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Barest of pleasures fades for the year

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Reader comments: A favorite of Bill Baker of Dataw Island, S.C.

Summer's last gasp is over, and so is nakedness.

The house is chilly and at least the first half-hour of sleep feels better wrapped in flannel. But the very best kind of nakedness -- open air -- is now impossible.

That makes me sad, because my favorite thing about summer is taking off my glasses, my shoes, my earrings, my top, my bottom, everything underneath and voila! I'm me again.

I'm no Madonna. I get no thrills from thinking someone will spy me naked, and don't think anyone ever has who didn't want to.

But, when I mention this to friends, nearly all smile wistfully and say, "Oh, I love to be naked, too." Makes me wonder if throughout our proud nation we all chafe each day within our clothes, and can't wait to get home at night to shed them.

I bet even Marilyn Quayle likes to be naked, in between raising her family and helping Dan campaign. Nakedness is as plain and wholesome as oatmeal cookies.

She probably goes to spas to be naked, though, or lounges on her private balcony as Secret Service types stand guard for paparazzi. Me, I just step into my yard, which backs up to a woods, with the morning paper and a cup of coffee. Or, at the cottage, I pad to the end of the dock at dusk to watch the stars come out.

A clothes distance

Is there anyone on earth who wouldn't rather be naked, alone and secure under a warm sun, than swaddled in clothes?

Yes, an old boyfriend of mine. We liked to drive through the hills north of San Francisco. And I liked to stop, grab the blanket from the trunk and wade through the tall grass to a

private spot where I could lie on my back for a few minutes, with nothing between me and the sky.

He would wait in the car, and look embarrassed when I got back in.

Once, we went camping in the mountains, miles from anyone. Everywhere we looked was rock and ridge and light and shadows and emptiness. The first evening, I kept my clothes on, for his sake, until we got into the tent. But the next morning, exploring, I felt so awed by that spot and, I guess, by the wonders of life in general, that I suggested we take off our clothes and just stretch out like children on one of those huge slabs of rock.

He said no.

So I lay there alone. He sat on the next rock fully clothed, his hands folded in his lap, until I sighed and got dressed.

How cruel of me, you say. He must be insecure about his body.

No, I think he liked his body plenty. I did, too, even though it was thin and white and goosebumped like a plucked chicken. In the privacy of his own place, he loved to be naked and prance like John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever."

A union with the world

Still, if he were insecure, nakedness might have helped. Nakedness buoys me, especially when I'm feeling doughy and dumpy. You see your naked body often enough, especially under sunny skies, and you grow accustomed to its ripples and dimples and oddities.

It becomes yours -- like the face you see in mirrors every day and which you don't hesitate to show to strangers.

I smile when I hear about the bold women in Toronto and Rochester, N.Y., who regularly march bare-breasted through the streets to demand equal nudity rights. I suspect we'd all be happier if we could be naked more often, and in more places.

But I'd never march. That turns nakedness political. And mine isn't.

It's the exhilaration of being, for a few minutes, just a creature: no props, no pretensions, nothing separating my skin from the rough wood of the dock, or the dew on the Adirondack chair, or the scratch of a wool blanket while, overhead, the geese fly south.