

February 2006

Exposed!

Considering nudism in a very cold place, The Rake takes it all off



I'm only telling you this personal detail about my wife because you have to be aware of it to understand the whole story of how I came to find myself playing volleyball with an Elvis imitator in the nude. So here it is: My wife has a perfectly formed body. That's not bragging, just straight information. That's the way she is. In fact, she's a pro. The missus is much in demand as a figure model among Twin Cities artists and sculptors. (That's her in bronze, for example, at the Burnsville town square.)

I, on the other hand, while kind and warm-hearted, am no oil painting, unless you favor the works of Francis Bacon. If my bathing-suit photo were to somehow show up on one of those "Hot or Not" Internet polls, the response would be "Not" by a landslide. I would probably crash the servers.

This fact was brought home to me dramatically last summer while on a business trip to New York City. The hotel's bathroom door featured a full-length mirror on the exterior that, when opened forty-five degrees, offered anyone standing at the sink mirror a clear over-the-shoulder view of his own backside. I was standing there fresh out of the shower and shaving as the mist cleared off the open, mirrored door. I was confronted with an unfortunate spectacle.

When a guy reaches a certain age he reflexively sucks in his gut when passing a reflective surface, but there's no way to retract a sagging posterior. From the rear I looked like something out of a Grannies Gone Wild video. Roast beef and gravity had teamed up to tenderize me. Yes, I'd taken a few body blows with the ugly stick.

In profile, things didn't appear much better. This looked like the pale, pasty body of a man whose last regular exercise was playing the tuba in marching band. I steeled myself and took another quarter turn, like a Miss America contestant from a region rife with inbreeding and malnutrition. My abdomen had the doughy center of a half-baked cake. My pubic thatch looked like the habitat of some rare and vicious rodent. I know this is repellent, but I'm trying to be

honest here.

When we're out on the town, my spouse and I make a sort of Morticia and Gomez couple, she all slinky and statuesque, I pop-eyed and squat. We are such a visually mismatched duo that people are relieved and delighted to see how we dote on each other. I guess we're documentary proof that true love is blind. She would do anything to delight me and I would do the same for her.

One factor that keeps our relationship interesting is that she and I often have different ideas about Something That Would Be Fun To Do. Her ancestors were hale, un-self-conscious Norsemen—Berserkers, I think historians call them—who invented the communal sauna as a way to stay in touch with their bodies through the long season of cold and dark. Their descendants frolic on clothing-optional beaches each summer, a holiday destination that my wife has repeatedly suggested that we should consider. She would talk of palm-fringed white sand beaches and meals of ripe passion fruit, the juices running down our chins and basting our sun-browned torsos. While I do hate to deny her, I felt that such a vacation would be several steps outside my psychological comfort zone. After all, there would be other people around. Naked strangers. I would dodge the issue with the reply that it sounded delightful, but a tropical vacation was not practical for this year's budget.

So when my adventurous darling asked me to book us a weekend at a nudist colony an hour north of the Twin Cities, I was surprised to find myself saying yes, a moment after the vertigo passed. I had then put the matter out of my thoughts. Until the hotel's rear-view mirror reminded me that our getaway was fast approaching. And then, gripping the bathroom countertop for balance, I began doing ballet stretches on the spot.

Minnesota is pretty close to nudism's final frontier. Our mostly unfavorable climate, mosquitoes, and a fairly prudish social environment have kept nudists in their closets. St. Paul statutes decree that "No person shall appear in any street or public place in the City in a state of nudity," and Minneapolis proclaims, "No person ten years of age or older shall intentionally expose his or her own genitals, pubic area, buttocks, or female breast below the top of the areola, with less than a fully opaque covering." Despite a decades-long tradition of bohemian skinny-dipping at Hidden Beach, nestled in the northeastern curve of Cedar Lake, you can be ticketed or arrested for bathing there in your natural state. In a nod to its citizens' support for the arts, the Minneapolis law offers a loophole for skin bared in the course of a theatrical performance. But unless you're on a public stage, and your "performance" goes beyond showing off your birthday suit, it is not wise to attempt to assert a First Amendment right to air your naughty bits. That's already been tried, and the local courts shot it down.

But there is succor, thanks to one longstanding article of American faith: What you do on private property is generally considered your own business. And nudism—or naturism, as its more classically minded apologists call it—has flourished in privacy here for decades.

The Oakwood Club is Minnesota's oldest clothing-optional resort. For sixty years the club has maintained a rustic forty-acre campground about ten miles west of Interstate 35W in Anoka County. The dirt road turnoff to the site is guarded by an unmarked farm-style metal gate with an intercom and keypad at the entrance. It's secluded, surrounded by towering oak trees, birch, and pine and bordered on two sides by a nature preserve that is off limits to future development. It's a good location for privacy. Polaris Industries Inc. opened its new research and development center in the area last May so it can test the all-terrain vehicles it makes

without the risks of traffic or the prying eyes of competitors.

