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Giant Problems

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SANDY Allen: superhero. That is how I perceived the world's tallest woman, 7 feet 7 1/4 inches, from my vantage point as the tallest little girl in Delmar, N.Y. Ms. Allen, who died last week at the age of 53, appeared invincible in her photograph in the Guinness Book of World Records. I imagined her wearing a red cape all the time, printed with the slogan, "The weather up here is fabulous." She must have been madly popular.

But when I drove to Shelbyville, Ind., last year to interview her, I found her alone in a claustrophobic convalescence-home room, made smaller by her 8-foot-long bed. She lived down the road from her childhood home, on \$54 a month in discretionary income.

She greeted me with a hug and a joke: "If you ever want the ceiling painted, put a hat on my head and tell me which way to walk." It was a hypothetical joke. Her legs were too weak to hold her 400 pounds, and she had recently summoned the fire department to lift her into her bed after she had slid off it. She was fighting organ failure caused by her gigantism. Excess growth hormone had wreaked havoc on her body. "I'm the oldest giant that ever lived," she told me with pride. "All the women who held this record before me died quite young."

Had Ms. Allen been born 20 years earlier, she would have been a circus performer, which, while not ideal, would have provided a steady income. It was a well-trod path: Anna Swan, a Canadian who was perhaps 7 feet 4 inches tall, was displayed in a museum by P.T. Barnum and thrived on the freak-show circuit with her husband, Martin Bates, who was 7 feet 2 inches, in the 1870s. The Alton Giant, Robert Pershing Wadlow, the tallest man in history at 8 feet 11 inches, toured the country in the late 1930s as a superstar, with 40,000 people attending his funeral.

But the circuit dried up in the 1960s, when audiences began seeing giants not as magical creatures but as sufferers of a medical ailment. Zoo-style objectification — of hair-covered men, of midgets — was



out of fashion. It was the era of civil rights: We're all the same on the inside, and we're going to treat people as equals.

Everyone except very tall people. Unlike the cultural rules for weight or ethnicity or looks or disability, the social mores for height still allow bystanders to stare and say whatever they're thinking. Which for a very tall person, let alone a giant like Sandy Allen, means: "Wow, you're really tall!" (possibly while whipping out a cellphone camera).

I am 6 feet 3 inches tall and attract a fair amount of goggling and commentary, much of it complimentary, some of it not. It does not begin to compare to what Ms. Allen experienced. Her friend Kim Blacklock describes walking through New York City with her two decades ago: "People weren't kind. Just the screaming. It was like — that kind of shock where they can't even stop their mouth to think that a human being is going to be the recipient of their reaction."

Ms. Allen spent long stretches of time not going outside. But she tried not to give into bouts of depression, which are shared by other giants, who live in isolation and poverty. Shortly after Guinness mailed her a certificate in the 1970s, she bought a van with the words "World's Tallest Woman" printed on it. She appeared in a Federico Fellini movie, playing a woman who arm-wrestled in bars.

"I try to be friendly with everyone I meet," she told me last year. "Some make it tougher than others. But I think that I'm this way so that I can encourage people not to give up if they've got problems in life." She visited classrooms, preaching the wonders of difference — and letting kids try on her shoes.

The decency was rarely returned to her. She trusted everyone, including tabloids, which printed fabricated stories of an affair between her and the world's shortest man. The Internet was particularly unkind. The first time I searched for her, I found a Web site where someone compared the size of her genitalia to a small Japanese truck. Her appearance on Howard Stern's radio show was a train wreck of vulgarity, and he backed her into admitting that she was a virgin.

She shouldn't have had to live so alone and die so alone. She was just 18 inches taller than everyone else. In a world of Michael Phelps and teeny gymnasts, she wasn't so different. She had a button nose, smooth pale skin, clear blue eyes. If she hadn't grown in all directions, "I probably would have gotten married, settled down and had umpteen million kids," she told me.

I learned of her death from a friend who is 7 feet 2 inches tall. He wanted to talk about the loss of the sunny Ambassador of Height. We discussed what might have made her life better. If every time strangers spotted her, they focused on how they identified with her, perhaps her Indiana drawl, her Pacers hat, her jewelry (Allen loved jewelry, the only mainstream women's apparel she could fit into), things would have been different.

No stares, no questions, no cellphone cameras. No hiding inside a nursing home, no abandonment. She would have loved that, I think. She would have been madly popular.

Arianne Cohen is the author of the forthcoming “The Tall Book: A Celebration of Life From on High.”