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The Naked Truth: Inside the wonderful world of nudism

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THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND I are completely naked. But we're on the job. Unfortunately, I've been badly let down by two of my interviewees. Here we are in a nudist camp and they've got their clothes on. I, on the other hand, am wearing only my track shoes. To say that I'm embarrassed is a major understatement.

Tim Bauer, the photographer, is standing behind me with a camera around his neck, and nowhere to put his lenses. I'm sitting down trying to appear professional, asking probing questions, taking shorthand notes, and I'm being laughed at. They think it's funny being interviewed by a nude journalist. So do I, especially as I'm not a nudist. I'm here to see why an estimated 100,000 Australians choose to be social nudists, in many cases going so far as to join one of the 30 or so nudist clubs throughout the country. I've also been pestered for more than a year by a friend, Michael Keighery, who thinks it's a good story. He claims to have a sociological interest in nudism. I think he just wants to take his pants off.

My heart was pounding with trepidation all the way to this place, the River Island Nature Retreat, two hours south of Sydney. *Forty kilometres to go till nudity . . . 30 kilometres . . . 10 kilometres . . . five kilometres.* Why am I doing this?

Somebody Save Me

No-one else wanted this assignment. 'I'd rather resign than do something like that,' one of my stitched-up colleagues said. (I think she really meant die, not resign.) Nevertheless, my co-workers offered important travel tips. With tears of laughter in their eyes, they suggested I be careful when cooking. They advised me not to do any frying. They said I should take an apron . . .

So what clothes was I supposed to pack? I'd never been anywhere where you didn't dress for dinner. The weather reports said frost on the ridges. Did that mean beanies and socks? I decided on shorts, jeans, four pairs of underpants, a swimming costume, two pairs of socks, three hankies, a couple of T-shirts, a sweat shirt, a jacket, the lot. (But, can you believe it, I forgot my towel.) The River Island Nature Retreat is not strictly a nudist camp—it's a 'clothing optional resort'—and I needed all the options I could get.

THE ROAD TO THE naked bush veers off from Mittagong and along the spectacular Wombeyan Caves Road. Not far from the sign saying HORNY (someone added the y), you plunge down the spine of a steep hill and into the lap of Colin and Katina Sell's 500-hectare property beside the Wollondilly River. Hugging the riverfront, under the blue gums, are caravans, camping sites and small cabins where the dedicated nudists stay. There are flocks of crimson rosellas and cockatoos skimming the boughs, two kangaroos standing off in the distance, and is that a platypus sliding up the bank? We have entered the Garden of Eden.

At the reception counter, 'Eve' greets us with an easy smile and an outstretched hand. I don't know where to look. Bauer is standing next to me going red and swallowing a laughing fit. Keighery is politely shaking hands, as if a naked receptionist is an everyday event.

'You ever seen a nude person before?' Katina Sell asks, staring right at me, responding to my obvious discomfort.

The Naked Truth

‘Sure,’ I reply, my voice rising a couple of octaves. ‘My mother, about 30 years ago.’ I am so embarrassed that’s all I can think of to say.

Within 15 seconds of arriving at our caravan Keighery is naked. He is standing nonchalantly at the doorway asking whether he can help Bauer and me unpack the car. We fall to the ground shaking with fear and laughter. Here am I thinking I have hours to get used to the idea of taking my clothes off and Keighery is already taking to nudism like a (white speckly) duck to water.

Part of the nudist philosophy is that without your clothes on, sex is demystified. The body becomes the great leveller. All measurements of status and wealth are rendered meaningless. Personal isolation is replaced by one big, bare extended family. Fine in theory. But in practice, there’s an old friend of mine standing outside our caravan without his clothes on and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. And what’s worse is that Bauer has just re-emerged wearing only a pair of German sandals and a camera.

‘I’m going for a bushwalk,’ he says.

‘So am I,’ says Keighery.

‘Like that?’ I ask.

‘Definitely,’ they reply.

I am utterly alone—the central character in my own Woody Allen movie. Everyone around me is nude. My friend, my photographer, my neighbours. Am I expected to take my pants off, too, and go for a bushwalk? Just like that? I can’t. It’s wrong. I retreat to the caravan to think . . . Then slowly I undress.

OK, I’ve got my clothes off and my track shoes on. Where’s my notebook and pen. Damn it. No pockets. I move to the entrance of my caravan, take a deep breath, and exit. A cold bar of sunlight hits me. So does the dread of my own shrinking manhood. I walk past my neighbours. They are all loins and grins. Act normal, David. ‘Hi, how ya going? Great day.’

