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The Metropolitans (excerpt)

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The Metropolitans

(excerpt)

– Ron Edison

Amy Kovacs stood in the vestibule of the swaying commuter train feeling claustrophobic amid the tall people. She carried herself with nose high, striving to impose every last millimeter of her being on the world around her. Amy's last millimeter nudged the tape at just under five feet, although she would always say she was five-two. In college, she'd given up measuring herself completely, relying on faith and will power to produce the missing inches.

As she saw it, the legs were her problem. She yearned for the willowy legs of a supermodel, but her Hungarian ancestors had cursed her with the bandy-legged genes of Attila's horsemen. It's not that her legs weren't shapely; they were. She just wished they continued for another inch or two before hitting the ground. Heels worked, but made her self-conscious, like a little girl playing dress-up. The precarious teetering was unnerving and undermined the confident facade she projected. Platforms were far more stable and trendy once again. Even tall women

wore them. The thought of thrusting herself another two inches into the atmosphere was immensely appealing, but platforms would be like stuffing her bra and she hadn't done that since junior high.

A kinder god would have given her large breasts to compensate, piercing blue eyes or maybe plump, pouty lips. She had none of these. That same dash of Hun from her father's side gave her dark hair and an olive complexion. "Gypsy blood," her mother called it. Many mistook her for Italian. Amy's flashing eyes were dark brown, too dark to be remotely construed as hazel, although that's what her driver's license insisted. Thanks to her Scandinavian mother, she sported a straight nose, a pair of narrow, curvy lips and reddish highlights when the sun hit her hair just right.

The hair was her glory. Reaching almost to her waist, luxurious and full, it gave her an ever-changing mask to camouflage the real Amy. Whether she piled it high to get those yearned-for inches, wore it blown out and sexy,

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playfully ponytailed, or battened down for corporate storms, no matter which way she arranged it, she received dumbstruck stares from men and envious glances from women.

But the leg thing wouldn't leave her alone, and however long she grew her hair and however high she piled it, underneath the mass of rich, swirly curls she was still four foot eleven and change. Walking to Loop lunch spots, her short legs did double-time keeping up with her peers. She lagged a step or two behind and her gait resembled that of a toddler struggling to keep up. Amy hated being last.

Her shallow stature also created an impression of youth—a mixed blessing. Even at thirty-one, she could count on being carded in bars. Heightlessness aside, most men found her very attractive. Being so short made her somehow approachable and she'd fended off more than her share of the impossibly tall, the impossibly round, and the impossibly impossible. What annoyed her most were the men who equated her size

with easy conquest, the ones who coaxed and cajoled as though she were a recalcitrant child. Amy delighted in setting them straight. If height were an indicator of intelligence, the NBA would be staffed with brain surgeons and rocket scientists.

For the most part, Amy went her own way and set her own pace. Most of the time, that meant alone, more alone than usual since dumping Greg. Or did he dump her? Things still weren't clear except that she had moved out of their Wicker Park loft two months ago.

She still bristled at the memory. That son of a bitch. Three years of her life - she'd even given up her cats for him and his sniveling allergies.

As the train braked unevenly to a halt, she grinned at her reflection in the glass. Laptop, tote bag, briefcase, purse - she looked like a commando strapped and accoutered for a mission behind enemy lines. Nice hair, too. The doors opened with a pneumatic blast and she stepped out into her Monday.