

And then Marilou Johnson walked past me from behind when I was looking through *Living Naturally*, and I could tell that she could see the open pages with the photos of people cavorting naked. My reflex response was to slam shut the magazine.

In the cafeteria at work later that day, Marilou approached me and said, “Hi. Can I sit here?”

“I, uh ... OK.” And she sat and said, “I know we kind of know each other, but we’ve never really met. High school English class. Remember? I’m Marilou Johnson.”

“Sure. I remember you.”

We sat quietly for what seemed a full minute. Then she said, “What was that magazine you had? Some nudie mag?”

“Sorta. I mean, oh, nothing. Just something I found.”

She didn’t pursue that, but she sat by me in the cafeteria again the next day and the day after. We talked about books—discovered we both loved reading and liked some of the same authors—and talked about our families and where we came from and what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives, and then one day she asked again about the magazine.

I confessed it was from a nudist camp. “There’s pictures. Families. Kids. Old people. All naked as the day they were born.”

“Really? A nudist camp?”

“Yeah. Uh huh.”

“Do you still have it? I’d like to see it.”

“Nah, I mean yeah I have it, but nah I ...”

“Chicken.”

“Aw-right. I got it right here.” I pulled it from inside my jacket and we thumbed through it together.

“This is kinda sweet,” she said. “I mean it’s so natural. Just families having fun in their altogether.”

I told her I had often thought I would like to go to a place like that.

“Are you some kind of exhibitionist?”

“Kinda, maybe. I mean just in my mind.” I was blushing but determined to be honest with her. I said, “The, uh, the idea of like, you know, being naked with other people, it’s like something that, you know, kinda excites me. But I’d never have the nerve to really do it.”

“I would,” she boasted.

If ever in my life I dropped my jaw, that was the moment. “Really?” I said.

“Sure.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Why not? Naked bodies are nothing to be ashamed of. It’s the way God made us.”

“I don’t think I believe in God,” I said.

She surprised me again by saying, “Me neither. I just said the way God made us because ... you know. It’s an expression.”

After what was to both of us a surprisingly long silence, Marilou said, “That place, Arcadia, it says it’s near Hoodspoint. That’s a beautiful wild place. I’ve been there.”

“The nudist camp?”

“Not the nudist camp but a regular campground near there. It’s not all that far from here. We could go. I’d go with you if you wanted me to.”

I couldn’t believe she was saying that. I said, “I’d love to go but I could never. Not in a million years.”

“All right. You don’t know what you might be missing.”