

Suddenly stripped naked

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was a warm, sultry day a few weeks ago when I decided to pack my beach bag and head down to the sea. On reaching a nice, sandy spot, I became immediately engrossed in my regular beach ritual: unfurling the towel in a way that doesn't scoop up sand, meticulously applying sunscreen to every inch of exposed flesh.

I was a busy bee. Which is probably why I didn't notice it sooner. Not until I was finished -- hair tucked up in hat, handbag squashed under another towel to stop contents melting, sunshades on -- did I look up.

At first I wasn't sure it was what I thought it was. Sometimes sunscreen forms a filter over my contact lenses. I lifted my sun glasses to make certain.

Yep! There was a fulsome part of the male anatomy directly facing me, not a metre away.

Hello, hello, I said to myself. But before I had a chance to check out its owner, it was right in front of me.

"Ruth, wonderful to see you!" came a hearty welcome from above. And I realised with horror this was a dear friend.

It is hard to know what to do in situations like this. I've never been one for etiquette and this was reminding me of my scary naked dream.

In this dream -- which I've been told by therapists is common and represents our deep fears of rejection -- we somehow find ourselves in a public place, stripped of the garments that shape our bodies, our wobbly or imperfect parts exposed for all to see.

There is no place to hide. No towels to throw around cellulite thighs or dangly bits that have yielded to the pull of gravity. In this image-obsessed world, the people in our dream are staring and pointing as we recoil, humiliated by our imperfections and vulnerabilities.

In order to save my friend from this horror, I jumped up instinctively to meet him eye to eye.

"Well, Sam, great to see you," I stuttered, trying to keep my gaze from falling. "You look, ahhhh, very well."

But it was his mouth that fell, wide open, at seeing my body. "Oh, Ruth! You are clothed!" He was barely able to contain his shock and embarrassment.

Suddenly I tuned in to the world around me. A naked bottom bending over to the right, a pair of breasts to the left. I was surrounded by bodies in their birthday suits: pink, beige and cafe latte. Blondes, brunettes and grey-headed folk. A veritable rainbow of humanity sprawled out on the yellow sand, against the azure sky and pea-green sea.

With a gulp, I remembered the recent announcement that this stretch of beach had become nudist terrain. Being naked there is a political statement. It's about

being green, ecologically correct, being at one with the environment.

This was my scary naked dream reversed. The Lycra around my body felt like a boa constrictor squeezing the life-force out of me; its luminous colours a neon light flashing "Uptight! Uptight!" to the startled world.

In my panic I saw fingers pointed at the crazy woman in costume, her vanity, insecurity and materialism exposed for all to see.

"I was just about to take my bathers off," I said, like a child caught doing something naughty. "I was at the public pool and I've just come for a dip in the sea and I was going to take them off after I found my suntan lotion."

But before I had finished, a new group of friends came bounding along, their breasts bobbing up and down, their body bits swaying in the breeze.

"Hello, hello," I waved, trying to keep a brave front. "Gorgeous day," I said, feeling more naked and exposed than a porno star.

"I was just at the swimming pool. I'm just about to get undressed." I started peeling off the costume with great urgency.

It has been an interesting debut for me, this move into the world of au naturel. Though free-spirited as a child, I've been taught well by society to fear my true self. To cover up. I've spent most of my adult life behind masks: hair colour, make-up, fabrics.

Flesh pulled in, zipped up. Not to mention the titles and trinkets of persona. I created an image and lived it, while balancing precariously on stilts: high heels that pinched my toes and made me taller than I was.

When we first went bush a few months ago, the feeling of walking barefoot on grass overwhelmed me. I had forgotten that something as simple as having naked feet could radiate so much pleasure through my body.

There is a sense of personal power that comes from kicking off one's shoes, letting the toes break free and brazenly walking barefoot in public places. It was as if I was walking barefoot towards someone I should have been.

But to go the step further and disrobe? To publicly strip away the facade? Yes, I decided firmly, as my costume dropped to the sand.

I stood naked before my new friends in all my glory, revealing my bather marks - the telltale signs of nudist fraud. My deception now uncovered, the crowd wandered off to swim.

The water did look exquisite. "Ruth," it was calling, "take the plunge."

I walked briskly towards the sea -- a long way off when you have nothing to cover you from the truth. Most of us can't even be naked with our own reflections in the mirror, let alone under the critical eye of society.

I threw myself in. And what joy! Barefoot was nothing compared with the feel of waves between the thighs and against the belly. Or the sensation of water and sand churning against secret, hidden parts. It wasn't until much later that night that the exhilaration wore off.

I felt them before I saw them -- long, red stripes on skin that had never seen sun. In all the drama and joy, I'd forgotten my sunblock.

After so many years in the prison of illusion, I guess it's going to take a long time for my body to adjust to the shock of being free.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 15 APR 2000