

*a view  
from the top*

From schoolyard taunts to dating a man of the tallest order, Arianne Cohen chronicles life from on high.

**SKY'S THE LIMIT**  
THE SIX-FOOT-THREE COHEN, IN A CRIMSON CAROLINA HERRERA DRESS, PHOTOGRAPHED IN MANHATTAN.

**i** was once, I believe, one half of America's tallest couple. We met in Germany, where Alan, seven feet two, expressed his romantic interest by following me around, an experience not unlike having a helium balloon attached to my belt loop. Whenever I glanced up, there he was, offering to walk my six-foot-three self two perfectly safe blocks, or suggesting a fourth meal. On our first date, the waitress seated us, and the entire restaurant stared.

We had nothing in common. He was a 37-year-old titled British orphan; I was a decade younger, a writer living in New York. We spent our evenings wandering around

Manhattan pointing out to each other the windows and mirrors that never get washed above six feet and the tops of appliances and shelves that have never seen a good dusting. The tall world can be a dirty place. We took turns providing comebacks to the numbingly boring queries strangers asked us on the street ("How tall *are* you?" "Is your family tall?"). We hunted for a tailor and delighted in our find, a four-foot-ten, 80-year-old Polish man who worked wonders on our hemlines, creating fabric where there had been none.

If I felt that my life up until that point had been defined by my height, I had nothing on Alan. His height changed the behavior of people around him. He was an instant celebrity, causing a frenzy just by entering a store, *up front* >98



# up front

## THE HIGH LIFE

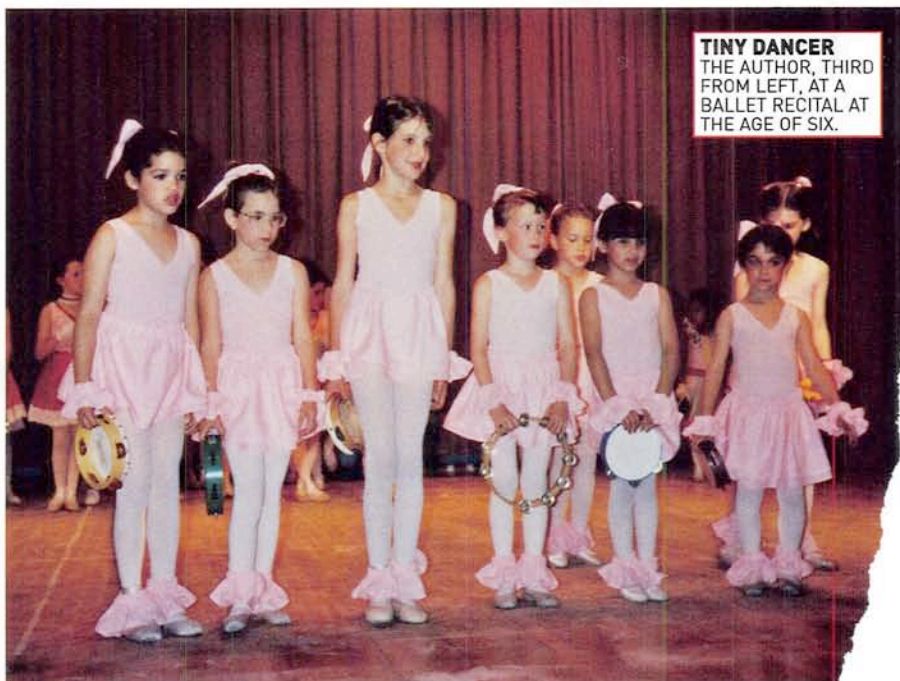
emerging from a cab, or doing pretty much any human activity. When we strolled together through midtown, seemingly polite men and women would whip out their cell phones and snap photos without asking. Passersby would spot him, immediately cross the street, and feel no compunction about entering his personal space, grabbing his hands or coat. Up to this point I had gone relatively unnoticed in my Upper East Side neighborhood; within days of his arrival, everyone on my block knew who he was and where we lived. When we walked my dog, people looked at him or at the dog. In my diary I wrote things like **IGNORED AGAIN! FASCINATING.**

**T**his was, for me, a great relief. After a lifetime of being stared at for my size but never really having an in-depth conversation about it, I couldn't wait to pillow-talk all night about what it had been like to be the tallest little boy in Bristol, England, and the tallest little girl in Albany, New York.

