

November 20, 2013



The Naked's Next Door

By [STEVEN KURUTZ](#)



Shannon Sessoms has never been so ready for winter. Cold weather brings the promise of several months without awkward sightings of the neighbors whom her family refers to as the Naked's.

Ms. Sessoms, who lives with her husband and two young children in Harlem, first spotted one of the Naked's two summers ago while enjoying a glass of wine on her apartment balcony one

evening. The balcony overlooks the backyards of several brownstones, and out of the one directly opposite her emerged a 40ish woman with dreadlocks, wearing nothing but a T-shirt.

"I thought, well, maybe she's running outside to let the cat or dog in," Ms. Sessoms, 43, said. "But then she started gardening, nude."

As in shirt gone, completely naked?

"Completely naked," Ms. Sessoms said.

She yelled for her husband to come look. "He's like, 'I don't want to see my neighbor naked,'" she said. "I'm like, 'No, no, you have to see.' But by the time he came, she was gone, and he didn't believe me."

Credibility was restored as the sightings increased in frequency and began to involve other family members: the husband taking naked smoking breaks; the couple and their two young children dining alfresco and au natural.

 "The husband was grilling naked," Ms. Sessoms said. "That's a little dangerous."

Ms. Sessoms was recalling these events on an unseasonably warm fall afternoon a few weeks ago, on the same balcony that overlooks her neighbors' yard. It was the kind of day, a reporter pointed out, that a nudist might regard as an invitation for a late-season frolic.

"We were really excited about this balcony," Ms. Sessoms said, looking across at her neighbors' yard warily. "We don't enjoy it as much as we thought we would."

 In a city like New York, where residents live in such close proximity, nudity is an often unavoidable part of domestic life. The living room window of one apartment faces the bedroom of another, which has an unobstructed view into the bathroom of a third. Many of the city's interiors — especially those of some of the newer glass-sheathed buildings — afford all the privacy of a gym locker room. (Indeed, in some corridors of the city, [along the High Line](#), especially near [the Standard hotel](#), the nudity on display seems to be part of the attraction.) 

And while some people are titillated or disturbed by seeing a neighbor naked, others are driven to distraction, as one man who [posted a letter on Craigslist](#) several years ago claimed to be.

Under the heading "Please stop walking around naked — 25th Street," he confessed to seeing his young, blond, female neighbor on several occasions, and said that it was killing his work productivity. In his open letter, he pleaded, "When you practice booty dancing in your underwear  in front of the mirror, then I'm screwed."

The Craigslist poster complained that his neighbor not only danced half-naked, but did so with the lights on and the blinds up, a habit shared by other New Yorkers. Living among 8.3 million people tends to create a sense of anonymity and encourage a laid-back attitude toward baring it all at home. If the guy in the next building sees a flash of skin as you go from the shower to the closet — or practice booty dancing — so what?

In New York, said [Helen Schulman](#), a novelist and professor of writing at a university in Manhattan, “you don’t really know the people across the way. I don’t think it’s the same in a small town.”

From her office, Ms. Schulman, 52, enjoys a “Rear Window”-like view into a mix of prewar apartment buildings and townhouses. Over the years, she said, she has noticed one resident in particular: “My window looks straight into his bedroom, and he never closes his curtains or shades. He’s reliably naked.” (She asked that her employer go unnamed so as not to embarrass the man.)

Half of literary New York has seen this immodest fellow, Ms. Schulman joked, explaining that when visiting writers come to her office, she points him out. “It’s a really funny icebreaker,” she  said.

If you haven’t seen someone in the buff, or nearly naked, it’s likely that someone has seen you. Most residents of big apartment buildings are skilled at the half-naked dash to the hall closet and back, or the shirtless plunge into the hallway for the Sunday paper.

“We all stumble out in the morning,” Ms. Schulman said of the residents of her Upper West Side building. “If our neighbor comes out in boxers or a T-shirt, I say, ‘Oh, we’ve all seen it already.’ ”

Kathleen Vestuto has seen her share of naked neighbors as well. Ms. Vestuto, who lives in Greenwich Village, was once caught naked herself, emerging from the shower to find herself face to face with a window washer, separated only by glass.

