**Natural Beauty**

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**Natural Beauty Pt. 01**

**Welcome to Palmira**

The flight had taken just under three hours. It was uneventful; but as our plane began its final approach in a wide arc high above the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean, a buzz of excitement filled the cabin.

From the air Palmira looks like any other tropical island paradise, with sky-blue coral reefs, black and silver and beaches, verdant hillsides and green-skirted rocky ridges, all bathed in golden sunlight. The broad bay over which we were descending teemed with yachts and skiffs and fishing boats. In the middle, a cruise ship lay at anchor. I could easily make out from their gleaming wakes etched upon the surface a fleet of small ferries delivering passengers to the shore. Following the curve of the coastline, neat rows of buildings gleamed brilliant white and vivid pink, climbing the forest-covered slopes that enclosed the town of Régate in a vast, viridian amphitheatre.

The atmosphere on a plane full of holidaymakers is generally the same wherever the destination. There's euphoria as you take off, settling into quiet languor as time passes, perking again as the end of the journey nears, turning into mild apprehension during the descent and landing, surging to elation when you come to a halt. But even as we touched down, the mood changed again. The female passengers, including myself, while outwardly cheerful became quieter and more introspective as the flight attendants opened the doors and a gust of warm, humid air swirled through the cabin.

Seated next to me were a couple who, I judged by their lovey-dovey expressions, were honeymooners. The young man had gone silent and was tightly clenching his fists. His face had a greenish pallor; and, when we'd stopped on the runway I heard an audible sigh of relief. He turned to me and allowed himself a sheepish grin. The girl was frowning and fidgety; but hers were not in-flight nerves. She was wearing a canary yellow sundress, and as she stood up she tugged downwards on the hem.

The flight attendant's announcement reinforced the feeling of trepidation and exhilaration.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Palmira. The local time is one o'clock, the temperature is twenty-nine degrees Celsius, eighty-four degrees Fahrenheit, and the weather is fine." There followed the usual instructions and advice. "On behalf of Palmair and the crew, I'd like to thank you for flying with us today, and we look forward to seeing you again in the near future. We wish you a very enjoyable stay. As you leave the aeroplane, please have your passports and customs declarations at hand for inspection; and ladies, be ready to undress."

Palmira's is smaller than most international airports, but the protocols and formalities are the same. Ours and a charter plane were the only aircraft on the tarmac, and the terminal appeared deserted, so I and my fellow passengers could expect a quick and easy process. But as we headed towards the baggage collection area we saw the first nude women. Beyond the glass partition, airport staff could be seen going about their jobs. The females were without exception stunning to look at, their bare skin glistening a variety of hues from ivory to ebony. Most were moving briskly and busily, but underneath a sign announcing "ARRIVALS" a dozen young women were standing, carrying boards inscribed with the names of hotels and tour operators. Each held her placard above her head or out to one side, so as not to obscure any portion of her torso.

As I absorbed this fascinating scene, the girl in the yellow dress squeezed her husband's arm. She was wide-eyed and open-mouthed. I looked around at the other women in our group. Those of us who were first-time visitors were staring, none uttering a sound (except for a few gasps and giggles). The attention of the males was equally riveted. We were entranced by this opening encounter with the raw, unadorned, full-frontal reality of Palmira.

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I had learned about Palmira when I was a little girl because my grandmother was born there. I'd heard romantic tales and fabulous legends of bold buccaneers, intrepid mariners and their hardy womenfolk. But I knew little about the contemporary life, until I chanced upon an old travel magazine. It was one of those glossy-format publications with pretensions to cultural significance, full of "gee whiz!" prose and pretty pictures. The July 1970 edition featured a faux-documentary article, "My Journey to the Caribbean's Exotic Island of Naked Women."

For a teenager still coming to terms with her own sexuality, I found the story and the (tasteful) images both provocative and intriguing. Grandma never spoke much about her experiences, but she did reveal something of her background. Her Palmirene lineage purportedly goes back three centuries. There is a tradition that my great-great-etcetera-grandmother had been taken there as a captive. She wed one of the pirates, raised many children and became a local matriarch. That may be a myth; but her family are one of the island's wealthiest, descendants of a merchant aristocracy who once ruled Palmira.

We occasionally visited Grandpa's home, in England, but never Grandma's. They had met when he was on the island as part of a hydrological survey team. They married and eventually settled in Australia; and when my mother was born they stopped going back to Palmira. The magazine article was written a decade after their departure and the place had changed a lot, in the wake of a big influx of tourists during the 1960s. But one thing remained constant, and has to this day — the famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) nude law.

"To celebrate the natural beauty of the female body, women are forbidden to wear clothing."

Though I did not anticipate ever going there, I hadn't lost my interest in Palmira. Nudity never bothered me. I'm pleased with my body which I keep trim with daily exercise and don't mind showing off in a barely-there bikini. When I was a university student my girlfriends and I often went topless, sometimes bottomless, on a beach near the campus. So I'm not shy. On the other hand, I am not conventionally sexy or girlie-girl feminine. This is partly on account of my profession. I'm a cultural anthropologist who spends much of her year on archaeological diggings where there's not much call for frocks, heels and lipstick. And because of my commitments, while I have a boyfriend it's often a long-distance relationship.

In fact, it was my career which would take me to Palmira. In recent times, a lot of interest has been aroused in the island's archaeological heritage. Once neglected, the study of pre-Columbian settlement in this part of the Caribbean has taken off. These remains are evidence of ancient cultural links between the islands of the Greater and Lesser Antilles, long before the arrival of the (peaceful) Arawaks and later the (warlike) Caribs. The Palmirene government has sponsored excavations on the island as a prestige project, and some remarkable finds have been made.

I had been working for nearly five years in the Australian outback, at well-known locations such as Lake Mungo where the continent's oldest human fossils have been unearthed, Box Gully and Kow Swamp. I love the fieldwork but had been contemplating a change of scenery and focus. So when I heard that a postdoctoral research fellowship was being offered by Palmira College, I considered my options. The remuneration was nothing special, more of an allowance really, but my airfares and accommodation would be paid for. More importantly, the modest scale of the excavations would provide an opportunity for me to be a key player on the dig and not just a glorified dogsbody (what Americans call a gofer). Even so, I didn't exactly jump at the chance; but I somehow felt it was my destiny to spend a year in the fabled homeland of some of my ancestors (and living relatives).

I received word that my application had been successful shortly before Christmas and a week after my 28th birthday. I'm not averse to admitting that my family connection, though tenuous, may have been a factor. The starting date was still six months away, but there were a number of orientation sessions via video conferencing. These concentrated on technical and professional issues, and not so much the local lifestyle. During them I got acquainted with my future colleagues. It's a multinational enterprise, mainly British and North American. (Palmirene historians are more interested in the "proto-colonial" times, by which they mean the notorious pirate state of the eighteenth century.) The director is an American ethno-archaeologist, Professor Rebecca Hayden. I also spoke with her deputy and other associates; and as this was during Palmira's wet season, they were back in their home bases.

However, the fact that Palmira would be different from any of the places I'd worked at so far became obvious during one of our online meetings. I had been joined by Daniel, who was halfway through his Master's program and was looking to convert to a PhD. As his academic adviser, I convinced him that a season working on Palmira would be good for his résumé. We were watching, on a split screen, Rebecca, her deputy Mike, and the curator of the Palmira Museum, Marcia Robbins. And we were both startled when the latter's image appeared live from Palmira. She's an elegant, attractive woman aged in her early forties, dark-eyed, mahogany-skinned and raven-haired. She was visible from the waist up, bare-breasted. Neither Rebecca nor Mike seemed at all fazed by her appearance; and once Daniel and I had overcome our initial shock the discussion went on as normal.

Yet it was hard not to feel some embarrassment, sitting with Daniel and seeing this woman so unabashedly exposed. I later reviewed her*curriculum vitae*on the museum's website. Although a native of Palmira, she spends much of the year in Toronto, where she's a professor of anthropology. A century after their forebears began to settle down from their peripatetic ways, many Palmirenes still maintain an itinerant way of life. For the women in particular, coming home must be a bracing experience.

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I discussed my decision with my family, especially Grandma. They were supportive, though perhaps a little perplexed. My boyfriend Matthew, who was used to our long periods of separation, accepted this latest one with equanimity; but I noted that he seemed keener about visiting me on Palmira than he did when I was working in the wilderness.

During my twelve months on the island, I would be dividing my time between excavations in the field and educational duties at Palmira College. That a relatively small community can boast such an institution is a tribute to the far-sightedness of successive governments, who have promoted tertiary education in order to prevent a "brain drain" by keeping and attracting educated young people. It used to be affiliated with the University of the West Indies but is now fully autonomous, with two campuses. I would be based at the postgraduate school in the capital, Régate. The undergraduate campus and Palmira Museum are located in the nearby community of Grandin. This is a "special administrative district" which has its own by-laws. Most of Palmira's families live there, although many of the adults work outside. Within Grandin's boundaries the nude law is not enforced.

I travelled alone; Daniel would not be joining me for another few weeks. The flight from Australia did not proceed directly to Palmira because the island's airport cannot handle the big jets. Instead, I stayed overnight in Kingston, Jamaica, and flew on a smaller plane the next day. The check-in area was located at one end of the terminal, and a queue had already begun to form when we arrived. It was a little disquieting to be standing under the destination sign as passers-by*en route*to other, less exotic places, turned to look. They must have noticed that we carried less luggage than most tourists.

There were about fifty people on board our aircraft. Most were in couples, and generally of about my age. There was an all-girl group in their early twenties, about half a dozen solo women but no single men. Seated directly in front of me were two girls whose sartorial style was a kind of punk-goth fusion and who spent most of the three-hour trip cuddling and giggling. Most of the females were dressed in skimpy fashion, although really no less than if we'd been on our way to any tropical island resort.

At the rear of the cabin were a woman and two younger males in spruce dark suits, hunched over open attaché cases and laptops. The woman, who seemed in charge, looked familiar — some sort of showbiz celebrity, a sports star or perhaps a politician. I couldn't immediately put a name to the face. She and her companions had not been in the queue, and when they passed my seat I heard them speaking in the Palmirene dialect. (This is a Creole English. I have studied languages as part of my ethnographic research, and Palmirene speech reminds me of Bermudian. It retains an old-fashioned quality but has been strongly influenced by immigration from Europe and the Americas, including other parts of the West Indies.)

Our aircrew were smartly attired in spick-and-span uniforms. The flight attendants wore short sea-green dresses. The captain, who came back to say hello, was an attractive woman with emerald eyes and close-cropped, copper-red hair. She had the friendly, no-nonsense manner of a veteran and spoke with a faint Canadian accent mellowed by several years of living and working in the West Indies. She had on a snugly fitting white blouse and a black miniskirt, without stockings. It was a more revealing outfit than you might expect on an airline pilot, but by no means risqué. But when we were inside the terminal awaiting the arrival of our bags, they overtook us, towing their trolley-cases, and they all turned to wave good-bye. The women had taken off their uniforms and underwear. The captain's skirt and blouse were folded over one arm, her panties and bra draped neatly on top. Her co-pilot, who was the only male in the group, scrutinized the bodies of all the women he passed, but he seemed completely oblivious to the unclad forms of his fellow crew members. Despite my having primed myself for this experience, the scene was still breathtaking.

Nearby, another scene caught my attention. While the rest of us gathered to retrieve our luggage, the three people from the rear of the plane were ushered directly into the customs inspection area. We watched as they were greeted by two officials, a male in uniform and a female*au naturel*. The two young men discarded their jackets and ties, while the woman just as quickly and easily stripped off all her clothing. She folded each item before handing it to one of the young men. She even removed her shoes and earrings and wristwatch. Her undressing revealed a gracefully athletic figure. Her brown skin glistened. And oddly enough, this is when I recognized her (from a photo in the online guidebook) — Palmira's Minister for Tourism. Between giving instructions to her assistants, she was nodding silent, friendly greetings to the customs and immigration officials. I was as impressed by the lack of pomp and ceremony which attended the arrival of a VIP as by her casual, comfortable nudity.

"Welcome to Palmira," one of the ladies near me whispered.

As we turned our attention back to the baggage conveyor, a further curious tableau presented itself. The passengers from the charter plane included a family — mother, father and two adolescent boys. I had read that women who are residents of Grandin don't have to strip if heading there directly. Possibly this was one of the few families who live outside the enclave, or maybe they were detouring, perhaps to visit relatives.

The woman was tall and well-built, with silky-sheen, chestnut-brown skin and glossy black, ornamentally woven hair. The man was almost half a head shorter than his statuesque wife, stout and balding; and he bore the harassed, docile expression which you see on the faces of the domestically downtrodden. He wore dapper, neatly pressed white trousers a gaudy, floral pattern shirt and a red neckerchief. Creating a somewhat comical effect, the boys were dressed the same as their father.

The woman had already shed her clothing, including her shoes. She seemed completely at ease with her nudity, like the other women in the terminal making no attempt to conceal anything. Between her thighs, a luxuriant growth proclaimed her marital status. (According to the guidebook, the local custom is that only single women remove their pubic hair.) She held herself erect, her shoulders drawn subtly backwards, accentuating her breasts. One leg was poised just forward of the other, bent slightly at the knee. Her posture was a most intriguing blend of coy, modest and provocative. She seemed in no way self-conscious, standing there stripped and exposed, her fully clothed husband and sons by her side. To each of them, this was totally natural.

The woman's composure contrasted with the agitation of her husband, who was impatient for the arrival of their suitcases, and with the frenetic energy of their sons. When one of the boys was just about to climb onto the carousel, Mama seized him by the collar and hauled him back to her side. He remained there with his brother, surly but obedient, until their bags had been retrieved. Watching them, I was fascinated by this image of a Palmirene family, the matriarchy not at all compromised by the fact that this woman was forbidden by law to conceal any part of her body.

We proceeded to the customs checkpoint and I was one of the last to go through. I had just one piece of luggage. The officer, who greeted us with a terse apology for the inconvenience, was a ruddy-complexioned man in dark trousers, a white shirt and a navy-blue tie. He glanced at my gear and waved me on. At the adjacent counter, attending to the honeymoon couple, was a woman whose only accoutrements were a blue armband and collar. Supervising the proceedings was the woman who'd greeted the Minister. She was small in size but conveyed a distinct air of authority. Blue-and-red ribbons encircled her throat and upper arms. She perused some paperwork and spoke briefly to the man, who offered her an amiable salute. Neither seemed mindful of the eloquent symbolism of this gesture, a man in uniform saluting a completely nude female.

By the time we reached the arrivals lounge, the other people from our flight were already experiencing, at first hand, life on the island of Palmira. The women were undressing. Some appeared relaxed — those who weren't first-time visitors or who were otherwise uninhibited. The rest were showing various degrees of embarrassment. Some giggled nervously, while others displayed tight-lipped bravado. The all-girl group used teasing and playful banter to overcome their bashfulness. The only women in the room who seemed to be reveling in their striptease were the goth-punk pair, laughing and larking as they peeled the clothes off each other's bodies. Some of the men assisted their ladies, but most just stood back and observed, solicitous and sympathetic to any lingering shyness, but loving the show.

None of us would be here if we were scared or unwilling. Few of the bodies had tan lines because most women who visit Palmira acquaint themselves with outdoors nudity before leaving home. So the source of discomfiture was its one-sided nature. As the women stripped naked, the men remained fully clothed. And I'd expected our disrobing debut to be more private. Yet this was probably the best initiation, since we were going to be exposed in public anyway. Nevertheless, to maintain some dignity and decorum there was a sign on the wall which decreed "NO CAMERAS".

I had rehearsed this moment of truth. Yet my feelings were mixed, and my ambivalence was not resolved by the behaviour of a couple nearby. From the evidence of their briefcases I concluded they were on some sort of business trip; from the husband's attire I deduced they were engineers. (I've been on university campuses long enough to have a sense of this.) As the woman slowly removed her clothes, they were engaged in a bizarrely mundane conversation and she was doing most of the talking. "Don't forget the duty-free... I wonder what the kids are up to right now... Are you sure you cancelled the newspapers?" Either she was covering up her nerves, or she really was this blasé; it was hard to tell. Yet she fondled each article of her discarded clothing before handing it to her husband, as if it were a precious jewel.

The distraction proved useful. Without thinking, I had pushed the straps of my dress and bra off my shoulders. But as I reached behind my back to draw down the zip, I could feel the gaze of the people, especially the males, around me. Most of the women in the room were already naked; but it's an interesting aspect of our psychology that the act of undressing seems to evoke an even stronger response than the resulting nudity. And as I stripped, I noticed how much I was focused on doing what one normally does without thinking. I allowed my dress to drop freely to my hips, and it fell into a heap around my ankles when I wiggled my backside. I slid the rear of my bra around to the front, undid the clasp and, sucking in a deep breath, I plucked it from my chest. I immediately regretted my flourish, because my breasts wobbled, welcoming their newfound freedom. This sensation, combined with my mood, had the inevitable effect. I felt my face becoming flushed and a telltale tingling in my nipples as they began to harden. But I wasn't alone in experiencing that.