Tall childhoods are fairly dependable—there are the nicknames (Giraffe, Daddy Long Legs, Amazon Arianne), the fact that you're always seated in the back row so as not to block anyone's view. But Alan knew to ask about the more lingering issue, how my height was handled at home. I told him of my mother's almost religious avoidance of the word *tall* and the many car rides home with me near tears after some social event at which I'd been teased. This is the trouble with tall taunts—your tormentor is always 100 percent accurate. My mother would drive in silence, biting her lip in unspoken support, patting my knee occasionally. She never asked what had happened. There was a sense in those car rides that this was the fate of being a Cohen girl. Height was never mentioned, yet understood to be at the heart of it all. And finally, I had someone to talk about it with.

My nearly six-foot mother had exactly two phrases to address my height: I was “a tall glass of water” and “It's what's on the inside that matters.” Although I knew that she adored me and thought I was pretty—she had a whole made-up song called “Who's the Prettiest Girl in the World? Ari-anne”—it wasn't always clear how she felt about my size.

This might be related to the fact that she herself had been a poster child for a tall upbringing gone wrong. A pale, skinny, high-waisted girl with a reddish pouf of curls, she resembled nothing so much as an upside-down exclamation point—not an advantage in sixties Brooklyn, where Jackie Kennedy, at five feet seven, was considered “statuesque.” My grandmother was forever suggesting strategies for how to look less



**TINY DANCER**  
THE AUTHOR, THIRD FROM LEFT, AT A BALLET RECITAL AT THE AGE OF SIX.

tall: Don't stand up so straight; don't be friends with anyone short. All of my mother's childhood photos show her pouting. Arline pouting at school. Arline pouting at the beach. It takes the suspense out of the family album.

My mother is an entertaining woman; when she's telling a story, she induces the sort of laughter that makes friends unable to breathe. To this day, though, she gets anxious in places

where people look at her—which is to say, everywhere. She doesn't like crowds or parties, wears beige and navy, and sits down as soon as possible wherever she is. Her social interactions are a subtle dance of adjustments to reduce herself. She has never worn heels.

My mother didn't speak to me about my size. Most of my impressions of height came from literature, a big brown book of fairy tales that I read almost every night. The plotline was always the same: A cute little person slays a tall person in possession of some sort of treasure. The heroines were always tiny:

Little Red Riding Hood, Thumbelina, the Little Mermaid. The tall characters not only were unsightly but also seemed to be idiots. In Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, the Big Friendly Giant was a few settings short of a picnic; Paul Bunyan was lucky he was ambulatory. Needless to say, I never identified with them.

I wasn't particularly aware that I was different until school gave my tallness shape, putting me in a place at once highly noticeable and at a slight remove. Up until then, I knew of height only in that I bruised my knees on my friend Jeni's bike handlebars, and that by the time I was eight, I shopped for clothes in the adult petites section, the only place where the sleeves were long enough.

At home, I received mixed messages. On the one hand, my mother filled my days with activities like swimming and tennis, in which my size was an asset, quietly constructing a life for me wherein being tall might be an unassailable trait, linked to being the best. At the same time, she took me on *up front* >100

My mother had exactly two phrases to address my height: I was “a tall glass of water” and “It's what's on the inside that matters”



annual visits to the endocrinologist, where, sedated by a Walkman, I would let a grandmotherly doctor measure my limbs, test my reflexes, and declare me perfectly healthy. I enjoyed these exams, a fifteen-minute wave of focused attention, but then I thought everyone had a family endocrinologist. After the exam my mother would send me to the waiting room so she could talk with the doctor. There, while they discussed my fate, I sat below walls muraled with—what else?—giraffes.

**i**t wasn't until I was ten, when my growth chart clearly indicated that I would hit six feet three, that I understood the reason for these visits. The doctor presented me with the option of taking estrogen to stunt my growth and told me that I had six months to make up my mind, as the treatment needed to start before puberty. My mother wanted this to be my choice and stuck to her characteristic silence. But I knew she had once faced the same decision—and what her choice had been.