Oakwood doesn't advertise its presence in the community; its exact location is undisclosed until you are accepted as a member or until you visit as a dues-paying member of the American Association for Nude Recreation, which represents nearly fifty thousand members and their families.

There's no hint at the entrance to suggest that there's anything down the tree-shrouded dirt road but a farm. From May 1 until September 30, however, the club is a beehive for sunbathers eager to make the most of Minnesota's brief skin-exposing season. It is a mecca of sun-soaked shuffleboard, jiggly horseshoe pitching, potluck dinners served naked with oven mitts, and a lot of rather insistent socializing. Oakwood operates as a cooperative. Members pay a \$650 annual fee for the privilege of parking their trailer or motor home at one of the seventy-seven designated campsites. This is not a resort you visit to get away from it all; you go to connect with others of your kind.

After announcing ourselves at the gate (we had purchased a yearlong AANR membership for eighty dollars and contacted the club's membership director in advance of our visit), we were buzzed through. About a quarter mile down the driveway we began passing Winnebago RVs and Airstream campers in a necklace of connected roads with names like Jaybird Lane and Barebutt Crescent circling the main grounds. There were a couple of slightly dilapidated trailers available for rental. The privately owned trailers ranged from top-of-the-line behemoths with handsomely arranged flower beds to skeezy, sad-looking little numbers on blocks. If Oakwood were a city, it might be a miniature version of St. Paul: down-to-earth, haphazard, a little dumpy, but with affluent areas, and full of civic pride, activity, and good spirits. We were met by a cheerful camp official riding an aging, canopied golf cart whose bouncy progress jounced her considerable bosom. She quickly established that we were first-timers and ran through the basics of nude etiquette with a brisk efficiency Miss Manners would envy.

Social nudism is a complex mix of gregarious exhibitionism and scrupulously maintained privacy. Our guide explained that Oakwood is a friendly place, but probing personal questions were discouraged. Visitors might exchange last names by mutual consent, but we should not feel offended if our fellow sun worshippers kept matters on a semi-anonymous first-name basis. There were strict rules of decorum. Sexual remarks or advances, staring and voyeurism, excessive or unwelcome touching, or even inappropriate public expressions of affection between couples would be boorish and inconsiderate. "If you kiss, make it a kitchen kiss," she instructed. The goal was pleasurable coexistence with the other campers. We could feel free to wear clothes or not in all the common areas, from the athletic fields to the communal kitchen and dining hall, but the in-ground pool was strictly clothing-free.

Most important, she continued, on all occasions we must carry our own towel to sit on. In his account of a visit to a nudist camp, "Naked," the essayist David Sedaris portrayed this rule as a laughable triviality in the psychosexually charged environment of a nude resort, as if your bungee jumping instructor pestered you to tuck in your shirttails before leaping off a bridge. I saw it differently. Having picked up a wretched case of psoriasis from the slimy sauna in the Detroit YMCA some years earlier, it struck me as laudable common sense.

So there we stood, my wife serene, myself deeply ambivalent. I had already learned from the AANR membership magazine that nudist resorts don't discriminate based on race, creed, age, class, gender, or physical attractiveness. Especially not on physical attractiveness. To

paraphrase Groucho Marx, any nudist club with aesthetic standards low enough to accept me as a member, I wasn't eager to belong to.

But one of the big selling points of the nudist lifestyle is its emphasis on health. In recent years, as skin cancer has become a significant medical issue, the focus has shifted from soaking up sunshine to the psychological benefits of shedding inhibition and learning body acceptance. Clothes are in many ways more threatening than a nude body, my wife pointed out. "Clothing is a shield, isn't it? We use clothing to make a power statement, to intimidate, to seduce." Well, exactly. What would I do without it?

I saw "stripped," "naked," and "nude" as synonyms for "diminished." Even the term "nudist colony" sounded ominous. What else are there colonies of? Undesirables, that's what. Termites. Lepers. Artists. Not the kind of places you'd want to visit; best to keep them walled off and enclosed. I was aware that I had my issues.

It was time to join the crowd. People were idling around the pool, some were weeding the gardens, and others were painting the dining hall with long-handled rollers, chipping in on the chores that all the members share. Couples were taking walks wearing nothing but athletic shoes. Most of the guests were in the vicinity of retirement age, with some younger couples and a few singles. My wife pulled off her clothes with the nonchalance of Lady Godiva. Feeling more like Quasimodo, I dawdled over every button and shoelace. It was an awkward moment. I picked up my towel and, following a fierce internal debate, decided not to position it for concealment. If it's true that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, I was now going to become the strongest man in Anoka County.