I stepped out of my dress and crouched to neatly fold it and place it, with my bra, in my duffel bag. I don't really know if I was stalling, but I took my time doing it. I still wore my knickers, the final piece of clothing, small as it was, which attached me to the world beyond the shores of Palmira. When that was gone, I would be giving up a part of myself. For the next year, people would gaze upon my naked form, viewing my most intimate places, sharing my body. Taking another deep breath, I stood up, reached to my knickers and pushed them down my thighs. For a few seconds I remained slightly bent forward, partly shielding my nakedness from view. But once I'd removed my pants completely, I held myself proudly erect, clad only my Balenciaga slingback sandals.

It was a strange situation. There were around fifty people in the room and thirty were bare-skinned, so I was hardly on my own. It's the same throughout Palmira (outside the enclave); more than sixty per cent of the population, local and visitor, are naked. But what made me a little queasy at being publicly exposed was that the men around me remained fully dressed. It might not have been so much different from back home, when I had "practiced" public nudity. Stripping all the way was permitted on the municipal beaches, but only for women. That might come across as sexist, but the rationale is simple (even if you don't agree). A man's uncovered genitalia are more on open display than a woman's. However, there's a difference here on Palmira. Nudity is compulsory, if you're a woman, and you experience it more intensely for that reason. Yet it's liberating. You feel flattered and honored, even privileged, because it is the*raison d'être*of the nude law "to celebrate the natural beauty of the female body."

Contemplating this, I'd become so lost in thought that when I finally looked about I saw that people had begun to move off. I reached down for my bag but my hand was politely brushed aside by a young man who picked it up instead.

"Welcome to Palmira," I heard once more.

The voice was familiar. Marcia is as striking in the flesh as she is on a screen. (And the expression "in the flesh" had now taken on a whole new meaning!) She has a sophisticated, dignified style, in a way rather intimidating, especially how she looks at you with luminous, hypnotic eyes. Her voice is as smooth as honey but she speaks with unmistakable authority. She introduced her assistant, Ricardo. He's a good-looking young man but was dressed like an apparition out of a vintage tourist brochure, wearing cream pleated slacks, Hawaiian shirt, Venetian loafers and aviator Ray-Bans perched atop a pink Panama hat. He spoke with a rich Jamaican accent and displayed not a trace of humor, so I couldn't tell if his attire was meant to be ironical. Of course, next to his naked boss he looked anything but*outré*.

Marcia stayed behind as Ricardo and I departed the lounge, crossing the terminal in silence. Ahead of us, the all-girl group crowded at the exit doors, laughing and mocking and daring each other to be the first out. We passed them, emerging into brilliant sunlight. Over the doorway, a sign in big red lettering stridently declared

"NO ADULT FEMALE WEARING CLOTHES MAY PROCEED BEYOND THIS POINT."

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Palmira's airport commands exquisite views, in one direction a turquoise ocean of startling clarity, in the other leafy hillsides dotted with neat, whitewashed houses, and between them the picture-postcard town of Régate spread out along the arc of the bay.

The concourse pavement shimmered in the early afternoon heat. Lined up at the curb were several open-air taxis. These are rather quaint, customized pickup trucks, with bench seating along the sides of the tray facing inwards under a canvas awning. Ricardo led me to the third one in the queue, spoke to the driver and showed her my ticket. She was tall and gorgeous, lean but shapely, with skin that gleamed golden in the sun's rays, sparkling amber eyes and lustrous blonde hair which cascaded across her slim shoulders. I was ready to believe the folklore that this island is home to the world's most stunning women.

She bid us welcome and announced herself as Catriona. Her taxi was the shuttle to where I'd be spending my first two nights, the Hôtel Andromède. (Quite a number of places on the island have French names, leftovers from a bygone era.) Ricardo and I climbed into the back. There was just enough room for us and the three couples already on board. One of the women, English and in her late thirties, was evidently comfortable with her nudity, although the way she pointed out the attractions to her husband when we were on the move made me think she was a first-time visitor. Next to them were the two girls who'd sat in front of me on the plane. Even without their punk-goth garb, their hair colors, perforations and pastel complexions proclaimed their lifestyle. And there was something else, a secret which cannot be kept on Palmira. On each girl, amidst the silken tufts between her thighs, I glimpsed the glint of a small gold ring piercing the rose-petal folds. We exchanged smiles.

I could not help but squirm when I took my place on the bench. The faux leather seat was warm and sticky under my bare backside. It was a slow journey through downtown, because pedestrians share the streets with the taxis (although no other vehicular traffic is allowed) and there seems to be no operational concept of right-of-way; so our buggy slowed from a crawl to a snail's pace in order to weave our way through the crowds. Whenever we swerved, and when we turned off the highway to head up into the hills, and as we climbed a gravelly, undulating road towards the hotel, I felt a delicious tingle as my skin peeled away from the upholstery and clung again when I sank back down. It was weirdly erotic, and as my unconstrained breasts swayed to the rhythm, during the half-hour drive these stimuli united in a thrill of sensation. None of us women could suppress the occasional gasp and sigh.

I was seated between Ricardo on my right and the other woman passenger on my left. The English husband was sitting directly across from me. He every so often let his gaze wander over my body, though our eyes never connected. He was a tall man, and his knees grazed against mine when the vehicle rocked sideways. We weren't packed in; but Ricardo's thighs touched mine whenever we lurched forward, and those of the woman next to me when we jerked to a halt. The feel of the men's trousers and the woman's warm flesh against my bare skin tickled my senses. Even if I'd wanted to put the nudity out of my mind, it was impossible.

While the other men were understandably charmed by our aroused reactions, Ricardo either didn't notice or pretended not to. It had perplexed me, before we started out, why he'd arranged the taxi-ride, but his reason quickly became obvious. What better introduction to Palmira could there be?

We drove eastwards through the town, which hugs the shorefront of Regatta Bay on the northern side of the island. Régate's western precincts merge into the Robina district, where the airport is located, and the Grandin enclave. The eastern end diffuses into the forested ridge which forms the island's backbone. The parts are linked by two major thoroughfares. The Esplanade follows the curve of the bay and is lined with cafeterias, bars and nightclubs, as well as travel agencies, vehicle hire operators, duty-free stores, souvenir shops and refreshment kiosks. The broader Boulevard runs further inland but roughly parallel. Along it are located department stores and specialty shops, the fancier restaurants, offices and banks. Near the middle of town, the two avenues are connected by Patrick's Emporium, the historic marketplace.

In contrast to the cool, quiet calm of the airport terminal, the Esplanade was vibrant with exotic sights, sounds and smells. The day was pleasantly warm and the salt air wafting off the waves was infused with aromas from the coffee shops and fragrances from the gardens. Tourists and locals mingled noisily, haggling, arguing, relaxing, loitering. It could have been any Caribbean resort, with perspiring men in billowing shorts and flamboyant shirts, young men in straw hats peddling knick-knacks, red-faced salesmen in white suits touting their trade, jaded tour guides shepherding their groups and organizing rides.

But then there were the women. Visitors, vendors, agents, guides; shopping, sightseeing, plying the crowds outside the storefronts; hanging onto the arms of husbands, boyfriends girlfriends; strolling or striding; wearing backpacks, carrying briefcases or shopping bags; dark, light, pale, black, brown, pink. All were stark naked. Some wore hats and shoes, but in between was nothing but bare skin.

After just a few minutes of observation, I could distinguish local women from tourists. The former carry themselves with a self-assurance and self-possession which come with day-to-day experience. To any of these women, covering her body would be as unnatural and discomforting as unfamiliar nudity was to me that day. Meanwhile, among the visitors it isn't hard to spot the new arrivals, although not always by skin tones or tan lines. The newcomers' bodies will be slightly hunched, as if against the cold, even when it is sunny and hot. They cling to partners and avoid eye contact with all who pass by. Those with at least a few days' experience of public nudity hold themselves with more ease and confidence, but they nevertheless stand out from the locals in the way they move and how they look about, not yet entirely accustomed to the extraordinary scenery, and less so to being part of it.

We left the town and drove up a hill to the Hôtel Andromède, overlooking Régate a long way from the water but with a superb panoramic view of the bay. It is a genteel establishment, graceful in design, set amidst manicured lawns, carefully tended gardens and lush groves of palms and pines. It's comfortable rather than luxurious. In the driveway, chips of fractured granite crunched cheerily underfoot as we disembarked. On a marble plinth flanking the portico there is a bronze sculpture of the daughter of Cepheus, chained naked to a rock and gazing forlornly to the heavens. The building's faux-Renaissance façade might at first appear a little pretentious, but it is not overdone, and the interior's fine stucco decoration and period furniture do set the Andromède above the norm.

We thanked our chauffeuse and were met by a long-faced doorman who was a personification of the hotel, attired in a crimson uniform with copious gold braid, befitting the old-world charm. He politely cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, ladies." He pointed tactfully towards our feet.

I was uncomprehending at first, until one of the other women exclaimed: "Good grief, this place really is posh!"

We laughed and I took off my sandals. We approached the reception desk across a gleaming marble floor. In my bare feet, I tiptoed charily over the hard, cold surface.

The young woman behind the counter had sleek brown skin and eyes like black diamonds. She wore her hair plaited in elaborate, beaded cornrows. She spoke in a calypso accent with a subtle patrician overlay. A plaque on the desktop identified her as Regina. Like most Palmirene females I'd seen so far, she was extremely attractive. So I do wonder if three centuries of nudity have given rise to a natural selection process that has made all the women beautiful, or whether the authorities give preference to the most attractive immigrants. But maybe it's just an illusion. In reality, as I'd seen on the Esplanade, the women — locals and visitors — are not all beauty queens, by no means supermodel-slim or triathlete-trim. But I was finding out that once I'd gotten past the initial reticence, being on display in public is a powerful and empowering expression of your womanhood. I've always believed that positive feelings about yourself radiate to everyone around you. (And I was soon to meet a woman who epitomizes that.)

All of us standing at the desk were spellbound by this vision of unadorned Caribbean splendor. I was the first to recover, signed in and was given two room keys and some brochures. Regina reminded us of the hotel's amenities, including a saloon bar and dining room, a swimming pool and gymnasium; and she bade us both have an enjoyable stay. Ricardo just grinned.

"I shall leave you here. I'll be back at nine tomorrow morning?"

It took me a couple of seconds to realize he'd asked a question. I nodded and said "That's fine."

There was no attendant to carry my luggage, which was just the one bag anyway. I took the stairs, and found my suite on the third floor. It was modest but comfortable, with a balcony that offered a splendid view of the bay. I took a quick shower, and it was a funny feeling to realize that once I'd toweled myself dry I was ready without further ado to go downstairs. But I couldn't resist scrutinizing myself in the full-length bedroom mirror. I performed a pirouette, arms outstretched, and was not displeased. I'm rather short. My lips are a tad too thin, my nose slightly crooked, my eyes a fraction too far apart, skin perhaps in need of better care. My hair is rather unkempt. (A shag cut demands discipline.) My breasts aren't large, my hips are narrow, my backside is small; but I keep in shape, the contours are in the right places and I have nice legs. I'm told I have a lovely smile. My pubic hair bothered me, a little. Just a few wisps blur the outlines of my crease, but I'd read that in Palmirene custom this is like wearing a wedding band. I decided that was not a bad thing, at least for now.

I went down to the bar. The place was almost empty, with a couple sitting at one of the half-dozen tables. The waitress waved her notepad to let me know I'd been seen. She was streamlined and tawny-skinned. (I must say that I don't normally focus so much on women's physical appearance... at least I didn't, until Palmira.)

I eased myself warily into one of the big lounge chairs but couldn't hold back another gasp. Unlike the taxi's upholstery, the leather was cool and slick against my back and bottom. I felt my heart begin to race and my chest start to heave, and it took a few moments to regain my composure. It was extraordinary how something as prosaic as sitting down in a leather armchair could be a new and exhilarating experience.

The waitress took my order for coffee, and while she was fetching it the couple came over and asked if they could join me. Feeling somewhat ill at ease — sitting alone naked in a bar in a foreign country can do that to you — and a little resentful that I'd been abandoned by Ricardo, I was happy to have company. Ted and Valerie are aged in their mid-to-late forties. He is bespectacled and somewhat paunchy, with a florid face and a double chin. In his gaudy shirt and voluminous Bermuda shorts, he was an endearing caricature of the jovial American tourist; and indeed, as he greeted the barman, he spoke with a broad Midwestern accent. She, on the other hand, is well-built and well-toned, with platinum-blonde hair and a pleasant face, keen eyes and a refulgent smile. She is curvaceous with an all-over even tan. When she sat, I noticed that she pursed her lips as her bare bottom came into contact with the chair. The touch of naked flesh on a seat is obviously something you don't get used to quickly.

The waitress came back with my coffee. Ted inspected her body from one end to the other, his gaze lingering at the most interesting places along the way. I reckoned he must do this every time, and was utterly unabashed. The young woman just smiled good-naturedly, completely relaxed at having her every nook and cranny examined so thoroughly.

I'd received only a cursory browse from Ted, but I wasn't offended. I could see he was showing restraint for the neophyte. Even so, I must have begun to blush, because Valerie leaned across and patted me on the knee. Then she did something that made me shiver. She gently pushed my knees apart, just a little. It might have come across as an invasively intimate thing to do, but I realized I had been clamping my thighs.

"First time, sweetie?" she asked indulgently. "It takes some getting used to at first, but it's the best feeling in the world, you'll see."

"This is our third trip." Ted explained. "We'll keep coming back, too. Can't get enough of it."

Val slapped him playfully on the arm. "No, you can't."

Ted's enthusiasm and Val's felicity were infectious. I started to relax, still somewhat tense but more at ease than I had been since flying out of Kingston.

"First time we came here..." Ted began.

"I hid in our room for two days," Valerie continued. "By the time we left, I had almost forgotten what it was like to wear clothes. You get so into it." She took a sip of her cocktail. "There are basically two types of men here, and believe it or not they don't divide cleanly into locals and visitors. Some will look at you out of the corners of their eyes. They're self-conscious about it, but they can't keep their peepers off you. The other kind will stand there and take a good long look, and when they're satisfied they go about their business."

"A naked woman is as natural and as glorious as sunrise and sunset," Ted cut in.

"He gets poetic around pretty girls," Valerie scoffed, good-naturedly, "but he's right, you know. Take some advice. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed. If they're looking at you, it's because they like what they see. Treat it as a compliment. So don't try to hide anything. Let them see what you have."

She paused, letting her words sink in. Ted, meanwhile, was ogling two women who had just walked in.

"God made the man first..." he said.

"... and left the best for last," she went on. "But the island has lots of things to offer besides the obvious. Some very good restaurants. Wonderful scenery, especially when you get out of the town. Lots to do. Snorkeling and scuba diving — that's our hobby. One last piece of advice though. Sun protection is a must, particularly on your pussy."

I drew in a breath.

"You don't want him sticking it in there when you've got a bad case of sunburn." She paused. "There is a him?"

Ted and Val were an interesting couple; and I had no doubt who, back home at least, wore the pants.

After some time and a single glass of wine, I managed to extricate myself from the T-V show. I admired their forthright and comfortable manner, but they were the sort of pair whose*joie de vivre*will quickly exhaust you. Their natural habitat is the large gathering where they can pass, or be passed, from one audience to the next.

I retired to my room for a nap but couldn't sleep so caught up on some reading. When it was time for dinner, I discovered that getting ready to go out for the evening is much simpler when you have literally nothing to wear. I decided to follow the lead of Palmirene women and eschew make-up. (They take the "***natural*** beauty of the female body" seriously.)

I opted to take the elevator because it happened to arrive just as I stepped out into the corridor. (I was the only passenger boarding on the third floor, so it must stop automatically.) I immediately lamented my laziness, because the car was overcrowded, with four women including the goth-punk pair and two men. We weren't pressed together, but our bodies touched as the car wobbled downwards. It was an antiquated lift which rattled and groaned and travelled very slowly. I happened to be wedged sideways between the two males. The shirts and trousers of the man behind me brushed against my bare back and bottom, those in front of me against my breasts. As in the taxi, it was a peculiar feeling. The fabric tickled but also teased. The descent seemed to take forever. I only just managed to stifle a moan.

The restaurant was a fancy one, with pristine white tablecloths, starched napkins, silver candleholders — all the accoutrements of a high-class establishment. The serving staff consisted of two waiters and four waitresses. Each of the males wore an elegant uniform of black pants and ruffled white shirt, with a spruce-green tie and silver-trimmed vest. The girls were, of course,*déshabillé*head to foot. They were marshalled by a pint-sized, intense-looking woman, the*maîtresse d'hôtel*, whose only accessory to what nature and a vigorous daily workout had endowed upon her was a thin gold neckband.

