



Tall Order

A six-foot-three woman searches for a normal date at the Tall Clubs International convention.

BY ARIANNE COHEN

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I want to tell you about my shins. They're nearly two feet long, extending my legs to forty-five inches, and my total height to six-foot-three. Most tall people are tall because of their shins. My femurs, trunk, head and other parts are all normal sized. Perhaps my other shin-like bones, in my forearms and fingers are a bit lengthy as well — I have a nine-and-a-half-inch thumb-to-pinky span, and my six-foot-five wingspan is slightly freakish. But mostly, it's the shins.

Long shins alter your social universe. To begin with, to be extra-tall is to be somehow more *public* than the average woman. Everybody sees me. Strangers on the subway peer upward and tell me about their childhood neighbor who was tall. Fellow grocery shoppers sheepishly request my help procuring items from upper shelves. Male passers-by mutter, "That was one giant woman." Men seem particularly inclined to register one characteristic: tall. They put me in the "enormous" category and move on. I compensate by joking openly about my height

— a maneuver that I've noticed fat girls use. It's a social trick, pulling the ball back into your court by letting all your wonderful traits shine through from the get-go. The message is, "There are other things besides my shape that I want you to register, such as the fact that I am not a he-man, and you need to re-categorize me pronto."

But height does have its bonuses. I'm remembered by everyone I've ever met. I've never been mugged. I'm perceived as smarter. And short people seem to think that tall is synonymous for sexy. They'll point out that Olympic volleyball bombshell Gabrielle Reece is six-three, that Kimora Lee Simmons just a smidge over six feet, that Brigitte Nielsen, six-one, starred in a rarely viewed romantic comedy called *She's Too Tall*. What these people are really noting, however, is that pop culture finds long legs *on very thin bodies* sexy. All of these women weigh at least seventy-five pounds less than I do. But it's nice that short acquaintances of mine think that hypothetical others think I'm sexy.

Last year, it was my height that got me hired by a glossy magazine to photograph the Tall Clubs International convention, an annual gathering of men over six-two and women over five-ten. My assignment: Shoot the convention's crowning occasion, the glittering Miss Tall International pageant, where one woman would be chosen by pageant judges to represent the beauty and virtue of tall women everywhere.

As with any unusual trait, tall women attract fetishists. Because we're public, we're easy targets. Men follow me with their eyes. They begin with a head-to-toe-to-head scan, then settle into a sustained invasive gaze. Others follow me digitally, repeatedly emailing my ariannecohen.com account. Sometimes I'll find myself being tailed down the sidewalk until I duck into a fancy building and flash a smile at the doorman. Would he mind if I stayed for a moment? There's a creepy guy following me. "Sure, miss, no problem." We stand in silence. He glances over at me. "So, how tall are you?"

**Tall clubs serve
different purposes
for different**

Thus the allure of hanging out with tall people in a hotel at their weeklong social convention for uncharacteristically tall people. I could finally kick on my heels and be among my people.

My flight into Charleston arrived late, and I entered the lobby of the Riverview Hotel at a sprint, camera bouncing across my chest. The concierge glanced at me and silently aimed a pinky toward a dimmed conference room. Inside, a hundred men and women, five-foot-ten to seven-foot-two, sat around tables. The door banged closed behind me. Half of the audience turned at the disruption, straining their specially

ordered formalwear, before nodding and returning their eyes to the stage, a set of cheap two-foot platforms on a beige rug, in front of a puce wall divider on tracks.

On the stage, spotlights followed five gowned pageant contestants in the formalwear competition, teetering through a holding pattern of steps, turns and pauses. The crowd hooted in support, and I began clicking away at the women, ages thirty-one to sixty-eight, trying to ignore the haze of fluorescent hotel lights.