Somebody Save Me

Keep walking. Check out the river. Doesn't it look nice. Isn't nature lovely. Oh God, here's a man and a woman walking towards me. They're completely starkers. And they're grinning, too. 'Hi, how ya going?'

BAUER SAYS HE'S WEARING acrylic for dinner. Keighery says he's going glasnost. I say I can't decide. Maybe I'll just wear pants and no top. Maybe a top and no pants. Maybe just under-pants. I eventually wear everything. There's a word for people like me in nudist camps: 'textiles'.

The Billabong Café is the first clothing optional restaurant in Australia. There's a sign on the wall which says: *Due to Health Act please don't sit on our seats without a towel.*

Keighery goes back to the caravan to get a towel. He thinks he's in Happy Valley. Bauer and I reckon we're in Camp Kinko.

The menu is mixed grill; the music Neil Diamond. The waiter is wearing a T-shirt—and shorts. He says, by way of explanation, 'Well, how would you like to have a dick in your plate?' I lose my appetite.

After dinner we wander over to the spa. A man and woman are courting behind a veil of froth and bubbles. I undress and slide in. 'Hi, how ya going?' I say. A Neanderthal-looking man with no neck looms up beside us. Everyone moves a little closer to make room. There are now seven people in the spa but that feels like six too many. The sign says 10 maximum but, if you ask me, that's intercourse. It's all getting terribly close. Bauer's slippery bottom is almost on top of me. This is a cannibal's pit and it's full. I have to get out. I want to retreat to my cave (oh God, I love my caravan) but my colleagues drag me towards the Barn. It's a fun-parlour cum beer-hall.

I look through the window. There are about 40 people in there and it's a kaleidoscope of flesh and faces: there's a man with an all-over George Hamilton tan and slicked-back hair

The Naked Truth

playing pool. He looks like a million dollars. There's another fella with just his T-shirt on and his donger hanging out. There's a fat guy in shorts sitting between two naked women. They're all laughing. There are women's rumps pressed on benches; children in pyjamas running between tawny legs; knitting needles, cards, beer cans, ashtrays and brown breasts dispersed across the table-tops. Keighery has walked into this madhouse and is now playing space invaders. Naked. There's a kid standing next to him in a dressing gown.

I should say at this point, this is definitely no bunny girl show or Mr Glamour contest. This is, for the most part, flab city. It's middle Australia in a state of undress. It's a suburb without its clothes on and these are its nude wives and husbands—doctors, nurses, magistrates, builders, bank clerks, even a QC, I'm told. There is barely a whiff of sex in the air. Or at least, not an erection in sight.

Over the next couple of days—Easter weekend—hundreds more will begin arriving in their family sedans and four-wheel drives. Yet another convoy of Commodores. Yet another naked posse coming down the mountain.

But I can't go into the Barn. Not yet. I need more time. I want my caravan. The caravan has become my womb. It's where I come back to when I want to be normal. It's where I put my clothes on and wrestle with my dilemmas:

How can you sit in a spa with naked strangers, one of whom has no neck?

What do you do when you are at a nudist camp and you've had enough of nudity?

What do you do when you're not tired and the only place to go is the Barn?

Is it OK to sleep with your clothes on?

OUR NEIGHBOURS ARE VETERAN nudists. Rodger Chong has been getting his gear off for 20 years. A former restaurateur, he

Somebody Save Me

is now retired and, with his wife, Sandra, lives on the New South Wales south coast.

‘My daughter, who is 30, is opposed to it,’ Rodger says. ‘We just have to strip down to our bathing suits and she starts to panic.’

When the Chongs first met, Sandra thought Rodger was ‘a dirty old man’ because he liked to slink around nudist camps. Rodger admits that he probably *was* an ‘old perv’ then but believes that both of them are now well-adjusted nudists.

‘We’re just mad-crazy sunbakers,’ Sandra says.

The Chongs are here with their friends John and Anne Simpson (not their real names), also from the south coast region, as well as Keith and Catherine Baker (not their real names). The Chongs introduced the Simpsons to nudism about five years ago, and then, on a nudist weekend away, met the Bakers over a few beers. Now the six of them have ‘clothing optional’ dinner parties along with their other nudist friends. They say it’s fun.

‘You ought to try it with your wife, taking your gear off,’ says Anne to me. (We’ve already done it, Anne.) After a while you don’t notice the nudity, says Anne. ‘You can be talking to someone and you wouldn’t even know if they had one testicle, two penises or three boobs.’ (Yes I would, Anne.)

All of them agree that the friendships formed through nudism are as strong as, if not stronger than, anything they had in the ‘textile’ world. They say it’s the relaxed way of life, the sense of community that appeals. And, of course, the sun. No worries about the hole in the ozone layer, they say. Just got to show common sense.