It was with slightly guilty relief that I scanned the room and saw no sign of Ted and Valerie. Yet I was fretting that I hadn't booked a table because the place was filling up. So I was about to head for the bar to order a counter meal when the goth-punk girls suggested I join them. Perhaps they were just being nice, but Emily and Caitlyn — Ems and Cat, they called each other — turned out to be delightful company, erudite and inquisitive; and I felt guilty about having judged these winsome little books by their offbeat covers. They are both petite and pretty, although I'm not fond of piercings, particularly green-haired Caitlyn's nipple rings. I was a little puzzled that neither had tattoos, but purple-topped Emily gave an explanation that made me smile.

"This is just a phase, you know."

I wasn't sure if she was being serious, because she had a wry sense of humor. Caitlyn was more frivolous; and when a waiter approached she twisted round in her seat to flirtatiously present him with a full view of her body. Yet the way the girls gazed every so often into each other's eyes, I had the impression they were lovers. They seemed genuinely interested in my archaeological work; and I in turn was curious about their motive for visiting Palmira. To get in touch with their femininity, was Emily's enigmatic reply.

I wish I could have spent more time getting to know them. They were setting off in the morning with a hiking party.

"Use plenty of sunblock," I advised.

**Natural Beauty Pt. 02**

**The Joy of Nudity**

I awoke to a chorus of songbirds. Sunrise was just getting started behind the ridge at the rear of the hotel. Regatta Bay was still shrouded in darkness; scattered clouds glowed pallid pink and orange in the indigo sky; a sallow near-full moon was sinking in the west. I imbibed the clean, crisp, salty air. I love that lonely, tranquil time when the night's reign is just ending.

I heard a noise coming from below. On the lawn, Emily's and Caitlyn's group was getting ready to set off on their trek. In the half-light it was a wonderfully eccentric tableau. There were approximately two dozen people. The males wore the standard hiking apparel. The women were nude between their broad-brimmed hats and sturdy hiking boots. Their bodies gleamed with sunscreen and their faces were streaked with zinc cream. Protected from the sun's worst rays, they were defenseless against a brisk breeze blowing off the bay. They were stamping their feet and swinging their arms. One of them uttered a reedy cheer when it was time to go. As they moved out, bare derrières wiggled beneath laden backpacks.

The breeze was beginning to bite, so I retreated inside to make a quick breakfast of tea and toast in the kitchenette; but as I was about to sit down I heard voices from the direction of the balcony. For a second or two I was bewildered, and a little chilled, then reproached myself because the people talking were plainly on the adjacent deck. I tried to be discreet, peeking through the latticework screen, but was greeted with a cheery "Good morning!" in German accents from a man and a woman. I saw, to my shock, that ***both*** were naked, sitting in deck chairs sipping coffee, and apparently not minding the nip in the air.

Dieter and Gabrielle were in the second week of their second visit to Palmira. They are followers of the*Freikörperkultur*— free body culture. They invited me to come over, and it was their turn to be startled when I said "Don't get up" and scrambled over the balustrade and around the partition. We were only three storeys above the ground, but I am normally afraid of heights. I guess Palmira has boosted my bravado.

There were no more chairs so I leaned against the railing. Dieter studied my body so thoroughly that I wondered if an erection was coming; but as an experienced naturist he knew how to control his responses. Nevertheless, his reaction was contrary to my expectations of naturism, which I'd believed was not sexualized. Its adherents generally deny (perhaps in self-defense) that eroticism has any part in their lifestyle. They reject society's conditioning us to see clothing as a way of separating ourselves from nature, as a symbol of status and a means for self-expression. And in this respect, naturism and nudism (there is a subtle difference) also impose a form of equality on its practitioners, without the surrender of individuality. On Palmira, however, the (public) nudity is one-sided, and compulsory. Whatever they do in the privacy of their suite and balcony, when Dieter and Gabrielle go out he wears clothes but she does not and is not permitted to. Yet they embrace*la différence*, they take pleasure in it.

I'd always been aware that the unspoken, underlying premise of Palmira's nude law is the "cmnf" phenomenon — clothed male naked female (although I think "nfcm" puts the emphasis where it belongs) — in which the erotic connotations are unmistakable.

The most celebrated depiction of "cmnf" is*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, the painting by Édouard Manet which shows two fully clothed gentlemen enjoying a luncheon on the grass with a naked woman. She is staring out of the frame, expressing no embarrassment, let alone shame. She has possibly just come out of the water and is drying herself in the air, because there is a second, half-clad woman bathing in the background. But the figures are languid, and there appears to be no sexual tension in the scene. Nothing would change if both women were fully clothed. However, the artist's intent was to create, in the worlds of Émile Zola, a vivid contrast. And that is what Palmira provides, a vivid contrast.

There***is***a sexual tension intrinsic to the nude-law culture, because only one sex is naked, and that sex***must***be naked. And if you see this as a power imbalance, it appears to favour the male. But that's an illusion, because we have chosen to come to Palmira, to be subject to the nude law. Ours has been an empowered choice.

So having done my customary overanalyzing, I left Dieter and Gabrielle. I decided to take a stroll around the hotel grounds and to the shoreline, a few hundred metres down the hill. I waited until I was outdoors before I put on my hiking shoes, and won an approving nod from the doorman as I tiptoed across the cold tiles. The footwear, a cap and a layer of sunscreen were all I had on. The day was already heating up, but it was a pleasant walk. Nearby, a squad of gardeners was at work. Beads of sweat stippled their skin, and the fact that half of the bodies were completely exposed was no longer a novelty.

On the spur of the moment I resolved to walk all the way to the centre of the town. I calculated it to be, at a brisk pace, about twenty minutes away. I would be back in plenty of time for my rendezvous with Ricardo. The road is steep at the beginning but levels out when you reach the coastal flats about half-way. There the Esplanade starts its run along the shoreline. On your way down, you sense the history of this island as you pass remnants of the serriform rows of fortifications that once snaked up the hillside towards the stronghold overlooking the harbor.

Régate's population is about three thousand, twice that for the conurbation of Régate, Robina, Grandin and proximate villages. The business and entertainment heart is bustling, noisy, in places gaudy but rarely tacky or seedy. The Palmirenes disdain the high-rise development which has tarnished the glamour of other resort communities, but there are nevertheless unmistakable signs of progress and prosperity. The weatherboard houses are modest but well-maintained. The overall tone is affluent but egalitarian, combining colonial-style elegance with modern glass and steel. There are no ornate villas, oversized mansions or opulent hotels.

The pedestrian traffic was relatively light until I reached Patrick's Emporium. Nobody seems to know who the eponymous Patrick was, but this has been the marketplace since when piracy and slave-trading were the mainstays of the Palmirene economy. Nowadays the lively activity is focused on tourism. There are fish, fruit and vegetable counters, a veritable maze of trinket stalls, and dozens of roaming vendors. There are even women's clothing outlets, selling everything from bikinis to ball gowns. Because it's at the heart of everything, people were coming and going, in all directions, hunting for early-morning bargains, seeking breakfast or heading off to work. Some were leaving the beach, the only public place where male and female bodies approach any degree of symmetry. Yet even on the strand the difference remains. You are warned in the literature, and by shorefront signage, that male nudity is prohibited. Indeed, Palmirenes are rather prudish about this. Exiting the beach, men are expected to at least put on a shirt, and trousers or shorts are*de rigueur*downtown.

I wandered aimlessly for a while, as did many of my fellow perambulators, taking in the sights. I was particularly interested in the daily lives of the residents, since I was now technically one of them; and I found my exemplars in a couple sitting in a sidewalk café having coffee and croissants. From the evidence of their laptops and folios, I deduced that they worked for one of the banks or law firms which populate the Boulevard. (Offshore banking is a growing, albeit somewhat controversial, source of income, rivalling tourism in importance to the local economy.) The man was dressed in an expensive tropical-style business suit. Preoccupied with a conversation on his phone, he seemed indifferent to his companion. She spoke with an English accent but was well and evenly tanned. Extravagant red curls swept over her bare shoulders but clear of her breasts. I pictured her as a bright, ambitious junior executive making a name for herself in the City of London, and learning that she had been transferred to a branch office in the sunny West Indies. ("The law says I must ***what***?") As she and her partner rose to leave, she turned away from me, and I saw that the crisscross pattern of the seat cover was imprinted in faint reddish weals on her buttocks.

I returned to the Esplanade, passing two police constables on patrol, a man and a woman. His uniform was a khaki shirt, slate-blue trousers and a broad-brimmed hat. Hers consisted of thin blue ribbons around her upper arms. She wore shoes at one end of her and a sun visor at the other with nothing in between except a narrow belt, from which were slung a baton and a radio. They paused to assist a couple who appeared lost. The man wanted to take a photo and they affably obliged. Farther along the street, two girls were eating ice-cream. Lush blonde locks splayed across the chest of one. The policewoman amiably instructed the girl to tie back her hair. Nothing must conceal what nature has bestowed.

It was time to return to the hotel to meet Ricardo. It was getting hot and I was walking uphill, so the sea breeze provided a welcome respite.

By now I was coming to terms with my nudity. I discerned myself striding with confidence through the crowds, not flaunting myself but enjoying what attention I received. Valerie was right. Everyone looks at you. It's why they have the nude law and it's why tourists come here. But in one sense it's easier for the males. Nudity exposes not just women's bodies, but our thoughts and feelings as well. Those who pretend they are not affected are betrayed by flushed faces but as well by raised nipples. You cannot, even for a moment, escape, hide or forget what you are.

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I was back at the hotel in plenty of time for a shower. I switched my shoes for sandals, but carried them as I went down to the bar for a coffee while waiting for Ricardo. He turned up just as Ted and Valerie came in. They smiled and winked, but moved on. Ricardo took me out to a small, open-sided vehicle something like a golf buggy. There are a lot of these on Palmira. The island has one of the highest population densities in the Caribbean region; so to reduce traffic congestion severe restrictions are placed on the size and power of private motor vehicles.

It's easy to see why the Palmirenes are so protective of their paradise. It is one of the most picturesque and fragile environments in the West Indies. Most of the people reside along the west coast in the three municipalities. The rest live in scattered communities across the island's thirty-four square kilometers (thirteen square miles). Nestled between the harbor and hills, Régate is the seat of government, chief port and commercial centre. Grandin is a dormitory town. Robina is the transport hub, built around the airport which services the island with a direct daily connection to Jamaica and regular flights from most other parts of the Caribbean. The other major population centre is Frigate Island, with a few hundred permanent inhabitants and several hotels. It lies to the north-east, accessible via inter-island ferry and water-taxi.

Having no rivers or natural lakes, Palmira is completely reliant on rainfall storage for its water supply, so farming is difficult and most foodstuffs must be imported. Some locals still engage in fishing and boat-building. Banking is the emergent source of revenue but is heavily regulated to avoid the scandals which have tainted that sector elsewhere. Palmira issues its own money, although the US dollar, UK pound and East Caribbean dollar are*de facto*legal tender. Other currencies are accepted, and the local banks exchange cash for a very small fee. Unemployment is virtually non-existent and the people enjoy one of the highest*per capita*incomes in the world, even if most abjure extravagant and ostentatious lifestyles.

The main industry is, obviously, tourism. In addition to the idyllic tropical setting and superb scenery, the colourful history and unique way of life have made Palmira a popular destination for adventurers and romantics, thrill-seekers and pleasure-seekers. With most of the workforce engaged in tourist-related activities and more than half foreign-born, it is not surprising that Palmira has a relatively young population. Furthermore, the sex ratio is lopsided, with 138 females for every 100 males. No other country in the world comes close to this figure; and it is the nude law which is mainly responsible. Women are easily seduced by this island. We come here to work and to play.

The trickle of tourists which started early in the twentieth century had become a steady flow by the 1970s. Female nudity became an attraction for jaded jetsetters bored with the topless beaches of Saint-Tropez and the fashionable hideaways of Montego Bay and Mustique. Laudatory articles in tourist magazines like the one that had attracted my attention, and in publications such as*National Geographic*,*Time-Life*, *Newsweek* and (naturally) *Playboy* highlighted the attractions of "gleaming golden sands, shimmering azure waters, dazzling cerulean skies and glistening, naked female bodies" for a receptive audience. "Don't bother packing much else besides your toothbrush," one well-known travel journalist advised her distaff readers.

As a result, this once sleepy backwater has grown rapidly in size and sophistication. Consequently, for environmental and logistical reasons limits have had to be placed on the intake of visitors, in particular from cruise ship stopovers. To further cope, foreign workers have been brought in from other Caribbean countries and (less often now) the rest of the world. Under Palmira's flexible immigration laws, most have been granted permanent residence and citizenship. These expatriates have made invaluable contributions to Palmirene society.

The legacy of the egalitarian buccaneer culture of old Palmira and the cosmopolitan influences of tourism and immigration have made this community a model of social harmony and racial equality in a troubled and turbulent part of the world. Political, social and economic upheavals elsewhere in the Caribbean have had little impact. The winds of change sweeping across the region have been a benign breeze in Palmira, although nature has not been so kind. Hurricanes in recent years have caused widespread damage; but the community has recovered quickly as a result of swift action and intensive reconstruction efforts. In fact, Palmira received widespread praise for its contribution to relief efforts on neighboring islands.

These tempests did have another consequence. For some years opponents of the nude law (yes, there are a few) directed their criticism at the dangers posed to unprotected bodies during the storm season. Although the nude law had provided for exemptions, ambiguities with regard to hazards led to amendments, and to the passage of an Equal Opportunities Act and a Health and Safety Standards Act which have benefited Palmirenes of both sexes.

How much of the island's prosperity, stability and tranquility can be attributed to the nude law may be a matter for debate; but the Palmirene people think they know. They have a saying. "When all women are naked, all men know they are brothers."

Here endeth the lesson (for now).

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Ricardo drove me to the Palmira College campus in Régate. The postgraduate school has an enrolment of two hundred full- and part-time students. It's a serene setting, a cluster of wooden-frame buildings nestled behind a hill not far from the beach. When we arrived there were a few people moving about, and this essentially random sample confirmed that about seventy percent of staff and students are female. The sight of their naked bodies should by now have been almost banal; but it was nevertheless a little bit strange to see the nude law operating in this place of higher learning.

Ricardo ushered me to the Department of Archaeology and Ethnology. Professor Hayden is also the dean of the postgrad school, which is an indication of how seriously the Palmirenes take their historical and cultural heritage. She's taller than I'd pictured her (having seen her beforehand only on a screen), with ash-blonde hair tied back severely in a ponytail. Though she spends only a part of the year on the island, her body is tanned all over. She was accompanied by two of her students, Stephanie and Brandon, who had been living on Palmira for just over a year. Their job was to get me*au courant*with progress on the dig sites.

The main excavation on Palmira is at Cimarrón Bay on the east coast, where I would be working as a supervisor. A secondary dig at Hamilton Bay on the south coast has yielded important finds. Discoveries have also been made at Grandin Bay in the south-west, but investigations there have been hampered by urban development. However, that site is used by the College for teaching purposes. There are smaller spots scattered all over the island. Because they have such a strong sense of their past, the Palmirene people take a keen interest in local archaeology. The popular interest is in colonial history, in particular the pirate heritage, but the government promotes pre-Columbian studies. A major focus has been on historical and cultural links with other parts of the Caribbean, from which half the population originates.

Rebecca left us for a couple of hours, and when she returned the discussion inevitably came round to the nude law. As the only one of us wearing clothes, Brandon kept out of the conversation at first, although I was interested in the male perspective. First I described my own feelings and perceptions, and the women assured me that these were typical for a newcomer. This was important, because most of the volunteer diggers come from overseas and, like the tourists, the majority are female. My responsibilities were to include their health, safety and welfare.

Rebecca emphasized that her nudity does not impact on her authority as a senior academic. In fact, she comes across as very charismatic, a natural leader*au naturel*. Her students idolize her, and as she spoke Brandon appeared smitten. She's an attractive woman, and being naked understandably adds to the appeal. She was obviously aware of his infatuation, but (as I've since come to appreciate) women who deal with male underlings here on Palmira take this grown-up puppy love in their stride.

It's all about that "vivid contrast." Back in Australia, while completing my doctoral dissertation I taught undergraduate classes, and encountered the occasional crush. Even in academia you cannot entirely avoid the "You're a woman, I'm a man" attitude from some of the guys; but it's kept suppressed. On Palmira, however, it's amplified because of the one-sided nature of nudity; professional relationships between the sexes simply cannot be asexual. You can't sublimate the difference between male and female. And because she is not permitted to cover her body, the sexual tension between Rebecca and Brandon, between naked teacher and clothed student, is heightened even more.

Neither of them expressed these thoughts in as many words, but it seemed clear to me.