The contestants disappeared, and the lights rose to blinding brightness. Intermission. I dashed backstage, behind the fake wall into the same beige conference room, to find out who, exactly, I was photographing. They immediately invited me to join the pageant, while squeezing into custom costumes, slathering themselves in skin-care products and experimenting with duct tape. "For tonight," announced one six-foot-two rosy-cheeked brunette who would later become the pageant's runner-up, "our make-up standard is, 'Can you see it from a galloping horse?'"

They returned to the stage for the pageant's Q&A and talent competition. Photographing normal-weight tall people is tricky, because on film they generally appear fat rather than tall. Shin height doesn't show on film, particularly when hidden under a gown, so the subject looks normally proportioned, but wide. The enormous breasts of six-foot-plus women only add to the illusion. I sat near the stage and quickly moved to the floor, keeping the camera low to accentuate the contestants' heights rather than girth, ignoring the fact that my black-denim rear was on view for the crowd.

I nervously anticipated the crowning of the winner, a blond-banged six-foot-tall special-education teacher in four-inch heels who later told me she'd entered because she wanted to meet people. Her strategy paid off. "When you're wearing a sash and crown," she later confided to me, "people talk to you." I dug my left shoulder into the rug, contorted the lower half of my body toward the crowd and nailed the crowning shot.

After the pageant, I circulated through the crowd of cocktail drinkers, who seemed to be mingling with no purpose. Weeklong conventions have a lot of that. It soon became apparent that tall clubs serve different purposes for different members. The women tend to be exceedingly friendly, a common trait among those with unusual physical

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characteristics. They are there to meet tall men who appreciate them, and to gush amongst themselves about how nice it is to rest a cheek

against a male chest rather than a forehead. The men, on the other hand, are either incredibly tall and sick of bending down to normal-size women all the time, or they're tall fetishists who've squeaked in just over the six-foot-two minimum. Men, I've learned, will travel anywhere for a fetish. I once worked for a newspaper in Cambodia and met men who'd relocated from Manhattan instead of just hanging out in Chinatown.

"You must come on our trip through historical Charleston tomorrow," I was told repeatedly by women. "We recruit on the go! And after that is the pajama party." That was the closest anyone came to broaching the subject of height directly. Like a bar that caters mainly to alcoholics, talking about the thing that had brought us all together seemed strictly taboo.

More than a few male eyes were on me. For the first time in my adult life, I felt like a conventional object of sexual desire in public. In typical social settings, I'm a sexual non-entity to men. Even if they find me alluring or stare at my eye-level chest for a while, men do not picture themselves with a woman who dwarfs them. Tall, broad women are perceived as frighteningly strong, emasculating. For me, nights out are usually a matter of dodging the one creepy guy with the tall fetish while pining for the cute, nerdy six-foot-two guy with the five-five pixie girlfriend who giggles girlishly upward at him.

I was mulling these very thoughts when a six-foot-two, thirty-two-year-old trader sauntered up, having watched my ass for the entire evening while I photographed the pageant. Like many tall men, he was attractive just by function of being large and manly, a bullish, testosterone-filled 250 pounds. He could bench-press me. This was sexy. I went with it.

He started talking. Was I from New York? Him too! Did I like photographs? Him too! He "felt a connection." I was too disoriented from the airplane and the tall people to notice that I was being fed lines.

He wanted to go upstairs. I insisted that we stick around for the Crazy Hat party. He suggested we go upstairs. A short septuagenarian, the wife of a six-foot-five club member, showed me her album of Tall Club photos from over the years. He recommended that we go upstairs. Finally, I checked into my room, then met him at the hotel restaurant where I ate my first meal in twelve hours. Afterward, I agreed to go upstairs.

In the elevator, he put on a closed-lip smile and kissed me. I felt no sparks, but no repulsion either. We made out in my hotel room, arranged diagonally across the queen-size bed, and engaged in standard one-night-stand talk, the usual array of questions that have no good answers: *When was the last time you did this? What do you like?* Every

time I touched him in a way that could be construed as vaguely pleasurable, he shouted, "LOVE IT!"