In 1956, my grandmother read a small newspaper item about a newfangled estrogen treatment that caused early puberty, closing a girl's growth plates. She clipped the article and stashed it away, and when my mother reached five feet seven at age ten, she retrieved it. For the next year and a half, my mother took an orange pill, morning and night. She had a few migraines, presumably from the hormones, and went into express puberty. Two years later she was five feet eleven and three-quarters, thrilled to have dodged the six-foot bullet.

I told my doctor that I wanted to think about it. I went home and asked my best friend, Diana, what she thought. She didn't know what I was talking about. (Despite a 60-year history and tens of thousands of treated patients across three continents, estrogen therapy for height is not a well-publicized practice.) She shrugged. "You're already five feet five. Aren't you going to be tall anyway?"

One night I stood in the mirror naked and stared at myself, holding a ruler above my head, trying to gauge what I would look like at, say, five feet eleven versus six feet three. I couldn't really envision either. I didn't know what to do, so for two years I didn't do anything. It was a passive decision. Hard as it is to imagine now, I told myself that if I wasn't happy being supertall when I was 20, I could have the leg-sawing surgery in which they cut your shins to make you shorter. I understand why my mother wanted me to have the option—she still considers it among the best decisions she's ever made—but I can't help feeling that any decision that includes leg-sawing as an alternative is a decision no one, let alone a young girl, should have to make.

To be tall is above all to be public. It took me a long time to accept this. I'm not by nature someone who craves the spotlight; I'm the sort of person who is charmed by window seats. I'm a writer and observer, and my attentions naturally shift to the fringe, where I've made a career of reporting. But being tall

comes with the expectation that you will not only be seen but enjoy it. There is no place to hide. You're constantly on display, whether you like it or not. I am convinced that my personality would be much smaller if I were five feet three.

For most of my 20s I treated my body as one treats a food allergy, as something to live with but not necessarily take pride in. It didn't help that it was impossible to find a cocktail dress, a boyfriend, or a comfortable car. Don't get me wrong—there are many advantages to being tall. Everyone remembers me after even the briefest of introductions. I can sometimes change the dynamic of a room just by standing up. But these are adult pleasures, embraced in one's later years.

In the meantime, I embraced Alan. I think he liked himself in comparison to me. I did, too—it had been a long time (OK, never) since I had looked up to kiss a man. And as a couple, we successfully avoided that frequent hazard of tallness, where a size mismatch can make you look ungainly and slightly absurd. Together we were all grace and long angles. It was the third person, standing there on the sidewalk, touching Alan, who looked absurd. We laughed about this.

It's mildly embarrassing to admit that learning to accept

my height required dating one of the tallest men on Earth. But it's true. Perhaps, after the years of silence, I needed to hear someone else's parallel tale, about the time his father quietly put a twelve-year-old Alan in the hospital for six days of monitoring, just to make sure he was healthy (he was). Or perhaps I just needed to see the situation writ big. What I saw most of all was that people loved Alan, seeing something wonderful, and yes, larger than life, in his size.

And then one day we ran out of things to talk about. It was rather sudden. One minute we were babbling away about how

tall people regularly receive inflated incomes, and the coach who had caught sight of Alan in a Brooklyn bar and invited him to an NBA practice. The next we were staring at each other blankly. We dragged on for another six weeks, resting on our old jokes, but we'd exhausted our very small area of common identity. Though our height had indeed shaped our respective lives, it was just that, a shape—not the anchor, not the content. We were over. We politely parted ways.

My mother kept asking, "Are you sure?" She adored Alan, mostly, I suspect, because next to him she was positively petite. She must have imagined the wedding photographs, how demure she might look in the family lineups. I assured her that I could not marry someone for his height alone. She seemed to understand.

My mother taught me that I can be anything I want to be in the world, but she was wrong. There is, in fact, one thing I can't be: unseen. And this is the reality that all tall women face, whether in a doctor's office at age ten or in a boutique dressing room as a grown woman.