Stephanie lightened the mood by revealing that whenever she goes home to California she finds it a weird and unsettling experience to be wearing clothes. Brandon then told us that he was surprised at first at how nonchalant the local men are about nudity and the local women about its compulsory nature. I thought he would raise some sort of response from Rebecca and Stephanie when he claimed that for outlanders it's the males who find it harder to adjust, and not just in not knowing where to look and how long to look, and the difference between a glance, a stare, an ogle and a leer. While it's most young men's fantasy to be surrounded by naked women all the time, males can be shy too. And there's such a thing as sensory overload. In fact the women listened to his views in silence, nodding and smiling.

Ricardo politely interrupted with disappointing news. My scheduled inspection of the Palmira Museum would have to be postponed. I had been looking forward to seeing it in real life, having only explored it online, and to visiting the College's undergraduate campus. But it seemed pointless to make the half-hour each-way journey just for sight-seeing. There would be plenty of occasions for catching up, and the alternative was more than enough compensation. Marcia Robbins was meeting with the members of the government at Parliament House. I could join her, and witness a sitting of the legislature. It was an opportunity not to pass up.

(It only then occurred to me that I could have been more*au fait*with local custom. The museum and undergrad campus are located inside the Grandin special administrative district, where the nude law is not enforced. Before leaving my hotel, I should have inquired whether I should bring something to wear. In fact, although nudity is not obligatory in the enclave, it is*de rigueur*for women who work outside. That is, it's is a social protocol rather than a legal requirement.)

The change of plans did mean extra time with Rebecca. She suggested that before lunch I sit in on an orientation address the staff give to new students. About two-thirds of all those commencing postgraduate studies are from overseas. They have jobs mainly in tourism, and many settle permanently. They come from all over the world and are drawn as much by the generous wages paid in the both tourist and financial sectors as by the island's other attractions. To ensure they are not overwhelmed by the culture shock, each new intake attends these orientation sessions. Things are run very informally at the College, and Rebecca takes some of the classes herself.

In the lecture theatre, about two dozen people were just getting seated. With a couple of older exceptions, they were aged in their early twenties and were about sixty per cent female. The young men were dressed how you would find them on any ordinary campus — in jeans, chinos, capris, cargo shorts, plaid shirts, polo shirts, flannel shirts, T-shirts, etcetera. The women were also accoutered in the usual style... for Palmira; and none appeared uncomfortable or coy about her nudity. They had been on Palmira long enough that they were becoming accustomed. A handful sat in a small bunch away from the males, but most had no problem mixing.

As I sat at the back, Rebecca stepped up onto the podium, alongside one of her colleagues, to deliver the talk and field questions. And because of their status and academic credentials, the contrast between them was set out in high relief. Clayton Madore, the assistant dean, was impeccably attired in a three-piece suit. The symbolism was potent.

We all know the phrase "clothes make the man." (On Palmira you don't have to add the inclusive rider "... and woman.") Some attribute it to Mark Twain, or to Shakespeare ("the apparel oft proclaims the man..."), but the sentiment goes back at least as far as Homer (he of the wine-dark sea, that is, not of Duff beer). In other words, it's a well-established principle, attested to by scientific research as well as in everyday life, that what we wear affects how others perceive us. Garments do more than protect us from the elements. They project your identity, your feelings and your aspirations, to communicate your social status, and to conceal things as well. Clothing style is a non-verbal cue which confirms, validates and defines power-dynamic interactions and relationships. But that doesn't necessarily impose conformity. We may choose to adopt a unique style to affect perceptions of us. And it works even when no one is looking. For psychologists have identified the phenomenon of enclothed or embodied cognition, which means that what you wear can influence the way you think, feel and behave in private as well as in public; but it's less about your own self-esteem than the confidence, competence and power that you associate with particular forms of apparel.

Yet Mark Twain would not be very popular with Palmirene women. He supposedly claimed that "Naked people have little or no influence in society." It's debatable whether he wrote that; but he did write: "Without his clothes a man would be nothing at all... There is no power without clothes. It is the power that governs the human race. Strip its chiefs to the skin, and no State could be governed; naked officials could exercise no authority; they would look (and be) like everybody else — commonplace, inconsequential." However, he also wrote: "Strip the human race, absolutely naked, and it would be a real democracy. But the introduction of even a rag of tiger skin, or a cowtail, could make a badge of distinction and be the beginning of a monarchy."

So it might be held that it's the women who carry on the classless character of Palmira's buccaneer heritage.

That being said, you cannot get past the consequences of the nude law. You can't ignore the asymmetry between men and women. It's ubiquitous; and that's one of the ironies of this weird and wonderful place. Because women have achieved social and economic equality, are represented in every sphere of cultural, commercial and political life, their naked bodies, deprived of clothing by the law of the land, are everywhere. You'd be hard-pressed to describe any aspect of Palmirene society without reference to or a comment on this singular attribute.

In any case, if clothes do make the man, it could be argued that the men are disadvantaged; they are the ones who carry the burden of ensuring they wear the right clothes. Palmira has its uniforms and dress codes to which males must adhere and which divide them into classes and cliques. So nudity in this context offers women the best of both worlds. In separating the sexes it imposes a particular conformity, but it also confers amongst women a sense of equality. In nudity there are no artificial distinctions. Certainly there is individuality and thus diversity, in size and skin tone for instance. But we all have breasts and vaginas, and without the accoutrements of clothing it is this commonality which stands out, not the superficial differences.

Yet the real joy of living under Palmira's nude law is not just that you are naked. There are, after all, who knows how many naturist venues around the world, and you only have to travel to your nearest beach these days to see bare bodies. No, what makes Palmira special is that all women are naked and only women are naked, you are naked all the time and you***must***be naked. Your nudity is an expression and a celebration of your womanhood. As I've mentioned, you don't have to be a supermodel, a glamorous starlet or a fine-tuned athlete to experience the joy of nudity.

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We had lunch in a coffee shop a little way off campus. The repast was fine, but after just a few minutes the wicker back and seat of my chair had branded my bare skin with light welts, like those I saw on the rear-end of the redheaded woman that morning. The place was full, and I suspect the mild discomfort inflicted on female patrons is deliberate — the Palmirene version of the "fifteen-minute chairs" allegedly used by fast-food restaurants to get customers to move on.

We soon moved on. Ricardo drove me across town. Marcia was waiting patiently outside Parliament House.

Palmirenes are proud of the fact that their island, the world's fourth smallest independent state, has one of the oldest continuously operating parliaments. Although self-government was achieved in 1968, and complete independence in 1974, the Legislative Assembly has been sitting in one form or another for more than two centuries. It currently has seventeen members elected for a three-year term. There are no formal political parties, and while the Members tend to vote as two blocs, conservative and progressive, there's little (from what I can tell) which sets them apart. Alliances are fluid and allegiances such as exist are to family and locality. Polling day is treated as a festival, and since MPs are chosen by proportional representation, elections are not winner-take-all contests.

It must be said, however, that sexual equality was rather slow in coming to Palmira. Women did not achieve the right to vote until 1973, and were not enfranchised on an equal basis with men until as recently as 1989. But how things have changed! In 2009, Palmirenes elected a female parliamentary majority; and today this small but enterprising island state has a woman Governor, Chief Minister and Chief Justice. And that is at least partially due to the nude law. Women have taken control of their own lives and, yes, their own bodies.

Parliament House is located on the north-eastern outskirts of Régate, not that far from the Hôtel Andromède. It is an unprepossessing structure in keeping with the Palmirenes' casual approach to officialdom. To gain admission to the public gallery Marcia and I simply walked up to the entrance, greeted the solitary guard (a genial old gentleman) and took the stairs to the second floor. The legislature was in session, and the people's delegates were engaged in a debate about fisheries. The exchanges were polite and relaxed. A couple of interjections drew laughs on both sides of the chamber. The Chief Minister, Jennifer Hibbert, was speaking. She is, like Marcia, a striking woman, full-figured but graceful, and in common with most Palmirenes is of mixed racial heritage.

After twenty-four hours on the island, I would have been surprised if the ten female MPs — who include the presiding officer — had not been naked. The cozy concordance of their warm skin tones and the cool green leather of the seats of power they occupied seemed symbolic of the temperate nature of Palmirene politics, but also of the vivid contrast which is the essence of Palmira. And in a funny way reinforcing it, perhaps because the air conditioning was out of order, their male colleagues in coats and ties appeared much less at ease.

Thinking about this, and about my previous musings on equality, I recalled a passage written by Jennifer Hibbert for the traveler's guide, in which she assayed the nature of the nude law.

"Striving for equality does not mean aspiring to sameness. Here we value equity — ensuring justice and fairness, allowing every person the appropriate opportunities to lead a full, healthy life. To achieve equity, we as a society must understand and acknowledge our differences; but when we've achieved equity we can celebrate those differences. So equal rights do not mean exactly the same treatment or obligations under the laws. And in this respect, here in Palmira men and women are definitely not equal. The beauty of the female body is esteemed above all else. As women, it is our right and our privilege to honor what nature has given us, by never hiding it away."

I wanted to meet this woman but was disappointed. As soon as the Assembly adjourned she went off to an engagement; but I did get to sit in on Marcia's conference with several government Ministers — Meredith Hewes (Education, Recreation and Cultural Affairs), Raymond Chase (Natural Resources and the Environment), Vesta Charpal (Infrastructure, Transport and Public Works), Derek Wyse (Public Services, Labour and Immigration) and Elizabeth André (Tourism and Trade). The latter was the woman who'd been on my flight. Like the Parliament, most of the Cabinet is female. The meeting was comfortably informal, everyone addressing each other by their first names. The discussion was about promoting the island as a high-end travel destination with a focus on historical themes, so my input was invited. (I think I even had an impact, reminding everyone that the pre-Columbian archaeology was just as significant as that of the colonial period.) At first it bothered me that they were so snobbish about up-scale tourism; but the hard fact is that Palmira needs to put limits on the number of tourists, for the sake of the environment, without contracting the economy.

Afterwards I decided to walk back to the Andromède. The distance turned out to be greater than I expected because the route was circuitous; but it gave me time to think. I mused about how extraordinarily my life had changed in such a short time. I had just sat in on a meeting with five*bona fide*Cabinet Ministers... and three of them were stark naked. And here I was, also without a stitch on my body, casually tramping up the hill.

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It was getting on toward sunset as I entered the lounge bar, as usual clutching my shoes along with my purse. (I have to say that being barefoot embellishes the look and the feeling of complete denudation.) I was wondering what to do with my evening, annoyed with Ricardo for again leaving me to my own devices; but that was irrational because he has his own life to lead. However, it turned out well.

Just as I took my seat, Regina the receptionist came in. She chatted briefly with the bar attendant, saw me and asked if she might sit with me awhile. I happily agreed and we ordered coffee. She impressed me by knowing about my archaeological work. In such a relatively small community it was not unpredictable that she knew the general details of my visit; but she actually cited a couple of my research papers. From her refined accent I had already determined that she'd been educated in England, and now learned that her parents are the hotel's proprietors. The family are members of Palmira's élite class, who still have an influence in how things are run.

It disappointed me a little that such a compact, compatible population might be socially stratified, but the reality is that class divisions are blurred to the point of invisibility. (Most Palmirene natives claim to be descended from the pirate pioneers and their hardy womenfolk; but that seems unlikely.) No one flaunts their wealth or status, and the elegant, alluring Regina, working at the reception desk, personifies this egalitarian spirit. In fact her brother, who's three or four years younger, was the bar attendant that evening. He brought our coffees and Regina introduced us. He looked me over, something I was rapidly getting used to and which he did almost as a reflex. Yet I couldn't help but wonder how he must feel about other men scrutinizing his naked sister. They were conditioned to the fact that he wears clothes and she doesn't; but still...

I mentioned my family, including my own Baby Bro, but decided against revealing our Palmirene heritage in case my kin and hers were traditional foes. Anyway, Regina was much more interested in hearing more about the ancient history of her island. I invited her to be a part of one of the excavations I'd be overseeing, and she appeared genuinely delighted (although from the looks of her immaculate hands and perfect body, she has not spent much time digging under a hot sun). Then she apologized because "Duty calls," and as she rose to depart she grinned.

"I leave you in capable hands," she said.

Ted's profligate shirt and Valerie's magnific breasts loomed over me. Ted called for drinks and I ordered a light beer. Valerie announced that they were going downtown for dinner and demanded I come along; and as soon as I capitulated she raised her hand and waved eagerly towards the lounge entrance. Caroline and Fin (short for Finlay) came to join us. They are Scottish, spend most of their vacation time in the Caribbean, and met the Americans while scuba-diving. They're aged in the mid-thirties. He's suntanned and stocky, with what one would describe as movie-star chiselled good looks; she is fair-skinned and slightly built, with delicate features and strawberry blonde hair. This was their first trip to Palmira and they had been first drawn by the island's other great attraction, its glorious coral reefs.

A few minutes later, two more of Ted and Valerie's recruits arrived. I couldn't tell if they were a romantic couple. They are French, both brunette and very pretty. Élise is slightly taller; her body's contours are angular, giving an impression of brittle fragility, like fine crystal; her eyes shine like blue sapphires. Adèle's curves are more voluptuous; her eyes glitter midnight blue above exquisite cheekbones.

Caroline and Fin didn't say much but seemed intelligent. Élise also said little but when she did she displayed a whimsical wisdom. Adèle is outgoing and excitable. When she gets feisty her voice becomes adorably high-pitched, and her breasts begin to undulate, in a manner that caught the rapt attention of the two men. Although this was their first trip to Palmira, she demonstrated an encyclopaedic knowledge of the island's history and culture.

A final couple showed up to complete our party just as we were getting ready to leave. Ted and Val had certainly been busy with their social networking, and told me I was in for a pleasant surprise. When introduced, Rob and Sarah responded in Australian accents. I'm not sure why meeting fellow Aussies was supposed to give me such pleasure, but they turned out to be quirkily charming, entertaining us with almost constant good-natured bickering. Indeed, they are an eccentric match. He's tall and easy-going; she's energetic and somewhat bossy, despite her diminutive size, willowy figure and squeaky voice. Her peach complexion, hazel eyes and pixie-cut blonde hair round out the impish impression. In fact I'd already noticed Sarah when I returned to the hotel that afternoon. She was at the front desk facing away from me, and with her pocket-sized figure and short hair, if she'd been wearing clothes she might have been mistaken for a boy. She and her husband were in their third and last week of their first-time visit to Palmira.

Our expedition was now at all-systems-go. The men wore jackets so I deduced we were heading to somewhere swank. In fact, I felt more underdressed than ever wearing just my Balenciaga sandals, because the other women had on earrings, necklaces and, in Sarah's case a gorgeous crimson ribbon choker with a miniature white rose. Valerie and the two French girls, in addition to applying lipstick and cheek blush, had rouged their nipples. So much for the "natural" beauty of our bodies! But I wasn't made to feel like a ninth wheel. Although none of the others are as effusive and ebullient as Ted and Val, all of my new friends were excellent company.

As we set off down the hill in one of the open-air taxis, we were packed in tightly that Rob had volunteered to sit up front with the chauffeuse. (This was Catriona, who was even more stunning illuminated by the rays of the setting sun.) However, the snug fit proved propitious, because a chilly breeze was coming off the bay; and as we climbed in six of us were tingling with goosebumps. So much for the tropics! But the two men, Ted and Fin, sat at the ends of the benches, most exposed to the cool air; and our huddled bodies provided mutual warmth. I was seated between Caroline and Sarah, and though I am rather drearily "straight" it was hard not to be a little aroused by the touch of their naked flesh pressed against mine. Nevertheless, by the time we'd reached the coastal flats and then the shelter of the buildings lining the seaward side of the Esplanade, we females were a bit cranky. When Rob couldn't resist praising the brittle night air, Sarah thumped him in the chest. His grin slumped into a grimace. She may be tiny, but she packs a hefty punch.

The street blazed with lights and roared with noise from the bars, clubs and discotheques. Although they are open day and night, it is after sunset and all the way till dawn that they come alive — loud and crowded, bursting with that quintessentially Caribbean blend of glitz and glamour, vitality and vulgarity. Ted and Val guided us through the throng towards the restaurant they had picked out. The*maître d'*recognized them.

"Table for ten?"

"Just nine, Antoine." (I suspect that the extra place was intended for Ricardo.)

"Will the ladies be dining*sans vue*?" Antoine inquired.

Élise and Adèle smiled. "Blindfolded," one of them whispered, though I think we all understood.

Ted nodded without consulting us. I presume the question was rhetorical, since all female customers in the place were sightless.

We were shown to a circular table, and each man was seated between two women. A waitress promptly appeared bearing a platter. On it was a stack of black satin sashes.

Ted was on my right and asked "May I?"

"Please," I replied.

As he wrapped the satin about my head, he did in a leisurely fashion, as if to let me feel the darkness as it descended. Drawing back my hair, his fingers brushed over my bare shoulders, perhaps deliberately, and I flinched. The man seemed oblivious, or he didn't care.

