How to Pass

By Louise Crimmins Piantedosi

Now and then, remember what Spinnelli said: *Jane Reardon. Great name. So Town and Country.* Thank the practical ancestor ambitious enough to drop the O or the Mc. Thank Bowdoin, where you lost your neighborhood accent for something vaguely upper crust. Be grateful you observed so many crusty ways. You can blunt cut and kitten heel your way through any door in Boston. At least you think so. But then again. *Spinelli*. What the hell would he know?

Keep things professional. Never personal. No need to mention that your town was a Hyde Park duplex, that your country was a Wilmington split level ranch. Briefly wonder: how could your parents not have seen it? Every house they chose to live in had been halved. Lose yourself in your work. Stay at the office late. Resist the urge to share that you, too, have a family connection to the firm: don’t risk being pressed for details. But when the cleaning woman comes around to feather dust and empty out your trash, think of Nora, the grandmother you never met. Most likely, Nora averted the eyes of the stay-laters, too. Think about feather dust and all the zillions of used-to-be-birds.

Make yourself useful. Volunteer. Kerry for Senator! Teresa Heinz Kerry is kind to you. You’re her fledgling. Her little sparrow in a box. You suspect she knows an outsider when she sees one: she won’t give you away. Her accent is Mozambiquan. She speaks conspiratorially. She winks at you when she talks. She gives you plum assignments: you’re a fresh face for the campaign, you’re the volunteer in the photo shoot, you’re the airport greeter of Bon Jovi, you personally deliver the hat Governor Weld left behind. Don’t tell her you felt offended by her husband, who looked right past you to find the more important people in the room. But because she’s a noticer, Teresa notices you noticing. She tells you of his having been Mr. Vietnam Vets Against the War. She knows how to keep you in the camp. Continue to assist at her small parties. Learn ever crustier ways: the value of the proper canape, that gin should be London dry, that everyone loves a layer of bacon, that—even in summer—men’s shirtsleeves must *never* be short.

Someday you’ll use her idea of having a portrait artist in the room. You cherish the sketch the artist did of you. You tack it to your wall. And you will always remember Teresa’s kindness, especially when you order fries.

Don’t forget your limits. You don't have to quit because your boss suggests team tennis but be ready with a good excuse. An unhealed fracture or intermittent vertigo will do. Stay in your comfort zone. Become a member of the Museum of Fine Arts or the Athenaeum Library instead.

Resist sarcasm. Suppress proletarianism. Deny yourself the urge to yank the string of pearls from Sally Usher's neck. *Oh no dear, you can’t buy them for yourself. They’re like opals. They must be gifted!* Don't ask if Sally's gifting grandmother ever heard of the Ama, the Japanese women who free-dove deep for them, knives roped to naked waists, each pearl a breath held for minutes. Don’t ask if Sally realizes how many centuries of people have suffered for shit that her kind *must* possess. And don't ask if the new bond fund brochure is being printed at a union shop. Definitely don’t do that. But if you do slip up at, say, a party, pretend it’s just the drink. No matter that you’re sober. You know the speechisms of drunkism. Let someone gallantly send you home in a cab so you won’t need to drive on the eshkshresh. Ekshpresh. Expreshway.

Ignore people from your past, no matter how significant. Better yet, have no past. Be Gatsby, minus the house, the parties, the Daisy, and the crime. But if you do happen upon, for example, your father, whom you haven’t seen for the ten years since your mother, thank god, threw him out of the house, just keep walking with your colleagues to Quincy Market happy hour. Or, if you must, tell them you’ve forgotten your keys at the office and circle back. Even if your colleagues, for some reason, turn around, they’ll never guess the identity of the cabbie at the taxi stand waiting for a fare. Be as kind as you can. Don’t let on you’ve ignored him before, the rumpled man in the ironed suit, how you’ve watched from a distance as he put down his sample case and sighed. Instead say, *Hi. Dad? I thought that might have been you*. His face is red. His hair is white. His sleeves are short. He says it’s good to see you doing so well. He says he’s never loved a job better. The people he meets. The freedom he has. Someday he’ll tell you about the back roads to Logan. He stares at your Kerry-for-Senate button. *Hmmph*. *You’re voting for that phony? Lousy tipper,* he says. Don’t tell him where you work. Don’t tell him where you live. Say goodbye good to see you and walk away. Briefly hyperventilate. Don't panic. Your sea wall has been breached, but it's not irreparable. Resolve to never hail a cab. Skip happy hour and just go home instead.