We stepped across the sun-splashed commons into a group of people who were happy to see new faces (and so forth) and delighted that we might become members. Oakwood's population has been holding steady at around 120 for some time, and this infusion of new blood brought them swarming to us like Lutherans to Jell-O salad. Oakwood has been around since 1942, and some of the more weather-beaten members looked to have been founders.

Envision a church basement full of stolid, kindly parish workers. Mix in a few peppy Wal-Mart senior greeters, that friendly Earth Mother from the health food store, and that guy from the accounting department who always stands thisclose when he talks to you. Oh, and a professional Elvis imitator with a big black pompadour and gold-rimmed seventies aviator sunglasses.

Now imagine them naked. Goodness, Reverend Lovejoy has shaved pubes. Elvis (and little Elvis) have a toasty nut-brown suntan everywhere. Crunchy granola mama has a major tattoo frescoed on her imposing bosom. I took in most of this through peripheral vision, being acutely conscious of where not to look. My desire to avoid eye contact (and wayward appendages) was intense, and at war with my desire not to appear standoffish. Never look below the collarbone, I told myself. I held my head as rigidly as if I were wearing a neck brace.

Eventually, I realized I was acting like a total mental case. Nudists, it dawned on me, don't mind being looked at. Duh! It's part of their pleasure in not wearing clothes. (Gawking is considered boorish, however, so mirrored sunglasses are the resort's unofficial uniform.) Oakwood was designed around social activities—swimming, bocce, potluck dinners, dances, card games, and a volleyball program unmatched outside the Olympics. The plan was (and is) to draw naked people into close (but not too close) contact with each other. The facilities are Up North funky, with

member-donated hand-me-down furniture in the recreation hall. A comfy, used sofa and a set of chairs formed a U-shaped reading nook for a library of paperbacks and outdated magazines thoughtfully provided for folks who want to be alone with their thoughts. But in this outgoing company, it didn't get much use. As it turns out, there aren't a lot of nude introverts. Looking through the collection, I came upon a history of social nudism that traced its origins to ancient Egypt. During the reign of sun-worshipping Pharaoh Akhen-Aton and Queen Nefertiti (1385–1353 B.C.), public nudity was generally accepted. Beginning around the seventh century B.C., Greek athletes trained and competed in the nude, even at the Olympic Games. The word "gymnasium" actually comes from the Greek word "gymnos," meaning "nude." In 393 A.D., Emperor Theodosius of Byzantium, the Christian ruler of Greece, banned the Olympics because he considered the nude activities decadent. It took 1,500 years for the Olympics to be re-established—alas, fully clothed. In the twentieth century, Germans were early proponents of the nudist cause. The first known organized club for nudists, Freilichtpark ("Free-Light Park"), was opened near Hamburg in 1903. In the United States, German immigrant Kurt Barthel organized the first nudist event in 1929, just outside New York City, and he established the American League for Physical Culture. Private nudist clubs and campgrounds began appearing in America in the 1930s.

We spread our towels on a couple of chaise lounges and settled in at poolside, where there was more chatter than I've ever heard around a swimming pool. People were vivaciously comparing notes on nudist winter vacation sites, and complaining about that peculiar sort of cabin fever that comes from not being able to disrobe publicly during the long Minnesota winter. One energetic retiree, his skin the rich mahogany hue of a perfectly browned turkey, told a visiting couple that Oakwood had electric and wood saunas and hosted the occasional nude cross-country skiing weekend. A matronly woman floating on an inner tube added that the Minneapolis Sno-Birds, a landless club, convenes at a health spa each month during the winter for nude swimming, aerobics, handball and, of course, volleyball; sometimes they even rent a bowling alley.

After an hour or so I was not relaxed, exactly—too many years of programming to be erased all at once—but my guard was down considerably. I stared a bit, as any newcomer would, but with more curiosity than titillation. Although there were a number of fit, attractive people around, looking at them didn't feel as if I were being somehow disloyal to my wife, because these strangers weren't sexy. An erotic response, outside the comfort zone of a committed relationship, rests on our tendency to fantasize. Without clothing, which strategically highlights the erogenous zones while placing them off limits, there's no fantasy and thus no excited reaction. (In fact, it wasn't until well after our visit when, back home, my wife was wearing a short skirt that I looked at her with the usual va-va-voomy reaction.) Being unclothed among strangers was an almost disappointingly mundane experience. I stuck my nose in the book I had brought along and read for most of the afternoon while the poolside guests discussed black-powder gunsmithing and Japanese social customs and debated whether or not George W. Bush is the Antichrist. Even on such divisive issues, though, there was not a lot of rancor. These people had the camaraderie of a shared secret, like a well-heeled team. The conversation inevitably boomeranged back to nudist resorts, cruises, and festivals they had visited or heard about.

