



Nov 12, 2008

Blogs and Stories

Arianne Cohen

Hold the Dressing

by Arianne Cohen



My night at an all-nude New York dinner party.

"If anyone young is reading this, go, right this minute, put on a bikini and don't take it off until you're 34." This is Nora Ephron, reminding us that now—*right now*—is the peak naked moment of our lives, the highest point on a steep slope of sagging. I remembered this rule when my email dinged with a dinner invitation. The invite contained details about the host (a friend of a friend), the cuisine (Indian) and the attire (none). A nude dinner party.

I was petrified. I am an enthusiast of other naked activities—skinny dipping, showers, sex. But unlike dinner, those all start with 's.' This seems important. Also, they all involve *doing* something. A lengthy swimming career taught me that many people are attractive naked not because of their bodies' particulars, but because of the way those bodies move. It's why the prettiest people are not always the most sought after. Movement is important. When stationary, my lower body looks like a bean bag chair.

Looking at her breasts six inches from the bread, I lost my appetite.

But I wondered. Nudity is something I can deal with. Perhaps I *am* a closet nudist. Perhaps nudism is my new untapped outlet, ready to occupy the empty space in my life between knitting and Netflix.

I rang the bell, and a geeky, middle-aged man in bifocals stuck his head around the door. Richard. He pointed to a stack of towels next to the door. The only rule of nudist events is that you sit on a towel. These were hand towels; I was expecting beach.

I was on Richard's email list because I'd heard that a computer programmer arranges all-expense-paid trips to Florida and the Caribbean for nudist rookies. Richard, the programmer, is a sort of ringleader for New York City nudists, making frequent trips to naturist resorts in Tampa, Palm Springs, St. Maarten's and Maine, bringing along groups of four-to-30 people.

Behind him, another naked man with long brown hair sat with a laptop at the kitchen table. Richard informed me that the female guests were running late. I wondered if stripping with two strange men in a strange apartment was unwise. I scanned. They seemed passive, and I decided they probably wouldn't attack me. On the wall, a digital picture frame flashed group shots of smiling naked people. They didn't look like they'd been attacked recently. I went into the bathroom, stripped, and took out the beach towel I'd brought from home.

I emerged and gingerly sat down on the towel on the couch, legs tightly crossed. Naked dinner is sort of like public speaking: it takes a couple minutes to win over the crowd, except you're the crowd. Richard told me about his gig as an extra on *Fur*, reenacting famous Diane Arbus portraits, while I struggled to find a flattering or comfortable upright couch position. Richard didn't hold back: one leg out to the side, balls in full view. It wasn't lewd. When you look at Richard, you understand why he's naked: He looks like he should be naked. Dressed, he would be a 2.5; naked, he's a 7.0. He's rotund-yet-firm, tan everywhere and fully comfortable in his nudity. He says he spends most of his home-time in the buff.

The rest of the guests blew in, three late-twenties women, a masseuse and two teachers, who stripped in front of the door and plopped down on the couches and floor. And a 30-ish Asian guy, who announced his recent victory on *Pants Off Dance Off*, a program on the Fuse Network that *TV Guide* called "the dumbest show on television." Contestants have three minutes to strip while dancing in a three-foot-square box. We watched the episode clip. He is indeed very talented at stripping in a three-foot-square box. I relaxed. When other naked people are calm, you're calm.

My earlier theory that moving is a pivotal part of nudity is all wrong. Moving while naked is a pain in the ass. It's hard to get off a low couch while adhering to society's Keep Your Legs Closed Always rule. But I made it to the dining room table, and dinner proceeded much like any other--chitchat about work, discussion of how cool it is to win \$200 for three minutes of stripping in a box. There was no sexual vibe. Through three courses of Indian food, I found that my need to check out men's packages had passed in

its entirety, and that skin is just another set of clothes. People carry themselves differently when naked; it's more authentic. You can read who people are at a glance. I imagined the heavily makeup'ed fashionistas of my Upper East Side neighborhood melting down under these conditions, their coiffed facades broken, their personalities unable to function in the harsh light of reality. There's something very real about naked dinner.

New York City is one of the worst places on earth to be a nudist. The exposure laws are strict, and there's [one nude beach](#) for eight million residents. Richard says he leads trips because he has the money, and because otherwise people would never learn how comfortable naturism is. There's no sex involved on his part.

His dinner guests seemed free, getting a dopamine high off the rarity of what we were doing. I was not high. My hand hurt because I could not stop gripping my towel. I sat on it, or held it in my hand, or carried it around the apartment, clutching it like child's security blanket. As long as I held it, everything would be okay. Couldn't. Let. Go.

Also. Couldn't. Eat. There are two types of people: those who look better dressed (Gwyneth Paltrow), and those who look better naked (Pamela Anderson), and one of the former was sitting directly across from me, a thin bank teller who was quite foxy clothed. But naked, she was thin and somehow unappetizing, and for reasons I can't articulate, looking at her breasts six inches from the bread, I lost my appetite. I felt guilty about this.

After dessert, people lounged on the couches for a while, then pulled on their clothes in the entryway. I'll save you suspense: I did not become a card-carrying nudist. I politely declined Richard's invitation for a trip a sunny resort somewhere down south, and happily escaped to the bathroom, because getting dressed is a private activity.

Never was I so excited to see my bra.