I sauntered to the changing room as if I'd been walking around naked my whole life. I spent the weekend chatting up old women, young men, and everyone in between, dropping trou whenever possible, even casually soaping my genitals in the coed communal shower without a trace of self-consciousness. I loved it so much, I forgot most of my clothes — I'd never once needed them — in my room when I left.

Back home, I became a proselytizer for Esalen. It was liberating, I told anyone who would listen, to be naked among all shapes, ages, and genders. "It makes you appreciate how narrow our concept of beauty is," I told my boyfriend.

"Should we try a naked beach?" he asked.

Having boasted about how comfortable I was in the buff, I couldn't back out. We found a "clothing optional" beach on Fire Island, only an hour away from my boyfriend's Brooklyn apartment, but the thought of baring all in public with him gave me pause. What if the beach was filled with gorgeous people and I stood out like an aged, saggy, sore thumb? What if, in a landscape filled with hundreds of brand-new bodies, we looked at each other and decided it was high time we broadened our own horizons? What if we saw things we'd never be able to stop comparing ourselves — or each other — to? I knew my boyfriend loved me, but I wouldn't be the sexiest woman on the beach.

I shelved my misgivings as we set off one weekend, giddy with anticipation. Initially, we were

baffled by the etiquette. When you wear a swimsuit among the nude, you feel like an outsider. We wanted to strip down right away, but first we needed to commit to the right spot. How close to someone's blanket was too close? Normally, I steer clear of noisy families; here, I wasn't sure what to avoid. "Do you really want to be staring at that all day?" my boyfriend whispered, pointing to a bumptious bent-over backside, when I suggested we plop down. No, I didn't.

Finally, we shucked off our clothes and took in the scene. The sheer variety of naked humanity astonished me. Old bodies, young bodies, firm and muscular bodies, bodies that drooped and sagged and dangled. Few people looked perfect, but everyone looked happy. The beach was a hive of activity. No one was content to sit on a blanket or gaze idly out to sea. Instead, they were positively flaunting their nudity — walking, standing, prancing, pacing, marching like models on a catwalk. To our left, a group of men and women were playing naked paddleball. On our right, to my boyfriend's horror, a gang of stark-naked men fired up a grill.

There were some classically perfect-looking people, but we'd seen their type before. I was more fascinated by the ugly, short guy to my left. "Now that's what I call a schlong," I told my boyfriend, who wasn't even listening. "Look at that," he whispered, as a stunning creature walked out of the sea.

She moved slowly toward her boyfriend, who was lying on a blanket. As she walked, water ran down the curves of her body; when she realized her boyfriend was watching, she struck a pose. She was confident and gorgeous, and she was, by conventional beauty standards, at least 75 pounds overweight.

I imagined this woman shopping for a bathing suit, frustrated by what society insists are body flaws, trying to find a suit that flattered her magnificent, uncelebrated form. Fact is, such a suit doesn't exist: The fashions we aspire to wear flatter no one but the perfectly toned. And the majesty of this woman's body would be rendered absurd if she stuffed herself into a brightly colored suit. She looked like a Renaissance goddess — to cover her up would be like spray-painting over a work of art. I suddenly felt silly about how much I worry about what I look like in bed — cellulite, muffin top, small breasts — and I realized that here, on the naked beach, the only thing I wanted to change were my tan lines, which immediately marked me as an amateur.

When I rose to take a swim, I reflexively reached back to tug my suit before remembering I didn't have one — and in an instant, all my self-consciousness evaporated. My boyfriend, I noticed, was staring at my body with admiration. "You're beautiful," he said. "You're going to make me aroused." I did a double take. He had been staring at naked women, many of them pretty, several of them stunning, for an hour, and looking at me might set him off? Amid all these thighs, breasts, and buttocks, it was me that he found so compelling? Oh, right, I thought: We're in love.

Shamelessly, I stared as he stood, and felt overcome by attraction to his sweetly familiar body. He looked beautiful to me, and suddenly I was filled with appreciation for what we had. He saw it, too; it was in his eyes. I laughed, and we ran to the ocean and dove in. All around us, faces bobbed in the water. We weren't fat or thin, pretty or ugly. We were just two people in love, enjoying the beach on a beautiful summer day.