

Vague Obscenities

by David Erlewine

5'5"

Paul stood 6'5". He assured himself that Kate's height was fine, taller than the average 5'3" woman. After all, he didn't want a volleyball-spiking giant. Sure there were moments where he found himself studying her legs, thinking how wonderful they would be an inch, perhaps two, longer.

5'4"

Three months after meeting, while standing up from dinner, Paul remarked that Kate seemed shorter. She pointed at his gut. "Fair enough," he said. She laughed, and he pretended to choke her, making her laugh again, a noise seemingly louder than anyone that height had a right to produce.

5'3"

When A Man Loves A Woman played, their first dance as husband and wife. Kate rested her head against Paul's chest. He tried pretending they were alone. He did wonder why she hadn't worn longer heels. A lyric kept buzzing around his head, something about envying all the dancers who had all the nerve. At the far table, his friend Paula, who he'd once kissed, was smiling and watching. He stopped making eye contact, convinced Paula was grinning at how silly they looked.

5'2"

During a check-up two weeks after giving birth to Ella Louise Kaufman, the nurse wrote down that Kate was 5'2". Paul, careful not to sound too anxious, asked the nurse to measure Kate again. Kate laughed. The nurse gave Paul a look but honored his request, adding "AND 1/12" next to Kate's height.

Kate laughed and reached out for Paul's shoulder. "Happy, honey?"

5'1"

Paul went to see a doctor. While the lanky man said of course he couldn't diagnose Kate's condition without seeing her, he

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acknowledged that if she was 29 they could likely rule out osteoporosis. Paul shook his head when the doctor asked if Kate slouched or had perhaps fallen off a roof and fractured the bones of her spine.

Before heading home, Paul went to a vitamin store and asked questions. The salesman handed him a can of protein powder that tasted "better than chocolate milk." That night, Paul transported the powder from his trunk to the kitchen. No matter how much milk, ice cream, or sugar he added, it tasted like chocolate chalk. Out back, he buried it at the bottom of the trash can.

5'0"

The nurse guiding Kate to push occasionally glanced at Kate's legs. Paul pretended not to notice her staring at his poor wife's legs. He tried not to feel sorry for himself, bringing another baby into a world where a woman's legs could go from lovely to stubby.

Nearly 15 hours after Paul signed them into the obstetrics unit, Carl Alvin Kaufman joined the world.

Holding young Carl, Kate laughed. Paul noted, happily, that at least her laugh hadn't diminished.

4'11"

While she slept, Paul measured Kate, who slept flat as a cork board. She came in a hair over 4'11". Paul checked on both snoring kids and then performed a number of Google searches about shrinking young females. He parsed through articles about minimal jail sentences, mothers struggling to juggle work/life issues, and anorexia.

He stumbled across a list of famous 4'11" women, including actress Nell Carter, author Laura Ingalls Wilder, Senator Barbara Boxer, and internet celebrity Tila Tequila.

After studying a number of Tila Tequila pictures, Paul slept better than he had in weeks.

4'10"

Kate straddled Paul, reaching down to rub his chest. Her fingers just reached his nipples. Kate squeezed them and laughed, asking if he wanted to be ridden like a bull. He nodded, tried to sound

enthusiastic saying “yes.” After somehow fitting inside her, he imagined Tila, wondered if she was so small everywhere, too. A few minutes later, Kate stretched out on top of him, her toes tickling his knees. He recalled seeing at least two porn stars listed, each clocking in at 4’10”. He pictured them with much bigger men. That helped him relax.

Later, after Kate began to snore, even louder than he remembered, Paul tip-toed out of the room. He wasn't as impressed with the list of 4’10” women. The porn actresses listed were named “Dyanmite” and “Tami Monroe.” He researched the name “Dyanmite,” thinking it was a misspelling. He clicked on the link but got an error message. The “Tami Monroe” link didn't work either. Afraid to infect his computer with a virus, he gave up looking for their pictures.

Joining them on the 4’10” list was Janis Ian. Paul played *At Seventeen*. He'd heard the song before but never focused on the lyrics. What sort of imaginary ex-lovers murmured vague obscenities over the phone? He thought about that a lot, listening to the song again.