“My apartment is small; I had nowhere to run,” Ms. Vestuto said, laughing. “So I just stood there and waved. He didn’t wave back. He was a gentleman.”

Mario Messina and his neighbors found their exposure to nudity less amusing.

Mr. Messina, 67, lives in a building on Park Avenue South, facing the Gansevoort Park Avenue hotel, which has a [rooftop pool](#) where the consumption of liquor and the shedding of apparel go hand in hand. A news reporter described the scene for the local CBS affiliate like this: “Young women in bikinis, pulling down their tops and baring their bottoms. Like ‘Girls Gone Wild’ on Park Avenue South.” (Elon Kenchington, chief operating officer of Gansevoort Hotel Group, called it an isolated incident, saying it was “not representative of the hotel, its staff or our typical guests.”)

Mr. Messina, who is chairman of the 29th Street Neighborhood Association, has been writing letters to the New York State Liquor Authority, requesting that the hotel’s liquor license be revoked. “I appreciate and understand youth,” he said recently. “I understand beauty. But for crying out loud, that is not something you do in Midtown.”

The cavorting at the Gansevoort reminded Mr. Messina and his offended neighbors that the city is a two-way fishbowl. “We are guarding our privacy like never before,” he said.

Nakedness has a way of provoking disputes; the city's police blotters and court files are full of naked neighbor stories. Like the one of the man who got booted from his apartment in the London Terrace Towers for, among other things, roaming the halls half-naked for years (he said he had a sleepwalking problem). Or the man who stood outside his former girlfriend's Staten Island apartment, stripped off his clothes and set them on fire after a fight. Or the Brooklyn resident who was accused of beating his roommate with a clothing iron because the roommate had a habit of hanging around the apartment naked.

Usually, however, nakedness is simply a violation of good taste.

Molly MacDermot cringes to recall the dinner party she gave several years ago for her boss and his wife. Ms. MacDermot, who is now 39, was living with her husband on a high floor of Symphony House, a 44-story building on West 56th Street. They faced a new glass building, and at eye level with their windows was the apartment of a man who was often naked.

"The naked guy was a staple," Ms. MacDermot said. "He was probably middle-aged. He wasn't Brad Pitt-worthy."

Moreover, the naked guy's apartment was bright and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows. "It became something that you deliberately ignored," she said. "It becomes furniture, like that bad sofa with the stain. You put a pillow over it."

Like any good hostess, Ms. MacDermot gave her boss and his wife the best seats, which had a view of the city skyline — and, unfortunately, the naked guy's apartment.

"Everything was supposed to be very special," she said. "It was a high-stress night. I was trying to get the linens right. I distinctly remember having asparagus soup. I thought maybe in this two-hour window the naked guy wouldn't be there."

But during dinner, Ms. MacDermot remembered, she heard the wife gasp, and turned to see the familiar fleshy form. Her boss choked on his food. "He was visibly shocked," she said. "It was awkward."

Toward the end of her time at Symphony House, Ms. MacDermot said, the naked man began watching pornography on a big-screen TV. Perhaps he didn't care, or was simply lulled into complacency, having never been called out and embarrassed by his neighbors — or at least by Ms. MacDermot.

"I don't think I would recognize him clothed," she said. In that way, she added, the city affords "a liberating sense of freedom."

In Harlem, Ms. Sessoms hasn't enjoyed the same anonymous relationship with the Naked family. She often sees the wife at the bus stop when the two mothers are sending their children off to school. She has also seen the entire Naked family clothed and dining in a restaurant.

And what started out as a comical situation has begun to concern her. She anticipates needing to have the birds-and-bees talk with her toddler daughter much earlier than she would like to, and worries that her 6-year-old son will say something embarrassing when he runs into one of the Nakeds in the neighborhood.