I had already enjoyed the adventure of dining*dans le noir*. I love the anticipation of each bite or sip, the momentary puzzlement and the sudden awareness of how heightened your senses have become as the loss of one stimulates the others. It titillates the taste buds and enriches your receptivity to aromas and textures as well as flavours. However, Ted had arranged for an extra treat that evening. As I sat in the dark in silence, I heard odd little sounds around me — shuffling, a sigh, a giggle. Then Ted tapped me lightly on the left shoulder and whispered that I should put my hands behind my back. As I did so he gently grasped my wrists, crossed them and looped what felt like silk ribbon around and between them. Once he'd tied the knot I found my arms securely pinioned, though not so much as to put stress on my arms or chest. Thus rendered helpless, I had to be hand-fed my food and wine.

The menu was superb. We started with an ambrosial seafood cocktail, moved on to a heavenly main course of duck in brandy sauce with truffles and wild mushrooms, and finished with a voluptuous dessert,*dulce de coco*— pineapple and sweet potato smothered in coconut cream. Being bound and blindfolded, as well as nude, added immensely to the culinary experience. Having ceded control to your partner, you must depend on him completely. You cannot be sure of what is going into your mouth when the fork or spoon hovers tantalizingly under your nose and nudges alluringly against your lips. The food then slowly reveals itself on your palate. Each morsel becomes an epicurean exploration. Each sip of wine is an intoxicating adventure. Each of the men attended to a woman on each side, while we had to focus intently on the meal. That adds to your appreciation. The simple act of dining is elevated to a skill, even an art form. It doesn't limit your experience, but rather enhances it. Still, it can get messy. When my blindfold eventually came off, I discovered a streak of tangy relish garnishing my right breast and a splotch of sweet cream decorating the left.

When we weren't putting all of our concentration on the meal, the repartee was enlivening and enlightening. Our bonds and blindfolds didn't inhibit us women any more than being naked. Undoubtedly a couple of glasses of wine contributed to the ambience. And there was no particular reason why only females should dine*sans vue*and bound, except that you already feel the piquancy of your nudity, so it's like a triple dose of sensory arousal.

Ted insisted on paying for everything. I left the restaurant feeling a bit wobbly. The alcohol may have been partially responsible, but after two hours of being retrained it took a while to recover equilibrium. We agreed that it was too early to turn in for the night, so someone suggested we try one of the nightclubs. We chose a venue that did not appear overcrowded. Inside, however, the place was buzzing with primeval sensual and sexual excitement. On the dance floor swept by lurid beams of flashing and strobing light were a dozen man-woman couples. Nude bodies writhed to the throbbing beat and pulsating light show, brushing with precise carelessness against the fabric of their partners' clothing. Naked flesh glistened with sweat and glitter which adhered to clammy skin; unfettered breasts bounced to cacophonous rhythms; bare bosoms and thighs rubbed impudently against shirts and trousers. Music blared, neon glared, people stared. A group of girls gushed onto the floor, bumping and grinding their bodies against each other, as the erotic energy surged to a climax. The place was like a cross between Paradise and the Inferno.

Waiters in casual slacks and floral shirts and waitresses attired only in what nature provides moved through the crowd, plying their patrons with all sorts of exotic drink mixes. A brace of bounders stood by to ensure that roving hands should not wander too far.

The scene was intoxicating but rather daunting, so we hesitated near the door. As she placed her backside on a stool, Adèle squirmed and pouted in self-reproach. The seat was warm and moist with perspiration. I recalled the uncomfortable feeling you get when you take a newly vacated seat on a bus or train. The feeling's a lot more yucky when your bottom is bare. We decided that retreat was the better part of valor and adjourned to a more placid setting a few doors down. After one drink, we strolled along the waterfront. The wind had picked up and I and the other women started to shiver once more. I could see Fin and Rob fighting the urge to take off their jackets to drape over their wives' shoulders. That would be against the law; but wrapping an arm around is not. In any case, after the steamy environs of the nightclub, the sea breeze prickling my skin was delicious. The effects of the dinner wine were wearing off, but the adrenaline high hadn't. I found myself giggling like a schoolgirl, and got some funny looks from my companions.

(It was early summer and I was a little disconcerted that it could get so cool — not exactly cold, but enough that I began to appreciate the hardiness of Palmira's women. I would soon learn that these chilly spells are infrequent and brief... but when they occur you just have to bear it. No concessions are made except in the worst weather. But I like the fact that sometimes we have to be tough... tougher than the men. It's a reminder that the nude law honours feminine strength as much as beauty.)

The Esplanade was congested as we looked for a vacant taxi. I could almost feel the eyes of passing men exploring my curves and crevices. It seems that inhibitions vanish with the setting of the sun, when instinct takes control. The brush of a man's shirt against my breasts as we zigzagged through the throng made me shudder; but it was not intentional. The multitude was well-disciplined, the men generally well-behaved.

However, out of one of the bars stumbled a pair of drunks, scattering pedestrians as they meandered boisterously along the street. Two police officers, a man and a woman, were quickly on the scene, deftly stepping in to separate the inebriates from passers-by. One attempted to remonstrate with the policewoman, but she set him back with a sharp word and a menacing stare. Meanwhile, a commotion could be heard inside the bar, and her colleague went to investigate. More carousers spilled out of the building. They clamored about the naked cop. Unfazed, she ordered them to disperse. There was, for a moment, tension in the air; but first one, then another of the men peeled off and staggered away. The rest quickly followed. The plucky policewoman's nudity did not deter her from confronting the men nor diminish her control. It may even have helped defuse the situation. But I had not expected to witness anything like this. For all its uniqueness, Palmira has its raw elements. It is not a utopia. You wouldn't want it to be.

Back at the hotel, having left Élise and Adèle downtown to continue savoring the nightlife, we had coffee and I said my good-byes. Tomorrow morning I would be leaving the comforts of the Hôtel Andromède for the dig site at Cimarrón Bay. My holiday was over; a new phase of my life was beginning.

**Natural Beauty Pt. 03**

**Exploring the Landscape**

I was awake half an hour before dawn, and went out onto the balcony to sit and think and watch the shadows of the ridge behind the hotel retreat off the bay and up the beach. It was very peaceful. Nobody was congregating on the lawn this morning. Rain had chased away the songbirds but had since dispersed. No voices were coming from the adjacent deck. The silence was broken only by the distant roar of the waves and the haunting cries of far-off seagulls. A mellow breeze caressed my skin.

I wandered downstairs and detoured past the kitchen; and to satisfy my curiosity I peeked in. As I expected, the*cheffe de cuisine*and her female staff wore aprons, with nothing underneath. I moved on to the dining room where a buffet was being laid out; and while I normally avoid a hearty breakfast, today I needed the fuel. It was early, so I had the spread all to myself. A waiter was setting down platters of croissants and bagels. His pale and youthful countenance suggested he was a student on a working holiday. He had what I was already recognizing as the telltale traits of the novice to Palmira's ways. He glanced at me as I stood at the table pouring my coffee, and when I didn't react he took a longer look over my body. To my surprise, I found myself standing more erect and inhaling to puff out my chest.

The young man averted his eyeballing when the manageress came out and punctured him with a formidable frown. It was the petite woman who had presided over the restaurant the night before last. (She either works very long hours or rotates shifts.) Presumably it's improper to gape at the guests. But he shifted his gaze to her body and she didn't seem to mind.

Back upstairs I packed my bag and then went outside to wait for Ricardo. Having already bid*adieu*to the friends I'd made, I didn't feel guilty about avoiding a final farewell. I did find Regina, already on duty at the reception desk, and promised her a personally guided tour of the dig site once I was settled in. Ricardo arrived on time in his golf cart. I had an important mission to start the day and was grateful. He drove me to the Customs Office, where I signed for the boxes, containing my belongings, which had come in on the overnight air freight service. The College had arranged for a pick-up. My things would be waiting for me when I made it to Cimarrón Bay. I could have hitched a ride in the delivery van, but it was actually quicker to cross the island on foot than to wait for road or water transport. Anyway, everyone hikes on Palmira.

Ricardo left me at the College with Rebecca. Acting the mother hen, she approved of my footwear and sun visor, but furrowed her brow until, understanding her concern, I showed her how my duffel bag can be converted into a rucksack. (I was a tad offended that she thought me such a newb.) But when I put it on she started to adjust the shoulder straps, lifting the bag higher on my back. It took me a moment to realize why, and I couldn't help laughing. The way I had it, the pack sagged too low. The modification made for better walking posture, but it was also important that my bare buttocks be exposed to public view. The Palmirenes take their nude law seriously!

Rebecca accompanied me to the staging area. She would not be going with me to Cimarrón, but I would have no dearth of companionship. In a park at the western end of the Esplanade, twenty or so people had gathered, also kitted up for the trek. The women were massaging their bodies with lavish amounts of sunscreen. I prefer cream to lotion. Remembering Valerie's advice, I applied extra dabs to my breasts, especially my nipples, and between my legs. I must have looked like a rampant party girl with smears of cream all over my private parts. The other women certainly did.

Among them was Sarah and Rob. We greeted each other like long-lost family. Sarah was dwarfed by her backpack, and I noticed that her little derrière was hidden by its bulk. No one pulled her up on it. We walked together; and as the philosophers say, it's a small world. I discovered that Sarah is a physicist working on her doctoral dissertation who teaches at my very own*alma mater*. She had done some research on radiometric dating techniques — carbon-14, potassium-argon, thermoluminescence — and so had an interest in archaeology. It was a pity that her sojourn on Palmira was almost over.

There were actually two distinct groups of hikers, although we went as one from Régate to Cimarrón Bay, a distance of about four kilometres. We didn't really need to stick together, but the herd instinct is hard to resist. Once the first couple had set off everyone else just followed. Having reached Cimarrón, six of us would stay there while the rest continued northward on a three-day camping excursion. I admired the resilience of the women who would be bivouacking nude.

Most of the trekkers were young, although there were a middle-aged husband and wife. There was a Japanese couple who appeared to be botanists or herbalists, because they took samples of various types of plants along the way. They appeared dedicated to their vocation; the woman bore a tattoo of an intricate vine which snaked and intertwined across both her buttocks, over her left hip and into her cleft. Ahead of them was a party of five girls and two guys. They were recently graduated medical students from the United States. From their athletic physiques I guessed they were adventuresome types; but the girls' fading tan lines revealed that they were not used to full outdoor nudity. They (the girls) had been taking annual "extreme" holidays — rock climbing, mountain biking, canyoning, ice canoeing, that sort of thing — and confessed that this was their most audacious. It was the first time they had brought along men, to act as chaperones (or, as Bethany put it, "to keep us out of mischief"). Josh and Miguel are gay, and the girls at first had thought they might need convincing to tag along. But as Miguel pointed out, there's no reason why he can't appreciate the aesthetic appeal of the female body.

That got me thinking (again). Palmira is bliss for heterosexual males, offering visual delights unobtainable elsewhere. It's a sublime experience for us women. But I imagine it's even more so for lesbians and bisexual women, who get to enjoy both sides of nudity's sensual pleasures. I thought of the goth-punk girls and wondered where on the island they might now be — somewhere to the north, probably, where most of the hiking trails lead.

Our route took us through the eastern outskirts of Régate and up the forested ridge to a maximum elevation of about two hundred metres, which we reached in just over an hour. From the summit the view of Cimarrón Bay was spectacular, but to our rear trees blocked the vista of equally scenic Regatta Bay. It had not been a difficult ascent, but once we left the shelter of the densest part of the woods on our descending track, the sun beat down out of a cloudless sky. There was not a whiff of breeze, and it was nice to be out in nature*au naturel*, my body bathed in the golden glow of the solar rays. I felt a bit sorry for the men.

We didn't have a guide for the walk to the bay because the path is mostly paved. The track through the forest is well-marked track. The stretch of road down the eastern side of the ridge is rough for vehicles but ideal for walking. However, the country we moved through was an eerie landscape of virtually deserted houses and hamlets. Without a reliable fresh water supply, Palmirenes have largely given up farming and abandoned the countryside. Most of the buildings that are still occupied have been converted into holiday homes. We saw a few women, some pottering in their gardens, two cycling along the road, members of a work crew clearing undergrowth for fire prevention; and we were reminded that the nude law applies outside Régate.

As we came into Cimarrón village, we were greeted by a young man and woman who directed the larger of our two groups to a kiosk for refreshments and a briefing on the next stage of their trek, followed by a quick tour of the excavations. He was in khaki shirt and shorts, and though she wasn't wearing a uniform she had on a khaki collar, so I assumed they were park rangers. I said good-bye one more time to Rob and Sarah; and the six of us who were staying at Cimarrón Bay awaited our escort. It had been two hours since we had set out, so it was still just mid-morning.

As we waited, I got to know my companions. All had signed up for fieldwork at the excavation. Tom and Lorraine, the middle-aged couple, are Americans who pursue their passion for ancient history by volunteering on digs around the world. As veterans, they have worked on many sites and are members of an organization which promotes public archaeology. Rachel, Lucinda and Sean are students. The girls are from Australia. (Palmira gets a large contingent of visitors from down under. My theory is that because we already have a near-ubiquitous beach culture, Aussies look for something more than just the basic sun, sand and sea.) Rachel is high-spirited and gregarious. She has classic beach-girl looks — very pretty, sandy-haired, blue-eyed and freckled-faced, slim but sturdy, with an all-over tan and a leaping dolphin tattoo which arcs around the contours of her*mons pubis*. A jagged scar running up the inside of her left leg is the result of a surfing mishap. Lucy is small, olive-skinned and dark-haired with large brown eyes. She's more introverted than Rachel but with a subtly mischievous wit. The two complement each other, and have already worked together on a couple of excavations, although this is their first overseas gig. Sean is from Ireland, with the stereotypical green eyes and red hair, and was at the time the youngest member of the team at Cimarrón. Unlike the girls he's not studying archaeology. Like Tom and Lorraine he wants to travel the globe as more than a sightseer; he wants to be a part of the local culture.

Just after the other hikers had departed, Mike the site director and Sue the site manager came to meet us. He's Rebecca's deputy and is responsible for coordinating all aspects of the excavation, including personnel, health and safety, public relations and liaison with government agencies. Her role is the management of day-to-day operations — logistics, daily assignments and so on.

We were the last of the team to arrive for the season; the others were already on-site. Sue showed us first to our living quarters, a seven-minute walk up the road. What is known affectionately as the Barracks is a travelers' hostel, part of which is rented for the season by the Palmira Archaeological Field Research Institute. Because, I suppose, most of the students are undergraduates, unmarried residents are sexually segregated. Rachel and Lucy were assigned to a six-bed dormitory while I, as one of the professionals, was accorded the privilege (modest though it was) of a twin-share.

All the hostel staff but one are women. This may be the hiring practice, but since the majority are "work for accommodation" backpackers, it also reflects the fact that most itinerant workers on Palmira are female. The exception is the concierge. A personification of the hostel, he has an antiquated look and style, always neatly attired in a faded grey suit, his weather-beaten face set in an expression that is at once benign and intimidating. He commands his nude platoon like a retired sergeant-major, which possibly he is. With female guests he is grouchily paternalistic.

I found my boxes had been delivered to my room; but before I could begin unpacking the sergeant-major called Rachel, Lucy and me out into the corridor to give us a stern lecture, expounding on the DOs and DON'Ts of his domain, reciting rules and setting weekday and weekend curfews that both he and we knew he could not enforce. But we indulged him. Perhaps he was expecting orgies (we females being slaves to our hormones, after all), but more likely he was just being protective. So it was hard to suppress a grin at the irony, as we stood there being lectured about decorum while stark naked. However, his unnecessary reminder that we mustn't wear any clothing at any time made us a bit fidgety. Perhaps our reaction was illogical; but having a man tell us to expose our bodies was a tad vexing.

Meanwhile, Sean was waiting for us down the hall, grinning. Although he's younger than us, I'll wager he didn't get treated like a naughty schoolboy. In defence of ***his*** attitude, I'll concede that on our trek he had endured some puerile badinage from Rachel — good-natured teasing like her advice that he should wear baggier trousers if he was going to be around naked girls all the time, and the more acerbic suggestion that he hadn't come to Palmira just to dig in the dirt. Headstrong Rachel was the most perturbed by the sergeant-major's sermon, and Sean enjoyed witnessing her comeuppance.

Sue was waiting for us in the lobby and noted at our expressions. "The old boy is quite a character, isn't he? Don't worry; we all get the same treatment." She glowered at Sean. "Unless you have a penis." She flashed a benevolent smile.

Sue is the person I answer directly to and with whom I have developed the closest working relationship. She's physically slight but nevertheless imposing, both down-to-earth and larger-than-life, plain-spoken but sympathetic and supportive. Though she excels in the practical, she has a PhD in classical literature. In her role as site manager she's everything from quartermaster to mechanic to electrician to counsellor. I have been on quite a few digs, and Sue is as competent and hard-working as any site boss I've known... and she does it all naked.