4’9”

During a family walk, Paul stopped pushing the stroller to pick Carl's bottle of milk off of the sidewalk. After wiping the nipple against his shirt, Paul looked ahead. The tip of Ella's head - before the girl even turned five - already nudged past Kate's shoulder. A car driving by them seemed to slow down, and the driver stared, likely trying to determine whether they were mom and daughter or sisters. Kate waved at the woman and yelled something back to Paul, maybe telling him which neighbor it was. As the car passed him, Paul held up his left hand.

To avoid staring at Kate and Ella, Paul studied the roofs they passed, looking for algae stains. When that no longer helped, he focused on Carl's wails.

That night, Paul was disheartened to learn that Kate was now the same size as Linda Hunt, the annoying elementary school principal

in *Kindergarten Cop*, the woman who had looked shorter than most of the fake students.

4'8"

Paul asked Kate to accompany him to the doctor. She said she felt fine, that whatever was going on with her height wasn't dangerous.

The next morning, before work, in an unplanned and dramatic gesture, he fell to his knees and begged her to go. He fought off the urge to rise, surprised that being on his knees made them the same height. Kate kissed his cheek and said she'd go if it would make him happy.

After conducting a battery of tests and blood work, the doctor said to come back in a week to see what was what.

That night, Kate's snoring was louder than it had ever been. In the guest room, he wondered if it was actually louder. Maybe he was using that as an excuse. Perhaps he couldn't sleep next to her because doing so made him measure her.

4'7"

The doctor could not determine what was causing Kate to shrink. He commented on Kate's good posture, nodding at Paul. Other than being a tad anemic, the tests indicated Kate was perfectly healthy.

That night, Paul confirmed he was now married to a woman no taller than Dr. Ruth.

Paul came down for breakfast to find Ella and Kate hugging. They were the same height. Paul went back to bed.

4'3"

Watching Kate on her tippy toes, getting water from the kitchen sink, Paul knew she had shrunk at least three inches.

Later, he confirmed she was the same height as Zelda Rubenstein, the creepy woman from *Poltergeist*.

He listened to an Edith Piaf CD, *The Voice of the Sparrow*, and thought of weeping. He was shocked at the power that Edith, at 4'8", conveyed in her songs.

He flipped through his wedding album and then checked in on the kids. Both snored. Other students would say nasty things to them about their mom. He'd need to prepare them. He pulled out his

notebook, jotting down a note to speak to the children soon about what would be in store for them. He added a P.S. to first think up some retorts for Carl and Ella to say. A few minutes later, he added a P.P.S. to remind the children not to have their retorts sound overly rehearsed.

1'10"

Over the course of 21 days, Kate lost 28 inches. On the 22nd day, on a cell phone camera, a neighbor's son captured Kate in the backyard, carrying what looked like an Epcot-sized bag of trash. Within a week, the paparazzi were waiting outside. Guinness Book of Records officials arrived. Measurements were taken, identification reviewed.

Kate was anointed the world's shortest woman, 2.24 centimeters tinier than Pauline Musters, who died in 1895.

4"

Paul and Kate waited backstage. Paul held Kate in his right hand, asked if they could please go home. Her loud laugh, as it tended to do, startled him. With his left hand, he dug in his briefcase for his notebook. He needed to make a note to ask the doctor why her laugh hadn't gotten smaller. Perhaps that held the key to a cure. Before he could write anything down, a woman, probably 5'4", told them it was time.

Paul carried Kate on stage, gently dropping her into his left hand so he could shake Jay Leno's hand with his right. Paul scanned the crowd. Hopefully Kate's Mom would put the kids to bed early, not allow them to watch the show with her.

As they wrapped things up, Jay asked if he could hold Kate. Paul paused, eventually relenting to the clapping crowd.

Jay stood up and held Kate next to his chin, earning a standing ovation. The next day on YouTube, 3,558,019 users watched the clip of Kate dangling next to Jay's chin. Only three of the 2487 commenters that day speculated what Paul, nearly out of camera range, was writing in his large blue notebook.

