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United We Stand (Under 4’11”)

Until recently, I had never found discussions of my height to be particularly fruitful. But recent events have changed my mind. This past summer, I had several conversations about my height, some of which were very fruitful indeed.

Just before I turned eleven, my pediatrician insisted that I get a bone age reading, which would give me an estimated prediction of my full-grown height. Upon hearing the results, Dr. Finkelman presented me with a choice: growth hormones or high-heels. I chose the latter, assuming that when a situation that called for high-heels presented itself, I would rise to the occasion—literally.

Much to my chagrin, that conversation with Dr. Finkelman presaged what I imagine will be a lifetime of height-related comments. When my friends and I turned thirteen and we were finally allowed to ride the subway in pairs, the mother of my good friend prohibited her from riding alone with me, claiming that I was "too vulnerable to crime" and "would get lost in such a vast system." When I was fifteen and began relying on caffeine to get me through my studying, a barista questioned the order I had placed, warning me that coffee "contains some pretty strong stuff for such a little girl." As others openly seemed to see my height as a sign of ineligibility and incompetence, their perceptions of me began to affect those that I had of myself. My confidence eroded somewhat, and I even grew reticent about my opinions in the subject that interests me most: politics. I sometimes found myself thinking that perhaps the perspective of the girl whose feet do not touch the floor when she sits at a desk lacked credibility.

Last March, I was overjoyed to learn that I had been appointed as a United States Senate Page. Soon thereafter, the advice of Dr. Finkelman came to mind, diverting my attention to the all-important subject of shoes. I was determined to couple the polyester business suit supplied by the Page program with a specific pair of four-inch heels, which I thought I finally had a reason to buy. Even my mother failed to convince me that four-inch heels are not sensible for a job that involves miles of walking. Because when you're 4'10", the desire for elevation trumps any sense of practicality.

As I received more information on the Page program, my hopes of gracing the Capitol a full four inches taller persisted. In fact, I was determined to find a loophole to circumvent the requirement that "all Pages must wear comfortable walking shoes." But after extensive research, my efforts proved fruitless, and my hopes of standing four inches taller were crushed by a pair of wingtip shoes that bore an unfortunate resemblance to those my father wears to work.

Upon arriving in Washington, navigating both the Capitol and a new metropolitan area seemed nearly impossible to me. I felt overwhelmed by the complexity of an amendment run, by the different protocols for conversing with Senators and staffers. And, sporting heel-less clodhoppers, I felt especially insignificant in a chamber that loomed so large.

In what turned out to be a pivotal moment, I found myself in the basement of the Capitol, an unlikely place for any sort of epiphany. Amidst the lunchtime traffic, the senior Senator from Maryland suddenly approached me and put her hands on my shoulders. I noticed that she too was evidently a member of the under 4'11" club. "You and I," Senator Mikulski said, "have to stand up together against these short jokes." Unable to recall any sort of protocol that would guide me towards a suitable response to her unexpected (but very welcome) comment, I assured her that we would "stand united."

My first encounter with the Senator was followed by many similar exchanges, in which she might ask me, for example, to find her "the smallest lectern in the world!" As I watched Senator Mikulski at work, I was inspired by her fierceness, by the fervor with which she spoke. But more importantly, I felt empowered by her ability to do all that she does behind the world's smallest lectern. As I became proficient at my amendment runs and learned to navigate the Capitol, I couldn't help but imagine speaking behind the world's smallest lectern myself one day. I had come to Washington to witness politics firsthand, to gain a more diverse perspective. I was delighted to have found a role model in the process.

On my first day of senior year, I ran into the school nurse, a fellow member of the diminutive club. In a fashion reminiscent of that of my favorite Senator, she put her hands on my shoulders. "I'm glad to see you haven't grown, Eliza," Joanne said. "A lot of people take comfort in that," I responded. "But together, you and I will stand up against these short jokes."