My Inner Shrimp
GARRY TRUDEAU


THINKING AHEAD  Describe a time when you were dissatisfied with the way you looked, when your "inner" and "outer" body image were at odds. How did this affect you?

For the rest of my days, I shall be a recovering short person. Even from my lofty perch of something over six feet (as if I don't know within a micron), I have the soul of a shrimp. I feel the pain of the diminutive, irrespective of whether they feel it themselves, because my visit to the planet of the teenage midgets was harrowing, humiliating, and extended. I even perceive my last-minute escape to have been flukish,1 somehow unearned—as if the Commissioner of Growth Spurts had had an old classmate of my father.

My most recent reminder of all this came the afternoon I went hunting for a new office. I had noticed a building under construction in my neighborhood—a brick warren2 of duplexes, with wide, westerly-facing windows, promising ideal light for a working studio. When I was ushered into the model unit, my pulse quickened: The soaring, twenty-two-foot living room walls were gloriously aglow with the remains of the day. I bonded immediately.

Almost as an afterthought, I ascended the staircase to inspect the loft, ducking as I entered the bedroom. To my great surprise, I stayed ducked: The room was a little more than six feet in height. While my head technically cleared the ceiling, the effect was excruciatingly oppressive. This certainly wasn't a space I wanted to spend any time in, much less take out a mortgage on.

Puzzled, I wandered down to the sales office and asked if there were any other units to look at. No, replied a resolutely unpleasant receptionist, it was the last one. Besides, they were all exactly alike.

"Are you aware of how low the bedroom ceilings are?" I asked.

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1 flukish: Accidental; by chance.
2 warren: A maze-like place where one could easily become lost.
She shot me an evil look. "Of course we are," she snapped. "There were some problems with the building codes. The architect knows all about the ceilings."

"He’s not an idiot, you know," she added, perfectly anticipating my next question.

She abruptly turned away, but it was too late. She’d just confirmed that a major New York developer, working with a fully licensed architect, had knowingly created an entire twelve-story apartment building virtually uninhabitable by anyone of even average height. It was an exclusive highrise for shorties.

Once I knew that, of course, I couldn’t stay away. For days thereafter, as I walked to work, some perverse, unreasoning force would draw me back to the building. But it wasn’t just the absurdity, the stone silliness of its design that had me in its grip; it was something far more compelling. Like some haunted veteran come again to an ancient battlefield, I was revisiting my perilous past.

When I was fourteen, I was the third-smallest in a high school class of one hundred boys, routinely mistaken for a sixth grader. My first week of school, I was drafted into a contingent of students ignominiously dubbed the "Midgets," so grouped by taller boys presumably so they could taunt us with more perfect efficiency. Inexplicably, some of my fellow Midgets refused to be diminished by the experience, but I retreated into self-pity. I sent away for a book on how to grow tall, and committed to memory its tips on overcoming one’s genetic destiny—or at least making the most of a regrettable situation. The book cited historical figures who had gone the latter route—Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon (the mind involuntarily added Hitler). Strategies for stretching the limbs were suggested—hanging from door frames, sleeping on your back, doing assorted floor exercises—all of which I incorporated into my daily routine (get up, brush teeth, hang from door frame). I also learned the importance of meeting girls early in the day, when the book assured me, my rested spine rendered me perceptibly taller.

For six years, my condition persisted; I grew, but at nowhere near the rate of my peers. I perceived other problems as ancillary, and loaded up the stature issue with freight shipped in daily from every corner of my life. Lack of athletic success, all absence of a social life, the inevitable run-ins with bullies—all could be attributed to the missing inches. The night I found myself sobbing in my father’s arms was the low point; we both knew it was one problem he couldn’t fix.