Re-focus on your work. Be enthusiastic about your boss’s commands. *I want you to let loose. Write something radical*, he says from above his bow tie and behind his wire rims. Radical? About bond funds? He’s looking at your kitten heels. Meow. You’ve got this. You’re known for writing with punch. It doesn’t take you long. *Workers of the world, delight! No tie, bow tie. Beacon Hill, Bunker Hill. Name stitched on a uniform, name etched on a silver spoon. Fidelity has a product for you! Thanks to our expert management, broad diversification, and low minimums, anyone can invest like the rich do now.* Your boss is silent for a bit. *Um, I think you took my use of the word radical too literally, Jane. You know what I’m going to say. Back to the drawing board.* Take this literally, too. Go back to your desk and doodle. Always either a face like yours or a flower in a pot. Wonder if, instead of English and American history, you should have majored in art.

Cheer up. Appreciate the view. You’re on the 23rd floor, cubicled beside the one flank of glass wall not blocked by executive suites. You overlook the harbor! Contemplate the history: you’re on *the hill* of the City Upon a Hill speech, the speech poached by Reagan and JFK, the one by Governor Winthrop of the lobby portrait, of the silly frilly collar, of the long hands and long face—a face as long as his descendant John Kerry’s. From this vantage point, it’s easy to see who’s at the bottom of that hill, and who’s at the top. Wonder what the hill was like before these buildings were buildings. Think about Samoset. Think about Squanto. Now there's a guy who must have had regrets.

Don’t respond to that cafeteria bulletin board notice for an apartment in South Boston, even though it seems to have been posted just for you. It pulsates. It sparkles. It smells like a rose. It *psssssssts* and *hey yous* until you rip it from its tack when no one else is looking. Exposed brick. Hardwood floors. Walking distance to the T. Reasonable rent. Be forewarned that the move will fissure you. And if you do move, don’t give HR your new address. Mail can be forwarded forever! Survey the prospective neighborhood from your lofty post. Notice that it’s guarded by a rusting hulking bridge that you’ll call Cerberus, that it’s moated by dark waters, a tiny huddled kingdom tipsy, tough, and bleak. Never mind that the one St. Patrick’s Day parade you saw there scared you. Break your old lease. Sign the new lease. Even your best friend will say, *Really? There? A racist neighborhood like that?*

But trust your gut. Consult your higher self. Reread Joseph Campbell. You're being drawn here for a reason. Invisible pipes, the pipes, are calling you. Your first week there, you'll hear a real tin whistle and try to find its source, only to be distracted by the waves at Carson's Beach. Many years from now, you'll learn your grandfather, youngest of thirteen, was born right here, on the very street where you decide to live. You'll be outraged that not one person in the family ever thought to mention this to you, even when you wondered why *this* was the one and only neighborhood that leaving made you cry.

Observe their ways, this new tribe to which you are at least ethnically connected. Avoid faux pas. For panhandlers, always carry quarters and ones. Especially when at the Broadway Station waiting for the City Point bus. Regret you didn’t share your little joke about being glad to learn the city has a point. Don’t repeat the mistake you made with Murphy, whom you mistook for a random bum. When you instinctively recoiled, he unsmiled and said, *Do I really look that bad?* He waited for an answer. His hair was wild and red. The wind was strong. You finally chose the tough love answer. *Yeah. You do. You really do*. You felt instant regret. You felt oxymoronic. Like tough love. Which you always believed was a myth. You noticed people gave each other the side eye. Someone patted him on the back. Someone gave him a ten. You realized they all know him. That here, there’s no such thing as a random bum.