Already, her son seems to find the family a source of amusement. Not long ago, Ms. Sessoms said: "He had a play date with friends over. His bedroom looks over their garden. He said, 'Look, the Nakeds are out.' All these 5-year-olds are staring at a naked man, hysterically laughing."

This afternoon, however, Ms. Sessoms was not taking any chances. With the sun out and the temperature in the low 70s, the likelihood of nudity was high. She poked her head into her son's room and breathed a sigh of relief. The room was dark, its curtains drawn protectively.

Some comments: NYTimes "picks"

1.

- o ellienyc
- o New York City

NYT Pick

I don't think it's just a question of being naked. In many cases I think it's more like being forced to buy a ticket to a "show" you're not interested in, like when you're stuck in a public place listening to someone yell into their mobile, or when you have to listen to neighbors who shriek at each other or play loud music all the time.. Yes, they have a right to do it (and they will be the first people to tell you that, just like they naked neighbors) and to "make a statement" however they please, but that doesn't mean the unwilling audience has to like it.

- o [In reply to Susan](#)
- o [Nov. 21, 2013 at 6:20 a.m.](#)
- o [Recommend149](#)



2.

- o Vincent
- o Los Angeles

NYT Pick

Writer Steven Kurutz and his editors at the NYT are complicit in creating yet another example of our need in American popular culture to demonize nudity. Yes, it's true that more people in this country are comfortable and unashamed about experiencing their bodies unclothed in private living spaces. And it's true that in the urban environment of

the high rise this may lead to a neighbor's viewing of a naked body.

In this conflict of social values we need to distinguish between one individual's belief in the normalcy of nudity in a private living space and a neighbor's personal fear of viewing nudity in a private living space because he/she finds it frightening, disgusting, or damaging to the psyche of a child. The key question is: Does the person who finds nudity normal COMPEL the one who fears nudity to confront his/her nakedness? Or is the experience of viewing another's nudity in his/her private living space OPTIONAL to the viewer? As a society, we need to debate in a rational manner the question of whether or not the sight of a person's body in its naturally naked state is ugly, indecent, or otherwise offensive, or whether the fault lies in the eyes of the beholder. And this should have nothing to do with how well or badly an individual naked body conforms to our society's current criteria for acceptable or unacceptable physical beauty.

- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 6:25 a.m.](#)
- [Recommend70](#)



3.

- Sharon
- New York

NYT Pick

I love to walk around naked in my apartment but I don't like being gawked at by my neighbors. So I bought white shades for my windows that let about 90% of the daylight in but block the view. Now I can walk around naked as I please without my annoying neighbors gawking at me, and also enjoy the pleasant soft daylight! Shades were about \$100 from Manhattan Shade and Glass. Best money ever spent.

- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 6:30 a.m.](#)
- [Recommend189](#)

4.

- Marc
- New York City

NYT Pick

Several comments seem to attack others for simply noticing and being dismayed about the nudity, so much so that I don't see much balance and respect for different reactions to it. I am liberal thinking (but conservative acting) male who lives in NYC. I have photographed both sexes for artistic nudes. It doesn't bother me that my neighbors across the street regularly have sex with no curtains or shades and the light on. Other neighbors have walked around nude up against their windows, with the brightest lights on. Teenagers have had sex on the roof across the street. But my mother would have objected

and I don't think her views should be dismissed. Some of the nudity seems to me to be forced on neighbors...deliberate exhibitionism. Not that I ever would, but I like light and air and what views I have, and I shouldn't have to keep my apartment dark to avoid nudity from neighbors.

I also think there is a certain reality that if attractive people are nude, it is less objectionable. But not all neighbors are as attractive as they think they are.

- o [Nov. 21, 2013 at 6:31 a.m.](#)
- o [Recommend103](#)



- 5.
- o Seagulls
 - o Virginia

NYT Pick

From the tone of the comments so far, it seems like this article got on some Naturist list serv.

