

Are You Okay?

by Andrew Roe

Naked is not good. Naked is not sexy. Naked is not, suddenly, tragically, what you want to be.

But: here you are anyway, naked. Totally. Completely. Shockingly. Nude. As nude as nude can be, and how the word itself, *nude*, sounds-feels-tastes exactly like it should. Never have you been so nude, so naked, so fundamentally revealed. You wonder: is it the light? No, it is not the light. The light in the room (hers) is minimalist and warm. It's actually a calming, campfire-y glow. So no: it's you all right. It's your nakedness. The fact of this. The lapsed biology of this. It's something—something is pulling you away from the slutty magic of the moment, and this is not good either. This is, in fact, bad.

Eye contact—when was the last time there was confirmed I-see-you you-see-me eye contact? Minutes ago. Not since the removal of your socks, her panties, both of you busying yourselves with the grave mechanics of undressing. All distractions, all utilitarian preparations gone now. The daiquiris starting to wear off, too. You're afraid to look; she's afraid to look. *Several* minutes ago, and counting. Somehow (instinct?) you both paddle over to your respective sides of the bed, which is fluffy and white and suggestive of cumulus. Moving is like moving upstream, like swimming underwater against a mighty current. You are salmon people: pink, vulnerable. The question then becomes: under the comforter or on top? Yet another impasse. How many can one encounter withstand?

Though to be fair, it's her nakedness as well. This is also disturbing. Because you are both older, beyond the push of forty, both well versed in the body's declines and disappointments. This is not magazines. This is not movies. This is a small bedroom in a large apartment complex where in the background you can hear the nocturnal comings and goings of neighbors, bass-heavy stereos, cats wanting to be let inside. She has had children. One breast seems lower, bigger than the other. The skin sags and hangs where you'd

expect, the sporadic blemishes draw the eye like glints of glass. But there is a truth and a bluntness to her shape. You aren't complaining. It's not that. And you are not not attracted to her. It's just that it makes you a little sad, is all.

You think back to the bar. Remarkably it's been only what—a half hour since you departed in agreement: her place, because the kids weren't there and it was closer and there was no way your apartment would do. Swaggering out into the night like a couple of professional club goers. It was a bar adjoined to a Hollywood-themed chain restaurant, and both bar and restaurant were empty of customers but crowdedly decorated with the memorabilia of lesser celebrities who, you thought, didn't really deserve their own memorabilia. (Stephen Baldwin's money clip? Ally Sheedy's cigarette case?) You talked about music. You talked about the coming fall TV season. You talked about when you love someone and it's like a part of you disappears but you don't mind. You ran a tab because why not, it's Friday night, and because it's not like she's an anonymous pickup. She's a co-worker with whom you've bonded during the past few months, finding each other amid the thousands of scuttling employees who call DataCorp home. Divorced, single parents, aging, unsatisfied at work, similarly wounded by the world—there was plenty to commiserate about. And commiserate you did. Lunches, breaks, after-work drinks, the occasional carpooling. Plus a balanced, enthusiastic exchange of emails, voicemails, and instant messages. The intimacy increasing day by day, week by week, until the narrative arc of the relationship had reached its turning point. Today, tonight. Too many drinks. Too many whispery revelations at one sitting. A hand brushed a thigh. A glance was returned, affirmed. Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" seeped out of the jukebox.

Now, however, there is no soundtrack. Only two bodies, one storyline. You've arrived at your desired destination—well, desired is perhaps too strong a word. You've thought about it. Wondered about it. What would it be like if. And now it's here. Live. In real time. You've both laid the foundation for what is about to happen/not happen. And you are still standing there at the bed. You are still

naked. Your penis curves a bit to the left, her right. You are either half erect or half limp.