Continue to develop strategies. Join a gym just so you can doff your Burberry on your way home from work. Stuff it in a duffel. Put on a pea coat. Slip into Keds. Go alone to see Sinead O’Connor at the Paradise. When she sings a song in Gaelic, feel the shatter of internal glass. Consider shaving your head. Consider Doc Martens. Feel guilty about being the harbinger of gentrification your neighbors know you are. Don’t expect a hello back.

Don’t even try to pretend you can’t hear your boss calling out to you from across the office floor. Everyone knows it’s the kind of call they’ll find you for. It has crackle and heat. It cuts through dimensions. It’s the kind no one wants to get, the one from a relative who goes through the switchboard, who makes the receptionist find your boss. *Jane*. *Your Aunt Rose O’Malley is on the line.* *It’s about your father.* Feel as if you should put your hands up, feel as if you must cough up feathers before your extension rings and you pick up the phone.

Go to the hospital. Go out of duty. Go out of curiosity. Go because who else is there but you. The hospital is a busy little city where everyone knows where they’re going except for you. Find the ICU. There he is. I see you. He says *Hah!* Like someone who’s embarrassed to be photographed. His hair day is bad. His feet are bare. The blanket is short. Johnny wearing a johnnie, pale blue with tiny white dots: Who wouldn’t be embarrassed by that? He’s immobilized. He’s attached to multiple translucent tubes. He’s a fly alive inside a web. You share this observation later with your mother on the phone. *I’ll bet it’s a tangled web*. *That man was a deceiver!* she says. *Now he’ll know what it’s like to be stuck all day in one god damned place*. A year ago, she moved to the hills of North Carolina. She’s awaiting the Rapture. Her car has four-wheel drive. Pull the blanket over your father’s feet. He says if he hadn’t broken his ankle, they wouldn’t have looked at his heart. Can’t get over it. How lucky is that? You say, *Somebody’s looking out for you. Luck of the Irish, right?*

He gives you the keys to his Malden apartment. He lets you borrow his car. He needs you to grab some clothing. Something more than the khakis. More than the sweatshirt that’s encrusted with tomato seeds from the BLT he was holding when he tripped over the footrest of the recliner. His apartment building is yellow brick with stone scrolls carved above the entry. It’s surrounded by maples. It used to be grand. The hallway smells like dust and radiator steam and the heavy dark wood of the doors. Each door has a window of rippled glass. Each looks like a detective agency door. You feel like a detective. You feel like a spy. You open the door to a room flooded with afternoon sun. Surprise! You see a flower box in every window. They’re planted with petunias. They wink at you a welcome. They’re abundant. They’ve been dead headed. Their pink looks neon in this light.

Every surface is stacked with newspapers and books. They’re covered in invisible moss. You find boxes of Polaroids. And pictures from Kodak instamatics. They’re almost all taken from the window of a car. You slowly come to recognition. You see the Hyde Park duplex. You see the Wilmington split ranch. These are shots of every place you’ve ever lived. You see the Brookline Village storefront where you worked before Fidelity. You see the apartment where you lived with your brother and your mom. You see your own apartments, including the one where you live now. He’s been a living ghost. He’s been a drive-by haunter. You find a birthday card from someone named Cookie. Close the box, grab the clothes, water the plants.

Three weeks later, he visits you in South Boston. He’s small at the bottom of the stairs, still hobbled by his cast. But his lease on life is new. For a moment, you see Johnny the child, and it makes you sad. Aunt Rose told him your car has been troubled. It keeps stalling out. *Sounds like the alternator. Easy fix,* he says. Together you walk into the unswept street, the bright unshaded sun. Men are out walking. Probably toward Castle Island. Where the breeze is the sea. Where they all go out walking. Red faced. White haired. Short sleeved. You pop the hood of your car. Neighborhood boys show up to help you. They see the Kerry bumper sticker on your car. *That guy’s a phony. His family name’s not really even Kerry. Pretending to be Irish to get our vote and shit.* They’re proud their vote is wanted. And they all know how to fix a car.