(I was already conversant with Sue's work. Her field reports are required reading for aspiring archaeologists. Yet I developed even more respect when I got to know her in person. She came to Palmira three years ago, fresh from managing a Maya site in Belize. Her job was to assess storm damage and she has stayed on. At first uncomfortable with public nudity, she requested exemption from the law but her application was denied. Now, though she doesn't share the pleasure or the thrill that most of us feel, she's very matter-of-fact about it, neither bold nor bashful. Indeed, because of her pragmatic approach to everything, it was Sue who alerted me to one aspect of compulsory nudity I hadn't thought of, menstrual management. Yes, it's an issue, because you are not permitted to cover your genitalia. So feminine hygiene products must be worn internally, at least in public — tampons or menstrual cups. To repeat, Palmirenes take their nude law very seriously.)

As it was midday, and apart from us and the staff the hostel was deserted. Packed lunches are prepared each day for the team, and six had been left for us. After that, it was time to head down to the dig site. It is right on the edge of the beach, and a sea wall has been constructed to halt the erosion that once threatened the excavations. (The government has now banned sand-mining, which had been a major contributor to beach attrition.) The buildings — dig hut, site office, science hut, etcetera — are a short distance inland. Ancient middens (domestic waste deposits) and cemeteries extend along much of the shore of the bay. A row of broad trenches has been cut at right angles into the banks of sand, clay and coral rock debris. Around two dozen people were laboring in these ditches; and had I not been acclimatized to Palmira, the sight would have been baffling, even a bit shocking. For it almost goes without saying, by this point in my story, that all the women, who make up the majority of on-site personnel, were bare-skinned but for headgear, footwear and gloves.

Working on an archaeological site is serious business. The physical labor can be difficult and is often tedious (for example, the sifting and sorting). The remains are fragile and unless you're very careful with documentation, things can get mixed up, context and chronology can be hopelessly scrambled; so there's lots of bookkeeping to be done. But it can be incredibly rewarding, because while you don't expect to make any paradigm-changing breakthroughs, each object unearthed is a new piece of an historical puzzle, adding to the sum of our knowledge. Hence everyone is highly motivated.

Contrary to the popular view of archaeologists — as adventurers like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft, or professional paleologists like Howard Carter — many are volunteer enthusiasts, like Tom and Lorraine, who pay their own expenses for the privilege of spending several hours every day under the sun scratching in the dirt... and without whom very few projects would be viable. These amateurs often have more fieldwork experience than the students, and even some of the career specialists. They contribute not just their labor but their maturity, know-how and intellectual curiosity. And because they come from all walks of life with careers outside archaeology and anthropology, they bring fresh perspectives and insights.

While there has to be a hierarchy, a sort of democracy prevails on-site. Everyone gets their hands dirty; and each afternoon when we gather in the dig hut to report on our progress, and in the evening when we discuss the day's finds, everyone has a say and everyone is listened to.

So after ten years in the field, it was rather jolting to see the sexes so starkly differentiated. And I have not yet really gotten used to it. We women toil as hard as the men but do so nude. On most weekends we go to Régate, or hike the nature trails, or head for one of the beaches, satellite islands or dive sites for rejuvenation, and being the *déshabillé* sex is part of the fun. But it still feels weird supervising my team members, giving orders to men whose simple act of putting on clothes is illegal for me.

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The full complement at Cimarrón once I'd arrived was thirty-five — twelve senior (professional academic) members, ten students and thirteen volunteers. We newcomers didn't begin work that first day, instead acquainting ourselves with our colleagues and familiarizing ourselves with the facilities and techniques. (Each site has its unique features, according to the environment, the history and the people working there.) We took part in the afternoon conference and joined everyone for dinner at the hostel. The camaraderie was the same as at all the digs where I've worked.

As on every site, although it's not a case of all work and no play, people are usually too tired at the end of the day for much socializing. But letting off steam on weekends is important for morale; for regardless of how dedicated you are, everyone needs some downtime. My previous archaeological jobs were in remote areas. There were few opportunities for rest and recreation beyond the camp. Palmira offers plenty, in the towns, in the countryside and in the surrounding waters.

We did have some good times in the Barracks, albeit under the sullen surveillance of the sergeant-major. While we don't get to choose our companions, given that our interests are similar all the people working on the site will be basically compatible. Each weeknight after dinner we gathered on the terrace, a covered recreational area with a bar and barbeque, or in the theatrette. Nudity was generally a non-issue, partly because we the unclad heavily outnumbered the men, but mainly because you cannot afford to fixate on it, otherwise you will end up in a state of permanent arousal — both sexes. (Keep in mind that it's not just the nudity, it's the one-sided nature which gives it sexual resonance.)

Inevitably in the group there will be some hooking up, particularly among the younger members; and the rule is that whatever you do off-site stays off-site. Most interactions are casual; relationships tend to be short-lived. There are usually spouses, fiancés, boyfriends, girlfriends back home. In any case, the priority is to maintain a professional environment (and there are ethical considerations as well). Furthermore, with a typical "season" lasting just six to eight weeks, people are coming and going during that period. Tom and Lorraine stayed for a month, longer than most volunteers.

My roommate was Alice, the project's first aid and hygiene officer. She's a winsome, amber-eyed brunette aged in her early thirties who left behind a career in medicine to pursue her passion. She has been on several sites in the Americas (she's from Oregon), and this is her second season on Palmira. Like most of us she claims that the island's archaeological heritage is the main attraction, but she clearly revels in her nudity. She isn't flashy or flirty; but she takes pride not just in her body but in the fact that she's naked. In other words she takes pride in her womanhood; and in that respect we're similar. Unfortunately, we did not get to spend much time together. She spent only the dig season on the island, donating her services on weekends to the Palmira Hospital. And while that's laudable, my personal belief is that when you work as hard as we do during the week, you really need to let loose and live it up when you can.

Because we arrived together, I acted as a sort of godmother to Rachel, Lucy and Sean. He was the youngest person on the site, acted immature at times, and liked to pull juvenile pranks, but his enthusiasm was commendable and infectious. He was adopted as a little brother by Rachel, whose irreverent high spirits matched his, and by Lucy, whose calm good humour counteracted both of them. At the same time, when we went to Régate for the weekend he fancied himself as our guardian, and we allowed him to bask in his heroism, even Rachel. (A line from a certain Terri Guillemets that comes to mind — "After a girl is grown, her little brothers, now her protectors, seem like big brothers.") Of course, our surrogate roles were somewhat compromised by the way he looked so blatantly at our bodies. He enjoyed hanging out with older women — that's me; he ***really*** enjoyed hanging out with naked women; and he was one of the males most candid about it, almost artless in his fondness for the undraped female form.

We also got on well with the hostel staff. Being guest workers, they shared our experiences. Mostly students taking a gap year, they are well-educated and broadminded. Some have boyfriends, male travelling companions, and in one case a husband, working in other establishments. They do not chafe under the thumb of the sergeant-major as we diggers did, possibly because they don't have the luxury of feeling aggrieved. Still, they have their methods of rebellion. At the beginning of the day shift, he would make them line up for inspection. They would stand rigidly at attention, thrusting out their chests (nipples firmly erect), sucking in their bellies, extending their hips to the fore, and I have rarely beheld a more provocatively titillating sight. He'd beam in clueless approbation of their soldierly discipline.

Naturally, most of our life was focused on the dig. The day at Cimarrón starts just after sunrise when Mike and Sue check the weather forecast. If it is good news, everyone has an early breakfast, eager to get onto the site. We normally walked from the hostel together, and the day's briefing would begin at eight o'clock.

My role during my inaugural season on Palmira was to oversee the excavation of one of the trenches, recording and bagging all sorts of stuff — human remains (biological materials and artifacts) being the most dramatic, but also seeds, shells and bones (mammals, birds, fish) — and taking soil samples. When digging stops for the day, the post-excavation analysis phase begins. My tasks included writing up a diary, comparing results with my colleagues to prepare a detailed grid map, and consulting with the conservator, whose job is the preservation of finds.

My crew consisted initially of my fellow newcomers (Tom and Lorraine, Rachel, Lucy and Sean), and we were given a basic first assignment, digging test pits looking for signs of burials and other objects of interest. In this you have to be cautious, and you record everything meticulously, because any interference can damage fragile remains. But we proved ourselves a crack squad and were soon assigned to a trench where we uncovered a grave with some fascinating ceramic and carved bone ceremonial items. We also had a role in unearthing an even more significant burial, containing one body and two skulls. This is evidence of ancestor worship.

Working stark naked under the tropical sun is not a major problem so long as you have UV protection. But when you're down and dirty in a meter-deep trench, the mud and grit get into your crevices. And when at the end of your shift you go to wash the grime off (and out of) you, there's another thing that makes Palmira different. Behind the dig hut are toilet cubicles, and to indicate that they're unisex, on the door of each are the standard graphic symbols for man and woman; but in this setting the stylized figure in a dress seems comically incongruous. And next to the lavatories is a shower and changing room... for the men. Since the women don't need to change into or out of anything, until recently the females' amenity was a row of shower heads out in the open. The thinking was that there's no point investing resources in private facilities for those who don't get that sort of privacy. But the public spectacle of us lathering our bodies is not exactly conducive to dignity, so a partition has been erected. Of course, not having to worry about wet clothes means we don't need to bother drying ourselves. The warm breeze does that.

One of my favorite hum-drum tasks is wet screening, sieving soil and other sediments looking for small objects. The large frame version is a heavy scaffold and a hose is used. The small frame is hand-held, and the screening is a two-woman job. This is usually a job for the girls because you stand in the water, up to waist-deep, and being female means you don't have to bother with stripping down to a swimsuit... Now I realize that's a flimsy rationale; but on Palmira life is full of little rituals and gestures. Whereas on other sites men and women are treated scrupulously the same, here the males are rather more chivalrous, if it can be called chivalrous that they allow us to do the fun, splashy jobs.

Before the team gets started each day, Sue does a health and safety inspection. Because almost all the work is small-scale and thus done by hand — with minimal mechanical aid, using picks and shovels, buckets and spades, trowels and brushes — this is a routine procedure. Proper boots, gloves and headgear are mandatory, sunglasses and bandanas are recommended. Knee-pads are helpful, but a kneeling mat is better. High-factor sunblock and insect repellent are vital for both sexes, although obviously we ladies need more.

The men have the prerogative of choosing a range of clothing that is cool, lightweight, comfortable and sweat-proof. (And they have pockets!) They can avoid the sun with long sleeves and trousers, but even in shorts and short-sleeved shirts they have a lot less skin to protect than we do. However, the sun does not present a major problem. We dig in the trenches for only three or four hours each day because there's follow-up to be done; and we normally do so under tarpaulin covers. These are not just for shade but to shelter the trench and its contents from rain. In fact digging has to cease when it rains, because while typically of short duration Palmira's downpours can be very intense. Even with the tarps water fills the trenches, so work stops for the entire day. At such times, there are lots of other chores to keep us busy.

If special protective clothing is needed, for example with some of the more vigorous excavation, Sue must make a decision. Giving these jobs to the males exclusively would be unfair to both sexes; and no one tries to take advantage of her nudity to get out of the hard work; but a woman must wear the absolute minimum of gear necessary, and must take it off as soon as the task is done. It is therefore one of Sue's responsibilities to file paperwork with the police to make any exemptions official. This is important because there is something to keep in mind about the nude law. It's a LAW. And when people break the law there are consequences.

A week or so after my arrival, a work party moved into the village planting trees and doing maintenance work on the road. They reminded me of the gang clearing undergrowth we had passed on my first day at Cimarrón; and I was informed that they were performing court-ordered community service. There were twenty-four, fourteen of them young males. The ten females covered a wider range of years, from twenties to forties. I knew about community service orders; they are issued for relatively minor offences like property damage, public intoxication, petty theft and non-grievous assault. I was now enlightened about one of the harsher realities of Palmira. Women who cover their bodies outside the Grandin enclave can be arrested. The penalty is a fine, imprisonment or up to a hundred hours of involuntary labor. It's almost always the latter.

To satisfy my curiosity, I have checked the Palmira Government Gazette, where law enforcement statistics are published. While most male offenders on the community service program have committed what are everywhere classed as crimes, the females have mostly been sentenced for the uniquely Palmirene transgression of putting on clothing. It doesn't matter if it's a bikini or a boiler suit; if you're wearing it, you're breaking the law. So it still amuses me that a man will be prosecuted for "indecent" exposure, while a woman will be prosecuted for not exposing herself. But it bothers me even now that a tradition which is such a source of joy and pride is imposed with the threat of punishment.

As well as straw hats, canvas gloves and boots, the males wore mustard-colored bib-and-brace overalls and white T-shirts. The females did the same work, without the overalls and T-shirt but wearing leather collars. They were supervised by male and female correctional officers. The woman's occupation and rank were denoted by blue-and-white armbands. If she dared to wear what the men under her supervision wore, she'd be joining them digging and planting.

I don't know how many of the females were there for breaking the nude law, although the age range suggested it was the majority. (For why would women in their forties be more likely to commit minor crimes than males in their twenties... except for the crime of wearing clothes?) In that case, I was curious about why they had done so. Could it be that the nude law is not universally popular? There must be native women who object but cannot spend their entire lives in the Grandin enclave. It made me feel somewhat better to learn that most violations of the law are not protests against compulsory nudity*per se*. For example, a few years ago, in the aftermath of a hurricane when people were injured during clean-up operations, there was a large public demonstration in Régate calling for improved hazard control and prevention. To dramatize one particular concern, several dozen women (including foreign emergency service personnel) wore overalls and industrial vests. The government responded with the aforementioned Health and Safety Standards Act; but each of the women was sentenced to a hundred hours of community service. That worked out fine, as it was a token punishment. They were assigned to the very job most had been doing anyway. Nevertheless, the law had been broken and a price had to be paid. (It could have been more severe. They might have been charged with "inciting" women to wear clothing, which carries a heavier penalty.)

Yet the fact remains that there must be women who object to the nude law but won't break it. They must live with it. No society is perfect.

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One of the tasks of staff members is to conduct tours of the site. Some of my colleagues dislike this duty, claiming it distracts from the "real" work, but I disagree. Public outreach is a very important part of what we do.

One time we had a visit from a group of university students from the United States. I give them credit for including a tour of our site on their itinerary, but it took them a while to be convinced that we were a genuine operation and not a mock-up for the tourists. They had been on the island for more than a week, but the girls were still startled to see nearly two-thirds of our team doing the job naked. So we gave them a taste by putting them to work; the guys as well, but I don't think they had as much fun, especially in the showers afterwards judging from the laughing and squealing emanating from behind the partition. So while I don't know if archaeology earned any career commitments that day, half a dozen girls got a new perspective on full-time nudity (and perhaps on the phrase "getting down and dirty"?).

Another notable occasion was an inspection by the island's Governor, Amanda Kennedy. Although Palmira is an independent state, political and commercial ties with the United Kingdom remain strong, and Ms Kennedy is the Queens' representative. She is the first woman to hold the office, and came to Palmira with a distinguished record of public service. Government House is located in Grandin, but in any case she is legally exempt from the nude law. However, on the day she arrived at Cimarrón she and the other women in her retinue wore nothing but hat and heels. She is statuesque, with dark expressive eyes and long auburn tresses that when she's naked she keeps tied back, away from her breasts. It was an informal occasion, but her vice-regal bearing was an insightful example of how a woman in high office can maintain her*dignitas*,*gravitas*and*nobilitas*when completely nude. The Deputy Governor, a prim little man with a comb-over, looked uncomfortable on this sultry afternoon in his stuffy three-piece morning suit.

The Governor, who has a reputation for firmness and outspokenness and defending the prerogatives of her office, could grant herself dispensation from the nude law but hasn't. However, the statutes do allow for special circumstances. There are reasons aside from health and safety why a woman may be exempted from the nude law. The authorities — police, magistrates and government ministers — are empowered to make singular and short-term exceptions. Medical and mental health professionals can issue certificates of exemption. Women over sixty years of age are exempted, as are girls under eighteen. You don't see many of the latter outside the Grandin enclave because nearly all families have their homes there.

Soon after the Governor's visit, my first dig season ended. There are three during the year, lasting a total of fifteen weeks. During the off-season most of the professional team-members go back to their own countries. (There are no native Palmirenes based at Cimarrón, because local historians focus on more recent history, that of their direct ancestors. Sadly, there are no descendants of the pre-Columbian inhabitants left.) I give classes to undergraduate students and mentor postgrads at Palmira College, and I help run the teaching and demonstration dig at Grandin Bay. Unlike the other sites, this one operates all year round. I still have plenty of spare time for gratis work at the museum. It is not very large but the displays are outstanding. Several of the burials from Cimarrón and other sites have been recreated, and part of a 1500-year-old village reconstructed.