To be clothed, at home, driving, navigating a wiggly shopping cart while spending way too much time deliberating over what you should buy: they are all better options than this, than being naked. You can't even enjoy the essentials anymore. Sex, sports, food—when was the last time food was anything more than fuel? You've lost the ability to relax, to “chill,” as your son would put it, he of the weekly phone call, which has become a duty, a penance for you both, but it's all you have, so you hit the speed dial button every Sunday evening at approximately the same time, the conversations growing shorter and shorter, devolving into a clipped Q&A format, you like a probing journalist, and he like an interview subject who doesn't want to disclose too much. Looking back—and why not look back when you're nude in front of a co-worker, collapsing sexually, with your budding belly catching the faintest hint of stale air conditioning—there have been failures, sure. Not as grand as some, but certainly worse than others. A connect-the-dots trail of fuckups and stutters and regrets. This is not the life you envisioned, ever. Somewhere your son is sleeping in a room you've never been in, never seen, in another state, in another time zone. He is twelve and moody. And somewhere your wife sleeps next to a new and improved husband: taller, sturdier than you, financially more secure, more vigorous, more ambitious, more everything. He has a goatee and listens to smooth jazz. He works out three times a week, minimum. You remain skeptical about the timing of everything. Your wife says she met him after, after she knew it was over. It had nothing to do with Clay. You say no. She, your wife, has always been hazy on the chronology of the whole thing, perhaps wanting to spare you the pain, perhaps wanting to bequeath you a lifetime's supply of uncertainty and tunneling doubt. You thought your marriage was fine, rock-solid. Sadly, you still think of your marriage as fine, rock-solid, even though the divorce papers were signed more than three years ago. And counting. How could two people who shared so much

and were so close be so far away from each other, then and now? You'd really like to know.

Does my face, my body betray all this? you wonder. Sure. Probably. Most likely. Though she—Barb, not your wife, the naked woman's name is Barb Sobol, she works as an assistant to the director of human resources and lives in Burbank and was born in Florida and is lactose intolerant but once a week likes to treat herself to a grande Mocha Coconut Frappuccino in spite of the repercussions afterward—doesn't seem to display any recognition of this. She pulls the comforter and sheets back. And that is that. Underneath it is.

But before she retreats into bed, she pauses. This you notice out of the corner of your eye. How should you proceed? Do you start mumbling excuses or carry on as though everything was fine and hope for the best? Then it happens: eye contact. However, you fail to hold her gaze for very long; it's quick, brief, a camera flash of time that dazes you, makes you blink. You look away. Look away and note the framed photographs on the dresser. Vacations. Lakes. Wet hair and uncomplicated smiles. But this is evidence you'd rather not confront. So you concentrate on the open closet that's behind her, that's overflowing with clothes and boxes and shoes, as if it's inadequate, not enough to contain what needs to be contained.

Wait. Barb has said something. You realize this belatedly, after the fact. She's waiting for a response.

"Sorry?" you ask.

"Are you okay?" she says.

And it is not until you hear this sound, her voice, Barb Sobol's voice, concerned and maternal, that you fully concede to yourself that no, you are not okay. You have been crying. For some time, apparently. Here, on the cusp, on the verge of sex, fucking, intercourse, coitus, relations, whatever, the first real opportunity for such contact since you don't want to say when—with your wife, that's when, with the woman who still circulates in your blood and probably will forever, and how you long for the time, only moments ago, when you could be classified as half erect—and you are crying.

Maybe it will pass. Maybe you'll be able to follow through despite all this pregame activity. You can still perhaps redeem yourself here.

But the heaving keeps coming, it's a vibrant, sucking rush, and everything's blurred and wet and you're out of breath and you don't know when it will subside, soon, you hope, soon, but it might take a while, and this is what you want to tell Barb, sweet, sweet slightly gap-toothed Barb, who deserves better (don't we all), just to give her a general heads up about what's going on, to reassure, to let her know that it's not her fault and she deserves better, only you can't talk right now because of the heaving, the continuing influx of added air, but you will be able to, talk that is, at some point, soon perhaps, the words will rise eventually, and that's what you'd say if you could.