If you want to romp nude around your home, the onus is on you to draw your blinds. This is how our society has worked for about as long as we have had blinds and clothing. It doesn't matter that we all have the same parts, or that nude is the state to which we are born; it forces a state of intimacy that at least half the relationship has not consented to. It isn't prudery to draw the blinds, it's basic manners.

- o [Nov. 21, 2013 at 9:13 a.m.](#)
- o [Recommend111](#)



- 6.
- o Mike
 - o Jersey City, NJ

NYT Pick

If one is in one's own home, it's the responsibility of the gawker to look away. If you are staring into someone else's window, you're doing the imposing.

- o [In reply to do not blame shift](#)
- o [Nov. 21, 2013 at 9:17 a.m.](#)
- o [Recommend60](#)

7.

- Dan Stackhouse
- New York City

NYT Pick

Funny article, and totally true. I recall, from the age of 6 or so, seeing my first unabashed naked stranger, a woman across the street on a fire escape. Fascinated me even then, and really I don't think there's anything wrong with nudity. We're all naked all the time after all, under our clothing. I'm guilty of wandering around the house in my birthday suit too, as are most people at some point, and if people across the street see or have telescopes set up to watch me make coffee, I don't particularly care. If someone said in the elevator that they'd spotted me, I'd shrug and say I hoped they enjoyed it.

And I guess I can comprehend a puritanical distaste for nudity, based on repression of sexuality, probably religious. But it's like when I glance out and am revolted by catching a glimpse of a neighbor eating asparagus soup (blech), I can easily look in another direction or close my shades. People that claim to be grossed out but still avidly watch nudes should realize they're not actually grossed out, but they naturally like nudity, down under the Victorian era prudity.

- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 9:55 a.m.](#)
- [Recommend34](#)

8.

- Davidwh
- Los Angeles

NYT Pick

Absolutely! These complainants simply ignore the fact that they are voyeurs. That's a nice word for 'peeping Tom' and while these nudists may be sometimes unthinkingly exposing themselves to the public, they are in their own homes: the complaints are coming from snooping judgmental prudes. I find this attitude insufferable. Once again, society is being asked to restrict itself to only those activities approved by parents! 'Oh no, I have to talk to my kids about sex or the human body! Arrest that man before I have to take responsibility for parenting!' Why not tell your kids it is rude to stare and laugh at those different from you? That there isnothing wrong with a healthy human body. My heart goes out to those innocent victims of prudish uptight snooping self-entitled snobs.

- [In reply to Ken of Sag Harbor](#)
- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 10:28 a.m.](#)
- [Recommend26](#)



9.

- Mike

- New York

NYT Pick

Maybe it's from years of living in Europe, but I fail to see what the big deal is. While my wife and I don't sit around our apartments in the buff, neither do we rush to close drapes or hurry to put clothes on when we get out of the shower. Honestly, I don't get what the problem is or why nakedness should be considered offensive by anyone.

As others have noted, I'd be far more concerned about neighbors who were racist, homophobic, anti-semitic, or really big into owning guns than ones who were comfortable without their clothes on.

- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 10:35 a.m.](#)
- [Recommend98](#)



10.

- Aaron
- Boston, MA

NYT Pick

If I'm on a European beach and see a topless woman walk by in a thong, it's no big deal. Whether she's large, small, young, or old, being topless in that context is normal and accepted. If you have a problem with mostly-nude bodies, just don't go.

But if I'm on the subway going to work and see a topless woman walked by in a thong, it would be a big deal!

It's like having a very loud conversation in a small place about your sex life or your bowel movements. In doing so, you are forcing everyone within earshot to cross normally private barriers and know intimate things about you that they would rather not. They will likely react with embarrassment and discomfort at this violation of social norms. Our description for a person that does this to someone else is "rude."

So no, I do not think the point of these people's reactions is that there is anything intrinsically shameful about nakedness. Nor I do not think the point is that the occasional accidental sight of another person's nude body is cause for alarm. Rather that in a culture where walking around nude in plain sight is not commonplace, where nakedness is something often shared with a sexual partner and not many more people, being publicly naked is very similar to that loudly intimate conversation. They just wish you'd lower the volume a bit by buying some blinds.

- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 12:10 p.m.](#)

- [Recommend82](#)
 - 
- 11.
- Mojo
 - USA

NYT Pick

It never ceases to amaze me how prudish we Americans are when it comes to nudity.

When I began traveling to western Europe it was refreshing to be among people who have mature and tolerant attitudes toward nudity. Various states of nudity are acceptable in certain parks, public swimming pools often have "swimsuit-optional" hours and nudity is prevalent in popular entertainment, advertising and the arts.

If their acceptance of the naked human body is detrimental to European societies I haven't found any evidence of it. Statistically-speaking, western European countries have much lower rates of sex crimes and murder than the U.S. From a subjective point of view I would say that the overall anxiety level of the European countries I have visited is less than 50% of the U.S.

Of course, that isn't primarily due to their casual attitude toward nudity. Europeans enjoy universal health care, social welfare programs that actually work and guaranteed vacation time that the average American can only dream about... Compare that to the rather grim situation on this side of the Atlantic.

Nudity and sexuality are intrinsic to our humanity. We are born naked and except for "test tube" babies all of us are on this planet courtesy of a sexual encounter between two people.

I do not accept the concept of "original sin." We are beautiful at birth with a clean slate as we begin our lives. It's the misguided moral judgment of society that produces shame and misery in people's lives.

- [Nov. 21, 2013 at 12:17 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend51](#)

- 12.
- Richard
 - Princeton, NJ

NYT Pick

In summer, I greatly enjoy a clothing-optional (aka "nude") beach, BUT approaching this beach are signs clearing stating "Beyond This Point You May Encounter Nude

Sunbathers."

I have attended naked yoga and meditation sessions BUT participants are simply invited - not required - by the leaders to remove their clothes (and several typically leave on some kind of bottom).

I am very comfortable with my body and being around naked people, BUT many other people simply are not.

That is the issue here: personal freedom to enjoy healthy nakedness VERSUS the kind of open, unavoidably witnessed nudity that is not pleasant for many of my fellow citizens and limits their freedom to be happy when confronted with it.

And I don't have an easy answer to all this.

- [Nov. 22, 2013 at 6:48 a.m.](#)
- [Recommend11](#)



13.

- Mayday
- Westchester

NYT Pick

I enjoyed this piece, and was reminded of my first apartment in New York, on East 5th Street. The hipster dude across the street was dubbed "Nudey Neighbor" by the ladies in the apartment next door to ours, for obvious reasons. We all had a good laugh when Nudey Neighbor, a guitarist in a downtown band, graced the cover of a Time Out New York fashion issue at the time, under the headline GET DRESSED!

- [Nov. 22, 2013 at 12:31 p.m.](#)
- [Recommend15](#)



14.

- Madeleine
- Manhattan

NYT Pick

It interests me that many of the "nudists across the way is no big deal" proponents live outside the city, and may not be fully aware of life in a New York apartment. Practically every window faces or is visible by another, and those who choose to walk around naked in their own apartments are fully aware of this fact. It is unfair to call people 'voyeurs' if, say, their living-room window faces directly into a clothing-optional household. Are they never to use their living room? I am not against nudity per se and privacy in NYC does consist in part of ignoring the presence of other people whose windows face yours. It

could be argued, however, that in this case the line between public & private is a bit of a grey area--if it would be considered inappropriate to walk outside nude, how appropriate is it to walk around nude in a clearly visible space, even if it is inside? I would argue that, in this case, individuals who spend their time nude are consciously impinging on their neighbors, who have no choice in the matter. The density of city living mandates a level of civility beyond that of the suburbs simply to make the city liveable. If I lived in a house in the suburbs, and the family next door, who I could probably not even see without effort, chose to live a nude lifestyle indoors, it would be a very different situation. Yes, Ben Franklin spent time walking around his house in the nude, but he didn't live in a high-rise apartment building.

- o [Nov. 23, 2013 at 3:20 p.m.](#)
- o [Recommend5](#)