One day at the Museum we received a visit from a very well-known singer-songwriter and her entourage. I shall call our famous guest Stella. (Don't try to figure out her identity from that, because it simply means "star".) She was inquisitive and despite her party-girl persona was impressively well-informed. And though we were inside the Grandin enclave she was naked. Besides Stella, I have seen a few celebrities vacationing on Palmira — a multiple-award-winning actress, a best-selling authoress, a champion sportswoman and so on. You would recognize the names instantly if I revealed them; but if they wanted publicity I wouldn't have to. In fact, Palmira enforces a strict code of privacy which includes robust anti-paparazzi laws. And while normally I'm not at all star-struck, I have to admire the courage of these women to be themselves, because despite the precautions, photos can leak out to the tabloids and gossip sites.

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Although during the non-dig part of the year I stay at a boarding house in Régate, I spend a lot of time in Grandin. After just a few days on Palmira you get so used to what's around you that when you go into the district it's a little jarring to see women wearing clothes. The boundary is unmarked except for signs bearing the same message as that displayed in the airport terminal.

"NO ADULT FEMALE WEARING CLOTHES MAY PROCEED BEYOND THIS POINT."

Conversely, nudity is not prohibited inside the Grandin precinct. In fact, more than half the women who reside there never wear clothes, although the proportion is higher among those who work outside. Then again, there must be women who never venture outside the district and are always clothed. I thought this might include members of the small diplomatic community, although it would be a dreary life, confined to a corner of this beautiful island. Palmira hosts several embassies, consulates and high commissions; and I got to meet the Australian representative. Heather Turley is Honorary Consul. A career officer with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, she met her husband James, a Palmirene citizen, on a mission in the aftermath of Hurricane Emily. They live with their children in Grandin, but her office is in the capital. She has diplomatic privileges and could disregard the nude law if she wished to do so. Naturally she doesn't.

I first met Heather at a reception, hosted by the expatriate community, for "important" foreigners living on the island, and I was flattered to be included in that company. It was held in Régate and all the women were naked. It was a black-tie function for the men, and as Heather and James stood arm-in-arm the impression might have been of one of those soft-focus photos in a "glamour" magazine spread. She's a stylish woman who speaks in quiet but assertive tones; and there's a warm glow of confidence and sophistication about her. She is not classically beautiful; she has a faintly masculine appearance, with a strong face and frame; but the funny (and wonderful) thing about nudity is that women like her exude sensuality and sexuality more intensely than any beauty queen bombshell; "plain" looks are enhanced, not overexposed. (I have noticed that beautiful females, especially the more voluptuous, tend to be the more self-conscious about their nudity.) So a woman such as Heather does not come across as conventionally feminine, but next to her husband in his tuxedo there was no mistaking her for anything but female.

Come to think of it, this was the first organized social gathering (as opposed to informal get-togethers with my colleagues) I had attended since my arrival. Soon afterwards, I was invited to spend a weekend with the Renettes, my relatives. They live on Frigate Island, as proprietors of Palmira's most luxurious hotel, the Chevron. I took the ferry*Sirène*from Régate, and it's a ninety-minute voyage. The hotel is larger and grander than the Andromède. On the other hand, Regina's family owns two establishments, so the score is pretty much even.

I was greeted by my second cousin, Lydia. She's aged in her early twenties and is almost impossibly gorgeous, with azure eyes and flame-gold tresses that cascade onto her slender shoulders like a river of fire. Her smile is radiant, her skin is flawless and her body is divine. She moves with feline grace. Very much cognizant of her own splendor, she pulls her shoulders back as if to emphasize her perfect breasts; and when she's still she casually pushes forward her pelvis, as if to proclaim "Look! No penis!" But her body language betrays that she's not entirely at ease with her nudity, though she wears it (so to speak) proudly. Her haughtiness evokes vulnerability. There's a distance in her demeanor, a coldness in her eyes as if they were about to turn from ocean-blue to glacier-blue. It's not that she's rude or acts aloof — quite the opposite, although that seems more a product of good breeding than an intrinsic part of her nature. In fact, she conforms to what I have just described about Heather Turley. When you're completely comfortable in your own skin (and what an apt phrase!), you don't have to be cold or coy or coquettish, you don't feel the need to flourish or camouflage your female charms.

There were two dozen passengers on the boat, and several were bound like me for the Chevron Hotel. One of the now familiar open-air taxis awaited us, and a young man was at the wheel. It is immediately obvious when you see them that he is Lydia's twin brother. Xander (short for Alexander, I assume) has the same striking features, but in an odd way not as well defined, almost blurred. It's his manner — he doesn't project himself. He's grown up in the shadow of his sister, who is easily the dominant. His expression is one of apathetic detachment. His clothes droop on him; he has the sort of languid bearing where even a tailored suit appears ill-fitting. Compare that with Lydia, naked and acutely aware of her beauty.

The twins' mother, Amelia, is English, and you see where they inherited their looks. They were born in England but grew up on Palmira. Kudos to them that, like Regina and her brother, Lydia and Xander have taken on regular jobs at the hotel. Yet they seem frustrated by the ennui imposed by their limited horizons. Both are intelligent and intellectually curious, and were fascinated by my "worldly" experience and academic credentials. During my visit they interrogated me endlessly about life in Australia, about archaeology and even about Palmirene history.

That night a soirée was held to welcome the cousin from down under. It was a more elaborate affair than anything I'm cozy with, and for an unpretentious gal who eschews glamour and glitter, nudity proved a blessing. No fancy gown to worry about. But I was bestowed with exquisite jewelry — a pearl encrusted barrette, emerald earrings and a turquoise pendant on a black velvet choker. It was weird to be so expensively embellished from the neck up and totally unadorned below. In fact, I ended up even more denuded than before.

Earlier, I had blamed my disheveled hair on the wind during my trip across the water; but that cut no ice with frosty Lydia. She took me down to the hotel's beauty salon for a hairdressing overhaul. I have to admit that my unruly shag cut was transformed for the better into a sassy side-swept crop. But then Lydia lowered the back of my chair, and when I was horizontal she ordered me to spread my legs. She instructed the*coiffeuse*to shave me (because a more thorough depilation would leave me with inflamed pubes for the evening), but advised that I should get a waxing when I returned to the mainland. I decided against resisting, since I'd been thinking about a move in that direction anyway. Nevertheless, I remained ambivalent. I have always associated pubic hair removal with presenting a "clean" bikini line, and that is plainly not an issue on Palmira. While aesthetic preferences play a role, it's mainly to distinguish married from unmarried women, and that is itself is a fairly recent trend. In any case, when I returned to Cimarrón everyone noticed my double hair makeover, and I eventually went for my waxing.

The soirée was attended by members of what counts as the local élite. It was presided over by Amelia, who marshalled her guests and serving staff with the command presence of a major-general. As I had already perceived, Palmira is very much a matriarchal society. The Renette women rule their aristocratic roost; and as I'd also learnt, being naked does not preclude power. Indeed, in an interesting way their womenfolk's mandatory nudity gives the males of Palmira a uniquely resilient sense of their masculinity, which obviates gratuitous displays of macho egoism; they are easy-going and user-friendly. I once heard a man described as being strong enough that he can afford to be tender; and I think there's a similar principle at work with Palmirene men. They have nothing to prove. Their identity and security as males is reaffirmed all around them all the time, so they can get on with being good men. (I'm not criticizing males elsewhere; but Palmirenes seem to be a breed apart.) I've also heard it said that a strong woman is she who can bring out the best in a man. Palmirene women do that. It's not the essential purpose of the nude law — at least not these days — but it's what you might call a fringe benefit.

Virginia Woolf wrote: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." And in a way — but a positive way — that's the case on Palmira.

And the thing is, Palmira is one of the least sexist environments you can imagine. There are two factors at work here. Psychologists and social scientists have long been aware that a person who is viewed as sexy is perceived to lack "agency" — personal power, the ability to plan, act and exercise self-control — and even intelligence. Although this applies to both sexes, women are more adversely affected, not just because (in the Western world) we traditionally wear more revealing and more sensual clothing. Take applying for a job. Even if you're conservatively dressed woman, a man will judge you more harshly (and unfairly) than will his female colleague. Because men tend to focus on the visual, you will be assessed not just on your clothing but on your physical attributes. Merely having breasts, however well they're covered, puts you at an immediate disadvantage. You are adjudged less competent because someone else finds you attractive.

Palmirenes aren't perfect. But at least part of the problem is short-circuited. You're not judged on your state of undress (by men or women) because your personal agency is undiminished, because you***must***be naked. And men's bias is decreased because they see, every day and everywhere, women whose appearance is reduced entirely to the sexual and yet are clearly not lacking in competence or intelligence. While I don't know if, in this respect, less attractive women have an advantage, what is clear is that to lay claim to any level of logical thinking a Palmirene man must, in a sense, reset his brain, training himself to look beyond first impressions.

Even so, it might be asserted that the nude law is sexist. On Palmira the female body is so revered that it is illegal to conceal it. Yet the intent and effect of the nude law are not the objectification of women. In this respect the critics (such as exist) are mistaken. Exposing your body to the world, being obliged by society's rules to abandon all inhibitions and put aside encumbering modesty, is an intensely personalizing and joyously liberating experience. And nudity being for one sex alone is not demeaning to females. Never have I been so conscious and proud of my womanhood. Like most women, I do not have a perfect figure or abounding confidence. I do not crave attention but neither do I shun it. Back home, on a beach in a bikini, I rate a few fleeting looks and that's nice. But on Palmira your body is the proverbial temple; it's hallowed ground — admired, respected and well-treated. Both men and women come from all over the world to worship here; but it's the women who are worshipped. If it's true you're an object, you're an object of veneration.

All women are. Even in the company of demigoddesses like Amelia and Lydia, there was a feeling of sisterhood amongst all the females in the room — hostess, guest and waitress alike. The uniformity of nudity imposes an egalitarian sodality which also transcends differences in shape, size and color. The expensive ornamentation worn by some of us actually reinforced this effect, which may seem counterintuitive. Jewelry properly worn serves to enhance or draw attention to what you're wearing without being a distraction. When you're not wearing anything else,***that***is what your accessories draw attention to.

(Lydia and a couple of others wore dainty gold and silver waist chains which I hadn't realized are legal until I saw a few in Régate. I now wear one sometimes. It tempts the line of sight downwards and upwards, from the raw sexuality of your breasts and vagina to the sensual safe space in between. It gives emphasis to the totality of your nakedness rather than the exposure of your parts.)

Throughout the evening, the two sexes mingled without awkwardness, diffidence or dalliance. The most stimulating part was the conversation. On both this occasion and at the reception in Régate, I found Palmirene high society to be very conversable, more literati than glitterati. Yet it still felt slightly surreal. Back home, a party where the male guests come clothed and the females naked would be a major event on the kinky calendar. On Palmira it's just another night out. More than at any other time since I'd been on Palmira, I felt as if I might be the woman in Manet's*Luncheon on the Grass*— not flirting or flaunting, but not shrinking from the public gaze.

Even so, it was the also first time since stripping upon arrival that I felt at all self-conscious. Wearing only pretty baubles and a sociable smile, as the guest of honor I occupied centre stage, so all eyes were on me. I lost the safety in numbers. But I recalled a snazzy one-liner from Gypsy Rose Lee. "I wasn't naked; I was completely covered by a blue spotlight."

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The next time I felt anything like that was when Daniel arrived. He'd meant to come over from Australia while we were still digging at Cimarrón but had been delayed. When he finally made it, the season was over and I was based at Palmira College.

I met him at the airport, and although he knew what to expect, by the time he'd gone through customs he was already mind-boggled. He had flown from Jamaica with two young women who had been attending a conference. (More about that in a moment.) He doesn't have a girlfriend, so far as I am aware — or a boyfriend, for that matter — but he is good-looking and personable. I watched them through the glass partition as the girls stripped naked; and I could see that they enjoyed his attentiveness as he accepted and folded each item of clothing and tried not to gape. But any pretense at nonchalance or discretion melted away as he came out of the lounge and saw me. It was as if he walked into an invisible wall. I allowed him to take a good long look at my body. I just smiled and he gave up trying to be subtle.

I had almost forgotten what it was like feeling uncomfortable about being naked. I hadn't worn a thing in over two months. But Daniel was the first person I knew from back home to encounter me in my new,*au naturel*habitat. What's more, I was his mentor and academic confidante. I'm seven years older and our relationship has always been strictly platonic (in the sense of being both asexual and mentorial). Indeed, this was really the first time (apart perhaps from the faculty party the previous Christmas, when I unleashed myself in a tiny party frock with plentiful décolletage) that he saw me unambiguously as a woman. And as I've pointed out, maybe*ad nauseam*, the impact comes from not just the nudity but the fact that it's one-sided and that, simply on account of being female, I'm forbidden to wear clothes. So I knew it would take a few days for our old connection to be restored.

Daniel introduced me to his new friends and we took a taxi into the city. Sabrina and Molly showed in their faces and their gestures the same feelings I had experienced on my first day, right down to the embarrassed gasp of pleasure when one's bare bottom first touches the upholstery. Both girls are extremely fit, lean but shapely. They had been in Florida for a symposium on public health policy (strategies for promoting physically active and healthy lifestyles). The conference had adjourned for a restart on Palmira with some of the attendees, to study the unique culture and its prospects for "wellness tourism". (I hadn't known that was even a thing.) Molly and Sabrina had flown in a day before the others, for some reason. Around two-thirds of the conference group were females, and I heard that they made quite a splash during their visit. (I read later in the conference proceedings that a recommendation had been made for greater promotion of clothing-optional resorts. I'm all in favour, but these will never have the same exotic flavor as Palmira. And I don't think there will ever be a male equivalent of the nude law. The world just doesn't work that way.)

By the end of the week Daniel had seen and interacted with enough nudity that mine was no longer a novelty or a distraction. Nevertheless, like Sean he enjoyed the company of naked women — Rebecca, Marcia, Stephanie and others besides myself. That seems a case of stating the obvious, but Daniel is from a "bloke culture" where young guys don't socialize much with the womenfolk. That said, he never played on his privilege. By this I mean he never considered himself special or superior because unlike us he was permitted to cover his body. Indeed, he treated me with discernibly more deference to my femininity than before — not just being chivalrous but respecting the fact that I have the strength and self-confidence to reveal myself so completely, proclaiming and celebrating my womanhood, being proud of what I am and having no pangs about what I'm not.

Whereas, sadly, it did not work out quite so well with Matthew. During my previous expeditions, when I spoke to him via videophone, sometimes I would take off my top, or even strip all the way. He never did, but I was okay with that. In my first three months on Palmira nothing changed in this respect, although he did comment that I was browner all over. However, when we reunited at Robina airport, I could see he was a little taken aback at how comfortable and casual I was with my public nudity. He didn't appreciate men looking at those parts of my body which he regarded as his exclusive domain. He stayed for two weeks, and though I cannot say that we've broken up, things haven't been the same.

**Natural Beauty Pt. 04**

**Pride in Womanhood**

I flew back to Australia for Christmas, and after six months it felt really strange to be wearing clothes, to have fabric next to my skin instead of the warm, fresh, caressing Caribbean air. My family noticed, although only Grandma really understood. Yet I felt no urge to bare myself, did not seek out a local "free beach". Some cultural practices do not translate.

Oddly enough, my attitude to clothing itself had changed. As I've mentioned, I have never been particularly "feminine" in my style choices — by no means "butch" but certainly not "girly-girl". I generally dressed for comfort... and to make a point of that is an indictment of much of female fashion. While there had been a few times when I cut loose, like my Christmas party frock episode, in that instance I was, to an extent, being ironic, contrasting my festive self with the practical woman who wears jeans on campus and dungarees on the dig site. Normally when I wore a dress or a skirt, for coolness or comfort, I never really thought about the genderized nature of clothing. Women wear dresses and skirts, show legs, bare shoulders and display cleavage; it's not something you bother to analyze. But my experience of life on Palmira has altered that part of me. I guess the most apt equivalent to what I've become is a "lipstick feminist". I have come to embrace feminine clothing as empowering — yes, because it is sexy but more because it's distinctively female, and because it's a choice I have made, not a convention I've adopted.

The first member of my family to comment on my new image was my brother, who has always teased me for being a tomboy. He was the one person I had been reluctant to inform about my going to Palmira, because I was sure he'd make jokes about it. (He did, but none are worth repeating.) Now he acknowledged my conversion. "Hey everyone, I've just realized something. Kate's a ***girl***!"

I returned to Palmira in January for the new dig season. I flew in with a contingent of undergraduate students from various Australian universities. We'd taken part in several online conferences but only met in person in Sydney on the day of our flight. As usual the females outnumbered the males, by about three to two. The journey was a long haul via Los Angeles and Miami. When we touched down in Palmira everyone was tired, but nonetheless keyed up. It felt good to be back.