Of course what we couldn’t have known was that he and my mother already had. They had given me a delayed developmental timetable. In my seventeenth year, I miraculously shot up six inches, just in time for graduation and a fresh start. I was, in the space of a few months, reborn—and I made the most of it. Which is to say that thereafter, all of life’s disappointments, reversals, and calamities still arrived on schedule—but blissfully free of subtext.
Once you stop being the butt, of course, any problem recedes, if only to give way to a new one. And yet the impact of being literally looked down on, of being made to feel small, is forever. It teaches you how to stretch, how to survive the scorn of others for things that are beyond your control. Not growing forces you to grow up fast.

Sometimes I think I'd like to return to a high-school reunion to surprise my classmates. Not that they didn't know me when I finally started catching up. They did, but I doubt they'd remember. Adolescent hierarchies have a way of enduring; I'm sure I am still recalled as the Midget I myself have never really left behind.

Of course, if I'm going to show up, it'll have to be soon. I'm starting to shrink.

**EXERCISING VOCABULARY**

1. Record your own definition for each of these words.

   - diminutive (adj.) (1)
   - harrowing (adj.) (1)
   - ascended (v.) (3)
   - excruciatingly (adv.) (3)
   - resolutely (adv.) (4)
   - perverse (adj.) (9)
   - compelling (adj.) (9)
   - contingent (n.) (10)
   - ignominiously (adv.) (10)
   - taunt (v.) (10)
   - ancillary (adj.) (11)
   - calamities (n.) (12)

2. In the opening sentence, Trudeau refers to himself as a "recovering short person." What type of person do you usually think of when you hear the word *recovering*? How does the author's word choice prepare you for the subject of this essay?

3. In paragraph 12, Trudeau explains that when he was seventeen, "all of life's disappointments, reversals, and calamities still arrived on schedule — but blissfully free of subtext." What is a subtext? What is the subtext to which the author is referring in this sentence?

4. Trudeau states that "adolescent hierarchies have a way of enduring" (para. 14). What is a hierarchy? Give an example. What does he mean when he refers to adolescent hierarchies? Give some examples from your own experience to explain your response.

**PROBING CONTENT**

1. What effect did the author's visit to the new apartment building have on him? Why did it affect him this way?

2. What problem did Trudeau have in high school? How did he react to the nickname he was given? How did his reaction differ from that of others with the same problem? How did he attempt to overcome this problem?
3. What happened when Trudeau was seventeen? How did this affect his outlook on life?

4. Has Trudeau completely overcome his high school anxiety? Support your response with material from his essay.

**CONSIDERING CRAFT**

1. Trudeau is a well-known cartoonist. Describe his tone in this essay. How does he use humor to drive home his argument? Refer to several specific examples, including the title.

2. In paragraph 9, the author describes himself as a “haunted veteran coming again to an ancient battlefield, . . . revisiting my perilous past.” Examine this comparison. What kind of figure of speech is it? How effective is its use here?

3. Trudeau’s use of irony often enhances his writing. In paragraph 10, he writes, “some of my fellow Midgets refused to be diminished by the experience.” How is this statement ironic? What effect does he achieve by using irony here?

**WRITING PROMPTS**

**Responding to the Topic**  How do you respond to Trudeau’s obsession with his “inner shrimp”? Do you empathize with him? If so, why? Or do you think he makes too much of his problem, especially because many will say that he should have grown out of it? In your response, make sure to include any personal experiences that have influenced your thinking.

**Responding to the Writer**  Trudeau believes that “height matters.” Write an essay in which you argue for or against this idea. Include numerous specific examples.

**Responding to Multiple Viewpoints**  Trudeau (“My Inner Shrimp”), Dan Barden (“My New Nose,” p. 181), Alice Walker (“Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self,” p. 193), and Grace Suh (“The Eye of the Beholder,” p. 187) all write about physical features that made them feel different or “other.” To what extent has society in the past decade become more accepting of difference? Consider the role of the media (television, film, newspaper and magazine stories, and the Internet) when forming your response.

*For a quiz on this reading, go to bedfordstmartins.com/mirror.*