

Can't a Woman Just Be Naked in Peace?

By Megan Pincus Kajitani

I'm a liberal woman of the new millennium, I'm comfortable with my body, I love nature, I hate tan lines, and I'm trying to get to know my new home down the coast here in San Diego. So what else to do on a beautiful Friday afternoon but throw a book and a towel in my old beach bag and hit the nude side of Black's?

Now, I've done topless beaches in Europe, where nobody looks twice. I assumed the famed Black's Beach would be similarly sophisticated – an earthy place with an appreciation for the freedom of the human form, in all of its permutations – similarly, “it's just a body, get over it.”

So, I head down the long, dusty, cliffside pathway to Black's and waltz (to the right of the orange cones) past the birthday-suited sun worshippers dotting the sand. I look around, smile with relief, and think, “How fabulous. Right here in San Diego, our own little commune of open-minded folks, comfortable with their regular, protruding bodies amidst a tight-assed, silicone-implanted coast. *And* no tan lines!”

Then, as I walk a bit farther, a little flutter in my gut notifies me that there are many more men than women hanging out in their bare nakedness here. It's that flutter in my gut that says to keep my wits about me, the flutter we women often experience when we find ourselves outnumbered by the Y chromosomes.

Brushing off the flutter (as we also often do, being a culture of women raised with the “disease to please” or what I like to call the “Just Smile Virus”), I forge on with my liberated woman adventure. Continuing down the beach to a somewhat secluded spot, I lay out my towel about 20 feet behind a male-female middle-aged couple tossing a Frisbee (they seem safe enough), near a pile of rocks shaped like a seal balancing a ball on its nose.

I strip off my confining bikini, take a long, deep breath, and soak in the moment, the encompassing sun, the freedom of being on this stunning, cliff-framed beach in all my naturalness, reveling in my independence, counting my blessings for this place of beauty and acceptance. After a few minutes, I start to read, relax, dig my toes into the sand. Then, the flutter calls again.

I look up, and behind me, along the cliffs, two naked men have appeared, each alone. One walks very slowly, back and forth. The other sits his bare butt on a rock about 15 feet away to my left. Both guys seem to be staring at me, both seem a little creepy. “Oh, stop imagining things,” I tell myself. “It's a nude beach. It's just a different experience. You're being paranoid.”

I shake it off and continue to read my book – well, sort of. I'm feeling a little less liberated and peaceful now, a little more naked and alone all of a sudden. Another dude appears, throwing out a blanket behind me on the other side, looking at me, too. I try to ignore them all, mind my own business, don't feel intimidated, don't allow my freedom to be disturbed. Then, I think, “Maybe they're just doing their own thing, why do I think they're looking at me?” Or maybe I should just enjoy the experience of people comfortable enough to look at each other's bodies, of men appreciating my wonderfully imperfect body in a town where Barbie bodies are the gold standard. I try to rationalize.

But the flutter won't go away. No matter how much I try to convince myself to "just smile," it doesn't feel good. The flutter is turning into a mild internal panic.

Just then, like an angel appearing for Jesus or Glinda the Good Witch for Dorothy, the woman from the Frisbee couple walks over to me. I look up at her, in her shining tan skin, and she smiles. "Are you new here?" she asks me. I tell her I am. She says her name is Elaine, and she and her husband are members of a group called the Black's Beach Bares.

She asks me if I noticed the men gathering behind me. I tell her I did. The Bares, she says, try to keep single women (any women) on the beach safe from these lookeelos, guys who aren't on the beach just to enjoy the natural beauty, but to leer at it, or treat it like a kinky sex show.

Elaine, her husband, and other good-spirited people who want Black's to remain free and comfortable for women (and anybody), patrol the beach, offering strategically placed umbrellas to women or couples, any vulnerable souls who want shielding from these nasty dogs. The Bares always congregate around that rock shaped like a seal balancing a ball on its nose. (*Got that, ladies? If you go alone to Black's, sit near the seal rock.*)

Guardian Angel Elaine invites me to move my towel closer to her and her husband. I do, and within minutes, the cliff hangers are dust. She turns to me and says, "See, that's all it takes. We don't let them get away with it." Right on, Elaine. She and her husband, upstanding members of the Black's Beach Bares, nod and smile at me, then go back to their private conversation.

I sit on my relocated towel and try to read a while longer. I want to stay there and not leave, just to say to them all, "I have the freedom to be here." But, I must admit, the mood is lost. My elation and titillation with this gorgeous nude beach have fizzled to a bit of the "ick." It's the "ick" that comes when leering guys suddenly turn feeling sexy and liberated into feeling exposed, vulnerable, like a dirty vulture's dinner prey.

I pack up in a few minutes, say a friendly farewell to my unexpected protectors, tie on my bikini and head back up the beach. Several nude men wading in the shallow surf smile at me and say hello as I walk back toward the orange cones. I don't know whether to respond. I decide not to. It's sad.

This beach, with its gold-speckled sand, cresting waves, and towering cliffs could not be more beautiful, just like a naked body in its splendor and comfort. But I'm not sure I feel safe here now. The Black's Beach Bares do an amazing service for women (couples, families, anyone) who want to enjoy this beach. But I'm so disheartened that they must exist. That our public culture forces nakedness and solo females to be constantly self-conscious and even in danger.

I head over to the other side of Black's, spend the rest of my afternoon laying out (*avec* bathing suit), watching the surfing, having a pleasant chat with a couple friendly Aussies, reading my book. It's a nice time, but I can't help feeling a little heavy-hearted the rest of the day. On the bright side was a new experience, a day at this unique San Diego gathering place with myself, and an enlightened, socially-conscious group of people who made it possible. On the dark side was the flutter, the "ick," the deep-seated knowledge that being a woman trying to do anything alone in the world today means being forever cautious. Freedom with limits. But, in the end, I suppose, freedom nonetheless. And freedom is usually hard won.

So, I won't let the lookeeloos ruin fabulous Black's Beach. I'll go back, maybe with a friend next time, and I'll help fight for the right to be safe and comfortable. I won't smile when I'm being leered at; I'll tell those bastards to move along and let me read. And I'll thank my lucky stars for the Black's Beach Bares, who help make our world, and San Diego, a place where a woman like me can continue my quest for liberation, joy, adventure, equality, and, damn it, no tan lines.

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