By the time we'd retrieved our luggage and had reassembled in the airport lounge, my little group had seen a few naked women. This they had prepared for. But when I started taking off my clothes they were goggle-eyed. It wasn't just that it was one of their own; I was their leader. They were still stuck in the clothing-equals-status mentality. I didn't say anything; there was no need for hurry; but when the first girl, a tall, athletic blonde, began unbuttoning her blouse I nodded and smiled, and the others followed. The young men watched in silence.

We took two taxis to the hotel in downtown Régate where they were booked in for two nights. I studied the reactions of the girls as their bare flesh made contact with the seat, and as they took in the sights on our journey. They're always the same. In fact, when I think about it, mine haven't really changed. The wonderful thing about Palmira is that you never get blasé about your nudity. There are the expressions you see on the faces of newly arrived women. There are your own responses to all sorts of situations and challenges. When a man's gaze lingers longer than what's considered polite. When goosebumps stipple your flesh and you're not allowed to cover up. When you exercise. (Back home I always wore a sports bra when jogging or doing calisthenics, for comfort and to prevent long-term sagging. On Palmira I support my breasts with my hands; but I have to cup them from underneath so my nipples aren't hidden from view.) Every time you sit down you feel the texture of the seat against your bare back and bottom, and you're reminded that there is nothing between your most intimate parts and the world.

So everything has consequences. Even the simplest acts have rules and conventions. Take that simple act of sitting. You could write a book on it. You've learnt as a girl how to sit properly in a skirt. But Palmirenes frown at a woman who crosses her legs (and arms, although crossing ankles is acceptable), because they see it as a way of shielding yourself. You naturally hunch over when your legs are crossed (because you've made your backside a narrower and less stable base). Therefore, with your legs uncrossed you sit up straighter. This looks more elegant and it gives your breasts more display. Knees can be touching, but not pressed tightly together. Posture projects pride.

In your first days here, I found out, the worst thing you can do is try to cover yourself with your hands. (It's illegal to use anything else — like your bag or hat or a towel, even if only the habitual offender will be busted for it.) That just draws attention to yourself; and it doesn't change the fact that you're naked; it just shows that you're ashamed. But you're apt to overcompensate. When you walk you tend to keep your hands busy, or clasped behind your back, as if to prevent them from converging, by reflex, onto forbidden places. However, as you become more at ease with your nudity, you loosen up. You start to enjoy the attention you receive.

That's important. Your experience is not all internal. People are watching you — not everyone, but those who do usually don't try to hide it. You take pleasure in being looked at, though not in being stared at. You give permission to look, but it's not necessarily an invitation. You expect respect.

On one of my weekends in Régate I encountered a young guy who was quite good-looking. His opening line set the tone for our short-lived acquaintance.

"You have a very nice body," he said.

"Thanks," I replied.

He saw my expression and apologized. "I'm sorry if that came across wrong. I really did mean it as a compliment."

He did, and he was polite, he wasn't leering, but he would not have said it (probably) if we met back home regardless of what I was wearing. He might has well have said "Nice tits." Palmira can do that to people. It loosens your inhibitions, and you have to be on your guard — both sexes. It's easy to forget that a woman's naked body is not the complete package. So if he'd said simply "You look nice," I'd have been flattered. It's a physical compliment, albeit in this case he'd be complimenting the person, not the parts. But it's because those parts are on display that men can sometimes be too blatant... and women too, in their own way.

What I've found on Palmira is that I love being around men, and it's not solely because of the attention. They are clothed, simply because they are male, and their clothing separates them from me because I'm female. So even when I sometimes become less mindful of my naked state, the very sight of clothing is a cue which brings me back to full awareness, not just of my undressed condition but of the fact that I'm a woman. When such a potent symbol of our public sexuality, how much and what sort of clothing is worn, has been eliminated, what's left are the distilled essences — pure masculinity and pristine femininity. (Who would have predicted a year and a half ago that I would make a statement like that? Certainly not I!)

One occasion when this was really instilled in me was when a minor mishap at the dig resulted in a sprained wrist and a gash above my right eye. To record each day's progress, we take photographs of the trenches from a rather high, normally stable stepladder. What happened was nobody's fault, just a freak accident because one foot of the ladder rested on a rock which became dislodged. I took a dive into the dirt. Alice patched me up on-site but insisted on a more thorough examination for possible infection and concussion. While the island's main hospital is in Grandin, I was taken to a medical centre in Régate. In spite of my protests, I was kept overnight for observation.

The nude law is not enforced in health care institutions. Indeed all staff are clothed, more or less. But Palmirene traditions are not ignored. Nurses wear scrubs, the men's outfit being pants and a smock, the women wearing just the latter. Doctors and senior administrators wear white lab coats, the males with shirt, tie and black trousers underneath, the females with nothing else (apart from panties for hygienic reasons). Male technical personnel wear overalls, their female counterparts a short tunic. Tribute must still be paid to*la différence*.

As for female patients, the nurse told me that it's up to each whether to remain naked. I couldn't see the point of putting anything on for my short stay. My attending physician was a handsome young gent from Grenada. I'd been half-naked in front of male doctors before this, but it felt just a little bit creepy to be lying on the bed, my entire body uncovered (there were no sheets) while he inspected my head and wrist and clinically ignored the rest. That night I slept with a light blanket. I was in an open ward, and in the bed next to mine was Richard, a tourist who had fallen off his quad bike. We chatted and he happily admitted that his misfortune occurred because he wasn't paying attention to the traffic but rather to the roadside scenery. In the morning I dispensed with my covering. Shortly afterwards Richard's wife arrived. She was wearing a chemise, but when she saw me sitting up in bed naked she grinned and removed it.

It's been one of my Palmirene insights that once the association of apparel with status, protocol or decorum has been broken, your inhibitions can be shed, along with your clothes. The woman just assumed that female patients would be covered up and propriety dictated that she should as well. But when she observed that it was okay to strip she did so immediately. It's why, after all, she'd come to Palmira.

My hospital experience was a reminder that one of the ways you get seduced by the nude law is, ironically, through how, when and where it doesn't apply. For example, it is not illegal to cover your body out of public sight — as in your private quarters. Back home I sometimes slept in the nude, usually when sharing the bed with Matthew; but in the cool hours I could pull the blankets over me. My suite at the Hôtel Andromède was warm so I didn't need even basic bed linen. The Barracks are also snug, but on my first night there I waited to see Alice's bedtime practice. I didn't want to infringe on her comfort zone. It wasn't a problem; she slept naked. In the Régate boarding house where I stay, the rule is that women must be nude at all times; and though that's impossible to enforce in the private rooms, I am anyway. In other words, even in circumstances when you're permitted to cover yourself, you don't. It's not just about how you appear to other people; it's about your own feelings.

(The boarding house is owned and run by a middle-aged couple who have lived all their lives on the island. Francesca has not worn a stitch of clothing on her body for three decades, and doesn't understand why a woman would want or need to cover up.)

I shall go back to a statement I made earlier and amend it slightly. We dress or undress to affect perceptions of us; but that includes our own perceptions, even when no one is looking. Your state influences the way you think, feel and behave in private as well as in public. And I have discovered that the confidence, the empowerment and the sheer joy of being nude in public don't fade when I'm alone. It's still me and my body. I want to hold onto those feelings.

And so my story is coming to an end, at least for now. I have taken up the option of extending my fellowship for a second year and have been promoted to the position of site manager at Hamilton Bay. It's a smaller-scale dig than Cimarrón but with lots of potential. Daniel has returned for a three-month stint. Matthew will probably not be back, and I am uncertain about our future. I am equally ambivalent about my brother who has announced plans to come over. He says it's to visit the home of our ancestors; but since he's bringing his girlfriend I doubt that his motives are purely nostalgic. I'm not sure how I'll feel about my Baby Bro seeing me naked; but that's not been an issue for generations of Palmirene big sisters.

I have probably gone on long enough, but there are still some observations to make about this extraordinary place.

One of the driving forces behind modern attitudes to female nudity on Palmira has been tourism. There's no doubt about that. What's less obvious to the outsider is that most visits are initiated by women, who make up three-fifths or more of all vacationers. This is partly as result of government policy, which is to limit absolute numbers and maintain a "wholesome" image. Only visitors with pre-booked accommodation are permitted onshore overnight stays; and since the demand is high and the number of hotel rooms limited, preference is given to certain categories, in particular couples. Single females are more likely to gain entry than single males, and all-female or mixed-sex groups than all-male parties. Until a couple of years ago, a certain cruise ship company ran tours from neighboring islands which were heavily patronized by men and became known as "voyeurges" (a clumsy but accurate term). Similar operations still exist, but on a much smaller scale and have been subject to severe restrictions. Students on spring or summer break are discouraged, though not banned. Graduates celebrating the completion of their studies, like the party of seven I met on the hike to Cimarrón Bay, tend to be less boisterous and more acceptable.

Palmira has also become a major player in wedding tourism, a lucrative and rapidly growing sector of the international travel market. Its appeal is the combination of wedding and honeymoon. In a very competitive industry worldwide, tourist destinations are hard to differentiate, so they must seek out or establish something which makes them unique. In a particular region such as the Caribbean, there are so many commonalities that it's hard for any place to stand out. But Palmira has a ready-made distinction. The island offers adds a special, indeed unique flavor to the wedding experience.

The very first people I met on my original flight to Palmira were the honeymooning couple. About one in ten of all visitors are newlyweds, and an equal number are spouses renewing their vows. Matrimonial couples are still a small minority. Not all family and friends are willing to abide by Palmira's rules, and for this reason partners on their second or subsequent marriage outnumber the first-timers. The exceptions are lesbian couples. (Palmira is a progressive society. Weddings can be religious or secular. Same-sex marriage is legal. Commitment ceremonies, which couples from some cultures prefer, are treated with the same respect as traditional marriages.)

One Saturday afternoon I and two of my colleagues, Sophie and Oscar, witnessed a wedding in a Régate park. The couple were accompanied by about two dozen guests. The groom wore an outfit appropriate for the tropics, an open-neck shirt and blazer, cream slacks and brogues. The bride's full ensemble consisted of a silver tiara, a silk tulle veil and ivory heeled sandals. Her complexion was fair, but she must have prepared for her big day. She had made sure that no tan lines spoiled the seamless sheen of her body.

It was a civil ceremony and the officiant was a woman. Needless to say, she, the bridesmaid and the female guests were also nude. (On a frivolously practical level, the perennial dilemma of choosing bridal gowns and bridesmaids' dresses — and fitting into them — is avoided on Palmira.)

The couple's vows had included the declaration, "I offer to you all that I have, I give to you all that I am." This had symbolic resonance when, just before they exchanged rings, they performed a little ritual. As they stood facing each other, he removed her tiara and veil, and she took off her shoes, so that she entered married life completely bare, even more so than when the nuptials began. She was both opening up and offering herself completely to her man. As they were pronounced husband and wife, all that she wore, from head to foot, was the ring he'd placed on her finger. It was a lovely gesture, with genuine meaning, unlike some of the more archaic traditions you witness at weddings.

Sophie and I had stopped to watch, while Oscar waited reluctantly but patiently. Sophie, from California, was at the time engaged to Corinne, a professor at UCLA. I think she made up her mind that Saturday to get married on Palmira. Corinne, who had had been a campaigner for same-sex marriage in their home state, wed her first partner in San Francisco back in 2004. And as someone once said (I imagine), marriage equality becomes real in the divorce court.

Corinne agreed and they tied the proverbial knot at Bonaire, a picturesque village on the north-east coast, in December — on my birthday, in fact. (I flew out for Christmas with my family a few days later.) Corinne is a tall, slim, attractive redhead, a few years older than Sophie's 26 years. I must admit that I found her manner somewhat abrupt. She's a no-nonsense, lay-it-on-the-line woman, in contrast to Sophie who's sweet-tempered and free-spirited. I met Corinne at their pre-wedding party, and wasn't sure how she was adapting to Palmira's ways. But if she had any misgivings they did not show.

There were men as well as women present at the party. Several had flown in for the event, and the women were at first understandably disoriented. However, they adapted quickly. Nevertheless it was a rather sedate affair until the arrival of a pair of male strippers. I was surprised by that, although the dudes disrobed only as far as their chamois loincloths, whereas the majority of their audience had started out with less. As a result the act was an anticlimax, but afterwards the revelers, both sexes, grew more confident, spontaneous and fancy-free. That night the Esplanade rocked.

The following day, as a nod to tradition and a hint of their relationship, Sophie was attended by a maid of honor — that was me — while Corinne was accompanied by a best woman. There were no fathers of the bride present, but in any case no one was giving anyone away. Their only accoutrements were Sophie's veil and Corinne's floral coronet, which they duly removed for a fully naked embrace, an enchanting symbol of their union. The celebrant did not pronounce them wife and wife but instead finished with "I now pronounce you joined in marriage." The reception was low-key, a garden party with no speeches and no bouquet-tossing.

I was touched by the simplicity and elegance of both of these weddings. Perhaps I'm reading too much into this (and maybe I've spent too much time on Palmira), but I love the idea of the bride being naked. What she wears on her wedding day should be an extension or reflection of her real, natural self, what she is taking into the marriage. This is her gift to her husband (or with Sophie and Corinne, to each other); it is an affirmation and an assertion of her womanhood and her sexuality. It represents her femininity; and by definition nothing is more feminine than the female body. Indeed, I've always thought that extravagant wedding gowns miss this point; they are more about fantasy (fairy-tale princess, anyone?) than reality. By contrast, revealing — in some cases very revealing — wedding gowns have become popular in many parts of the world, including Australia, because women are choosing the dress that expresses their actual personality. It may be sexy, sophisticated, glamorous, glittering, daring, demure, winsome, whatever. A fully naked bride may then be considered*ne plus ultra*- nothing else beyond — in her emancipation from anachronistic traditions.

On that note I shall finish off, with one last analysis. If there is one way in which I have been profoundly changed by life on Palmira, I nominate feeling pride in being female. Before Palmira I would have dismissed that sentiment, like taking pride in being born with brown eyes. Whatever you are or want to be, I would have said, to be proud of something that's outside your self-determination is vacuous. Now I think differently. We live in a world where, by and large, females are constantly reminded that we do not and should not have autonomy over our own bodies, that we don't belong to ourselves, that even our self-esteem is controlled by others. That might appear to be the case with Palmira's nude law, but I have learnt otherwise. The nude law is a liberation, not an imposition.

In a very important way Palmira is an enlightened society. Women and girls here show a healthy, positive attitude towards their bodies, are more self-confident and more comfortable with our sexuality, more self-accepting with regard to body image than those of our sex elsewhere, and more than males. Because we hide nothing, we learn that there is no such thing as the "perfect" body. Everyone looks at you but no one judges you. People have seen everything (and I mean that in both senses). This is a culture in which commercial and peer pressures don't make us feel we have to look like a Barbie doll or a supermodel.

Palmirenes suffer from remarkably few eating disorders. Anorexia, bulimia, obesity are virtually unknown. At the risk of generalizing: these often arise because a woman or girl experiences herself and her body as separate entities, and she forces herself to control the body she dislikes, making it in her mind an object that is alien and unwanted. If her body is objectified, it's worse when she objectifies it herself. I don't think this happens much on Palmira because you cannot separate your physical body from your essential being. (And men, set this example, are also healthy.)

In most Western cultures, the prevailing view of the naked female body is a detrimental mixture of titillation and shame. To take one example, if a mother breast-feeds her baby in public, this is often treated as improper behaviour, rather than what it is, a perfectly natural and wonderful thing. And yet women's bodies are used to sell everything from cars to cola drinks. In other parts of the world it's the opposite but no better. So womankind is caught between the bikini and the burkha. And the only escape, if it's allowed, is to adopt masculine habits, clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, values — that is, to deny or repudiate one's femininity, one's own being. You cannot do that on Palmira. You come to terms with what you are, and with what you're not.

Nevertheless, in celebrating difference Palmirenes have addressed the issue of gender identity. It's written into the nude law. Their solution is not without controversy, but they've made an effort and it's a work in progress. Transsexual females — persons born male who have undergone sex reassignment through surgery — are subject to the law. Somewhat more contentiously, a transgender male — biologically female but whose gender identity is male — must be naked. On the other hand, transsexual males and transgender females are defined to be male. In other words, as the law stands, if you have breasts and a vagina, however you identify yourself you must not conceal them. If you have a penis, you must wear pants.

As I've stated before, Palmira is not perfect, it's no utopia. What makes this place unique is that the people believe that the expression of natural femininity should not be constrained by what are no more than contrived notions of status, gravitas, decorum, morality, modesty, shame. So women, far from being victimized or objectified by the nude law, are empowered by it. Palmira turns on its head the all-too-common notion that femininity is weakness. Palmirenes believe that you have to be strong, smart and self-confident to openly express your true self.

That is what I have found. Through the joy of nudity I have discovered a new pride in my womanhood.

5