My mother is happier now that she's shrunk in recent years. I tower over her by at least five inches. We don't discuss it: I know how she feels, she knows how I feel, and that's that. She occasionally eyes my shoe collection, bemused. "Are those yours?" Yes, the size 14 heels are mine. □

I treated my body as one treats a food allergy, as something to live with. It didn't help that it was impossible to find a cocktail dress



# contributors



ON LOCATION FOR THE L'WREN SCOTT SHOOT IN PARIS

## PHYLLIS POSNICK

EXECUTIVE FASHION EDITOR

“All of the women featured have very interesting and distinctive styles and personalities. It was fun and challenging to choose clothes for them”

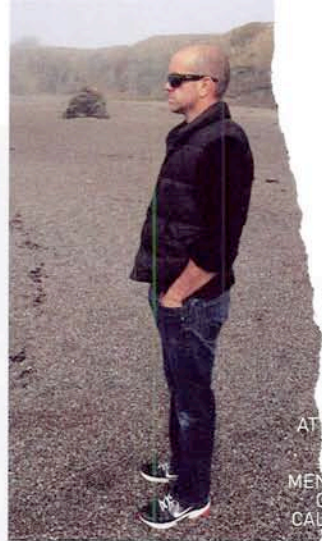
STYLES THE ISSUE'S SHAPE PORTFOLIO (PAGES 190-213)

## JONATHAN VAN METER

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

“Beyoncé has the most infectious laugh—we did a lot of giggling. I watched her rehearse several of her hits, which felt like a private two-hour concert. She sang as if her life depended on it. It was awesome”

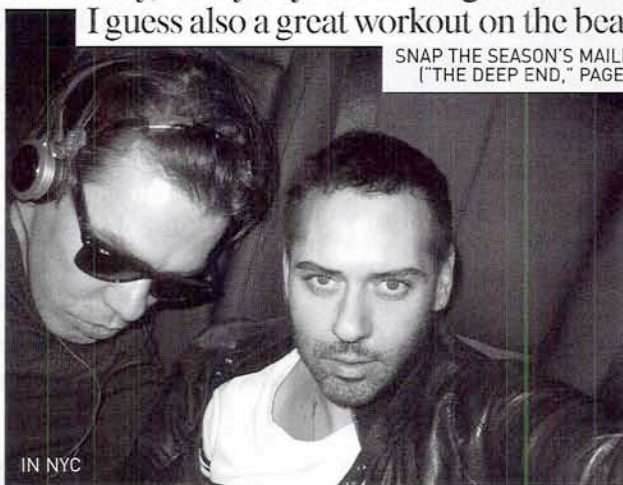
PROFILES COVER GIRL BEYONCÉ KNOWLES (“FIERCE CREATURE,” PAGE 214)



AT MEN CAL

## PHOTOGRAPHERS MERT ALAS AND MARCUS PIGGOTT

“It was a lovely, sunny day! We had a great team and I guess also a great workout on the beach!”



SNAP THE SEASON'S MAILLOTS (“THE DEEP END,” PAGE 172)

IN NYC

## ARIANNE COHEN



COHEN, IN HER NEW YORK APARTMENT, WEARING A TADASHI SHOJI DRESS

**T**he 28-year-old writer and former nationally ranked swimmer shares tales of growing up tall and embracing her height—the subject of her upcoming *The Tall Book: A Celebration of Life from On High* (Bloomsbury, June)—for this month’s Up Front, “A View from the Top,” page 96. Cohen earned her reporting stripes with an editorial column in the *Harvard Crimson* that won the 2003 Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence Award and during a year spent abroad in Cambodia, where she worked as a reporter for the *Cambodia Daily News* under Harvard’s Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Fellowship. What was the inspiration behind writing about her height? “Being six feet three has really dictated

so much of my path—my boyfriends, what sports I spent ten years playing, where I chose to go to university and live, how I get treated and noticed, and how I dress. And yet no one had written this book! Was it my imagination that height dictates so much of our daily interactions? It wasn’t. It was my personal quest to figure out what the heck was going on in my life—I just got lucky in that 15 percent of the population shares the same life.”

**HEELS OR FLATS?:** “I live in either my black knee-high boots with three-inch heels or my handmade pair of cowboy boots that go with everything.”

**WORKOUT REGIMEN:** “I go running every 48 hours. It keeps me happy and thin.”

**SPRING FASHION WISH LIST:** “A maxi dress—they tend to look like minis on me.” □

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Posnick: SARA MOON/VEE