With not a lot to do other than be naked, Oakwood is the sort of place where a non-naturist could die of boredom except for the weird buzz generated by moving among all that insouciant exhibitionism. It's considered uncouth to comment directly on the rampant nakedness, but that merely keeps the obvious subject percolating just beneath the surface of many conversations.

While I played volleyball with Elvis, I lost count of the number of times the onlookers made puns about cans, hoses, buns, knockers, and balls. Every gag evoked a gale of laughter, though they had surely been heard thousands of times before. That evening, during a Texas Hold 'Em poker tournament, one of the players told the dealer to get on with it and deal or he'd "shuffle the tits off of those Queens." Nudity was the elephant in the room that everyone giggled about, but no one spoke of openly.

Not everyone there was so nonchalant, however. One new member, when he learned that my wife has worked as a figure model, interrogated her for every detail about a dream job that involves being naked and getting paid for it. This guy—probably one of the "funny uncles" we'd been warned about—managed to work the word "nude" into every third sentence of his incessant patter. The same guy also managed to position himself a couple of yards away while she used one of the outdoor showers to shampoo after her swim. He was ostensibly talking with the club's vice president about the availability of water and utilities hook-ups at the trailer sites, but he was keeping a pretty intent gaze on my sudsy better half. I think he wanted to be ready to administer artificial respiration if she got soap in her eye.

We spent the night in a funky old rental camper, socialized some more around the pool the following day, and left late in the afternoon. My wife had a wonderful time, coming as she does from that hearty Northern European stock that thinks it's fun to leap steaming and nude from a sauna into a snowbank.

So two weeks later we visited Avatan, a newer forty-acre resort just a few miles down the road from Oakwood. There's a sort of St. Paul-Minneapolis friendly rivalry between the two clubs that bubbles to the surface in the hotly contested Minnesota Nude Volleyball Championships, which Oakwood has won each of the last five years.

Avatan, founded in 1961, is designed on a rational grid plan in contrast to Oakwood's easygoing sprawl. If the vehicles on the grounds were an accurate reflection of their owners' financial condition, there were some very well-to-do members with Cadillacs, Lexuses, and mobile homes with appointments worthy of Donald Trump, as well as folks of more average means. The club's amenities are finer, its pool bigger, its guest cabins new and enticing, its membership office stocked with Avatan schwag including, paradoxically, a colorful line of Avatan T-shirts. We were escorted around the facility by a host couple who spent the better part of two hours with us, explaining every bylaw and codicil in the membership contract, introducing us to dozens of (nude) members, and inviting us to stay for that evening's (nude) dance. I've taken Ivy League campus tours that looked slipshod by comparison.

Our visit was on the last weekend of the season, and as the sun set we weren't in a hurry to leave. My squirm factor had dropped to near zero. Avatan and Oakwood both welcome all ages, but on our first naturist weekend, no kids were present. Here, there were many. It was surprising to see young children and teenagers in the nude alongside adults, but the kids had a degree of well-spoken self confidence I would have killed to have at their age. High-school-age boys and girls splashed water at each other in the pool and played water polo. One little boy, six or seven, asked a balding man about the two-foot surgical scar that vertically bisected his sternum, and the man fully and patiently explained his history of heart problems and the bypass procedure that had corrected them eight years before. The boy cannonballed back into the pool when their conversation was over, but I think he learned something during the exchange about the body's susceptibility to disease and what can be done about it. Oddly enough, the presence of kids was the only aspect of the entire experience that troubled my wife. It wasn't that the

children were boisterous or unruly. They were perfectly well behaved. It was their very presence that struck her wrong. What was sauce for the goose and gander, she felt, was not fit for the young jaybirds.

It was the end of the season, a day when the sun set quickly and cool breezes discouraged twilight lounging around the pool. The dance that evening was hosted by a local singer who brought her own electric keyboard and kept her clothes on. She said she'd played for all sorts of parties before; performing for a crowd wearing dance shoes and nothing else was no big deal. A gig is a gig, she said with a shrug. By chance, my wife met a woman she knew in the outside world—the "textile world," the naturists call it—and the pair of them chatted un-self-consciously before the woman and her husband stepped out onto the dance floor. She was a large woman, and she moved so gracefully she nearly floated. I don't know how she was received outside this gated community, but it was clear that here she had no fear of being judged or ridiculed. It got me thinking about how, a year ago, a five-second exposure to Janet Jackson's left nipple threw our nation into a three-week spin cycle of outrage. It also got me thinking that maybe censorious attitudes were a bigger problem than nudity per se. Watching that big, lovely woman twirl in her husband's arms, I thought about Masaccio's fresco *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, showing the original couple getting kicked out of paradise. You know what it really shows? An angel sending a couple of losers off to live in a textile-world, clothist colony.