I tried to delay removing my clothes. As a girl who regularly spends thirty minutes in the lotion aisle debating the merits of "nourishing" versus "softening," I felt rushed.

He got my shirt off, and as his fingers ran up and down my back, he whispered into my ear, "You're so, like, solid."

What did that mean? It sounded more like, "You're broad, like a man." I laughed it off. "Haha. Don't be fooled — I can't lift my own body weight."

"LOVE IT!" he said.

Then he announced that he wanted to "climb all over" me. To this, I had no response. He suggested I remove my panties, a pair of black cotton Victoria Secrets. I declined. He commented that they were

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nearly the same size as his boxer briefs. I sharply reminded him that some of us were working that evening, and had just spent two

hours crawling on a floor with a camera, something best done in sturdy undergarments.

He recommended for a second time that I remove my panties. Sex would be fun, but I needed a game plan. I had a talk with myself, something like, "Arianne, this is a bad idea. He probably does this every weekend and you're going to get an STD from a guy who shrieks LOVE IT!" I announced my decision.

He suggested that I remove my panties anyway. I squeezed my eyes closed and conjured an image of the worse case of genital herpes feasible. I declined and hopped out of bed. He asked me to stay in Charleston for the week, but I had photos to develop and a VD test to schedule. "I'll call you!" he said, as he walked out of my hotel room in only his boxers.

I caught a plane back to New York five hours later. During the flight, I chastised myself for turning down strings-free sex. What was I thinking?

A week later, Tall Guy instant-messaged me. He told me that it turned him on when women "tower over him." I assumed that at worst, he considered me a "type" to be checked off his list. We set up a date.

He requested that I wear heels, so I went with it, and purchased a pair of four-inch pumps at Tall Size Shoes. I was now six-foot-seven.

To avoid looking ridiculous, I decided that the local burlesque show, run by a couple of Sarah Lawrence grads, would make a fine venue for our date. The theme that evening turned out to be "white trash," which somehow fit perfectly.

When we returned to my apartment, I stood in the four-inch heels and let him rise up on tippy-toes to kiss me. He spotted a step stool in the corner — a completely pointless gift from my mother — and asked me to stand on it in my heels. I was now six-eleven. I looked down at the scalp peeking through his gelled black hair.

A previous boyfriend once told me that fetishes are representative of psychological hang-ups. I wondered what this stool thing represented. I had, over the years, asked around about tall fetishes. The best answer came from a photographer who told me that most tall fetishists want to be taken

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over. They want to be enveloped by all 215 pounds of femaleness, overwhelmed by the excess of womanhood. In theory, I support that. But I have no idea how to envelope, nor do I want to.

Apparently I wasn't active enough while perched on a stool, contemplating the few inches between my head and the ceiling. I didn't know what to do with the man whose eyes were level with my ribs. He sensed my disinterest, slowed down, then stopped. He sat down on my couch. I stepped off the stool, slid off the heels, and sat down next to him. Apparently this took away my charm. We made out a bit, but somehow, everything deflated. I got up and moved the step stool out of sight. He left at four a.m., saying "I'll call you!"

I'll never know what he meant by "solid," because four-and-a-half hours later, at 8:30 a.m., he announced via instant messenger that we were over. "I am not ready for anything . . . I got out of a very serious relationship a few months ago . . ."

I held off on ranting. Is it okay to rant at someone for their fetish? I don't know. The problem with tall fetishes is that they're not about me. They're about the guy, who is inevitably projecting imagined sexuality onto me. I want to write an informational pamphlet, entitled *About Dating Arienne*, which specifies that I enjoy normal, step-stool-free sex, of the sort I've had with the few men who seem immune to my height. Usually, they've dated a handful of women who all looked sort of like me, in varying sizes. Under these circumstances, my sexuality is awesome. When on a step stool, it's less so.

The next day, I returned the heels. n°