

July 12, 2009

The Air Up There

A 6-foot-3 perspective on the vexations and virtues of tallness.

BY JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

EVER since homo sapiens began walking upright, we've been hearing about the terrible dilemmas facing short men. Elevator shoes or growth hormones? Napoleon or Randy Newman?

But so far, much less has been said about the plight of tall women. They are less likely to marry and have children. They are reduced to wearing men's trousers and ugly shoes. They are con-

THE TALL BOOK

A Celebration of Life From on High.

By Arianne Cohen.

Illustrated. 243 pp. Bloomsbury. \$20.

stantly asked if they play basketball or work as dominatrixes. They have to fend off the advances of fetishists who arrive on dates bearing roses and step stools. (Seriously.)

And then there are those annoying non-tall women. In "The Tall Book," Arianne Cohen, 6-foot-3, describes her rage at seeing a petite contributor to the Book Review enter a New York bar with a skyscraping man. "My blood pressure spiked," she writes. "I pretended that it didn't bother me, but my inner monologue was shrieking . . . *Poacher!!!*"

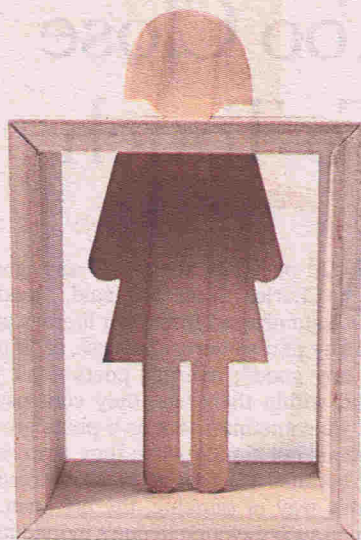
Hey, it wasn't me. I am almost 5-foot-11 (and terrible at basketball). But then, as Cohen's spunky report on the weather up there reveals, I'm not really that tall.

"Talls," as Cohen refers to her tribe, are the S.U.V.'s of humanity. They eat more food and are given more personal space (one or two extra feet, similar to what people give their bosses). They have higher I.Q.'s, longer lives and bigger salaries, earning about \$789 more per inch per year. They trounce shorter people in presidential elections and other popularity contests. The advantages are so overwhelming that two economists once wrote a tongue-in-cheek paper proposing a special "tall tax" to level the playing field. Naturally, Cohen finds this idea deeply unfair.

Cohen may be a libertarian on tall taxes, but when it comes to airplane seats she's a socialist all the way. She writes sympathetically about an antidiscrimination lawsuit filed by the Tall Club of Silicon Valley demanding that anyone who self-identifies as 6-foot-2 or taller — in other words, roughly half the male population of online dating sites — be allowed roomier seats on airplanes. And she endorses the "universal design" movement, which holds that buses, trains, furniture and buildings should be comfortable for people of all sizes. (You try checking out your super-tall self in a low-hung bathroom mirror, or hoisting yourself up off a 14-inch toilet.)

Curiously, the Netherlands — the coun-

Jennifer Schuessler is an editor at the Book Review.



try with the greatest average height and the strongest commitment to universal design — is also one of the places where future tall girls are most likely to pursue medical treatment to suppress growth. Cohen cites research showing that nearly half of women who get treatment later regret it, while those who decide, as she did, to grow as "tall and gorgeous" as nature intended are "nearly universally" happy. She does quote a German woman who is grateful to have been stopped seven inches short of a projected 6-foot-10, and she describes a mournful visit to Sandy Allen, America's tallest woman, at 7 feet 7.25 inches, who once worked for Guinness World Records and played an arm-wrestler in a Fellini movie, but at the end of her life was confined to her room because of complications stemming from an overactive pituitary gland. For Cohen, however, no tall is too tall, as long as you are otherwise healthy.

IN a chapter on tall sex, Cohen — who confesses her own reluctance to "date down" and once snagged a 7-foot-2 boyfriend at a pan-European tall convention — offers advice to women who have sprouted past the apparent ideal of being 8 percent shorter than their partner. (Eight percent is the average height disparity between men and women, and also, it turns out, the downward angle at which most models are photographed.) She suggests dating older men, or men from more "liberal" backgrounds, which apparently correlates with openness to taller partners.

Or you could just move to southern Sudan. Among the Dinka and Nuer people, women over six feet fetch 80 to 100 cows on the marriage market, while shorter women bring only 50 or 70. Why?

"They bring tall children," one man explains. Plus, in a nation short on step stools, they can "reach things." □