As for pervs, you can pick ’em a mile away. On the perv meter. Someone so much as looks at you the wrong way and they’re out the door—or up the mountain.

‘When my husband first told me he wanted to come here I thought he was twisted,’ says Catherine Baker.

‘I thought I was twisted, too, until I came here,’ says Keith. ‘But now, the way I look at this place, it’s better than a course

The Naked Truth

of Valium. My job is pretty pressured, I manage a plumbing supplies business and when I come here I just unwind.'

Keith Baker looks at the spread that his friends, the Simpsons, have just prepared. It's impressive—sweet corn omelettes, curried sausages and tuna macaroni.

But Keith's a fussy eater. 'Just give us a curried banger,' he says. 'None of that Italian stuff for me.'

DILEMMA: WHEN YOU'RE STANDING in your caravan and you see a naked couple walk by, do you take your pants off before you introduce yourself?

Answer: Yes, unless you want to be mistaken for a perv.

'Hi, I'm David Leser. I'm a journalist. Would you mind terribly if I asked you a few questions?'

It's amazing how one day in a nudist camp can make you feel jolly about your nakedness.

The woman's face says, 'Yes, I mind very much'; her husband says, 'No, not at all.'

Henry Chu is an administrator and part-time lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney. Suzanna, his wife, works in a bank. She discovered nudism last year when her husband dragged her here without telling her where they were going.

'I blame Henry for not explaining properly what this place was all about,' she says. (Suzanna puts on her T-shirt to talk to me, and to protect herself, so it would seem, from Bauer, who is stalking her camp site like a polar bear.)

'It's explained in the brochure,' her husband says.

'I arrived here and saw naked people and thought, "Uh-oh, is this what is meant by clothing optional?" It took me two days to get comfortable.'

I know what Suzanna means. She is still not comfortable. I want to tell her to loosen up. To enjoy her nakedness. To understand, as I have just begun to, that she's come to the right place.

Somebody Save Me

Reputedly, the orthodox nudist clubs are the Stalinist wing of the naturist movement, heavy with rules and proletarian chores, while the nudist beaches are sneered at as enclaves of anarchy, where old pervs can roam free. It's only among the 'progressives', in a clothing optional resort like this one, I am reliably informed, that you can revise your beliefs about the naked body in your own good time.

That's what's happening to me. Before I know it, I'm stepping out of my caravan and facing the naked world unabashed. Maybe if I introduce Suzanna to my new friend, Frank Bridgeport, the 83-year-old who's staying in the caravan alongside ours, not far from our other friends the Chongs, she might start to feel better.

Frank has been a nudist for about 74 years, ever since he went skinny-dipping in the Salt Pan Creek, south of Sydney, during World War I. He's never looked at clothes the same way since. He tells me that in the 1930s he and about 60 other mavericks used to stay in makeshift huts in Royal National Park bushland. He says that you could never go nude then unless you posted a 'cockatoo' in a tree to watch out for the police.

'I have never hidden myself though,' Frank says. 'I have always told people I am a rudie-nudie: that I'm Frank by name and Frank by nature.'

Or how about Terry and Carol Bainsfair? Carol also works in a bank and she, too, was apprehensive about stripping off when she first arrived. Now she and Terry, a hospital administrator, have got their own little cabin on the waterfront here which they come to nearly every weekend. A steal at \$6000, and all they have to do is take their clothes off.

Terry knows how prudish we are in Australia about nudism, and asks why we always snigger at the mere mention of it. Could it be, as the veterans claim, that in the clothed world we're all sexually hung-up, and that it's only the nudists who've really come to terms with their own bodies? Could it be that it's the 'textiles', in their skimpy bathing suits and plunging

The Naked Truth

necklines, who are making the provocative sexual statements, not the nudists?

'Go to Europe,' Terry says, 'and nudity is everywhere. Here, it's like a dirty word.'

Terry's right, you know. He's from England, but he's switched on. He knows about places like Cap d'Agde in the south of France, destination of some 40,000 people during the height of summer. There, they go nude to the cinemas, to the supermarkets, to the hairdressers, everywhere. All over Europe there are nudist resorts. Even Estonia has one. It's called the Estonia Free Body Culture Society.

But here . . . well, it's catching on slowly. There's a luxurious new resort due to open on the New South Wales central coast soon. It's called Bardots. In the meantime, though, there's this place. Unfortunately, I can't stay around for the nude egg-and-spoon relay, sled race or disco on Sunday night. There are some things you just can't do.

Postscript 1992:

Michael Keighery is fast becoming a committed nudist. He had some people round to his place recently and ended up taking all his clothes off. Now he's planning a nudist weekend away with some of his friends and has asked me to go. I'm still thinking about it.