

## STATE OF GRACE

COULD A SMALL-TOWN SOUTHERN GIRL "PASS" IN NEW YORK HIGH SOCIETY? FED UP WITH FEELING LIKE A PUNCH LINE, AMY MACLIN ENLISTED AN IMAGE GURU TO HELP

It's been eight years since I left Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, for New York City, but the people here still treat me as if the price tag is hanging from my straw hat. The ladies at Bergdorf purr, "What do you think of the big city?" Bartenders assume I'm the cheerfully immoral type who takes her Wild Turkey neat. I once had a boss who greeted every single vacation request with a hearty "So, you goin' to Billy Bob's weddin'?"

But I was deflated recently when I met a man (English-born, California-raised) at a party and he wouldn't stop marveling at the way I still talk. "Are you working-class?" he asked.

I didn't grow up poor, but my parents did—cotton-picking, mayonnaise-sandwich-eating poor. They worked hard to educate their only daughter so that she could move up the eastern seaboard and land on the mastheads of a few fancy magazines: all so some Yankee could wonder out loud if she was beneath him. It made me doubt the Tocquevillian notion of America as a caste-blind meritocracy, and as we say in Wilson County, it chapped my rear end.

So I wanted to know whether a professional could take the Mt. Juliet out of the girl: Was there a Henry Higgins for my Eliza Doolittle? Could I be transformed into a glossy-haired, round-voweled creature from a place where the kids played field hockey instead of sniffing glue off the hood of a Camaro? My Fair Lady started out as a filthy flower girl from Tottenham Court Road, which sounds for all the world like a Tennessee trailer park.

For my transformation, I chose New York man-about-town Montgomery Frazier, who, he was quick to inform, is not a stylist but an "image guru." For about \$250 an hour, Monty helps a client list of society ladies and Hollywood wives go from where they are to where they want to be with the right dress, the right career move, the right introductions at the right parties.

"I like to say I'm manager, marketer, publicist, and stylist, all rolled up into one," Monty said. I told him he was hired.

**We meet at La Goulue, a charming French bistro on** Manhattan's Upper East Side. Monty, who is a regular, gets the best banquette in the house, with a view of Madison Avenue.

"It's a game!" he says when I congratulate him. (Nervous and unaccustomed to charming French bistros, I had arrived too early and had been pinned against the wall at a back banquette, where I sat putting first one elbow on the table, then the other.)

"They're always so nice to me here," Monty says. "'*Bonjour, monsieur!*' Maybe because I always dress a certain way. I guess that's why I do what I do—I look at myself as a canvas."

At 43, the fair-haired, New Mexico-born Monty has flawless skin the hue and texture of a ripe apricot; I have to physically restrain myself from reaching out to touch his face. He is wearing tweedy Jil Sander trousers with a black cashmere cardigan and black-rimmed specs, because he is having, he tells me, a James Dean meets Italian schoolboy moment. But tomorrow I might find him in mod rocker mode. He knows change is possible for anybody, he says, because he reinvents himself every day.

I order a tuna tartare as expensive as my shoes and tell him I want him to turn me into a proper lady, then escort me to a ritzy function to see if I "pass," like Eliza at the triumphal ball.

Monty is enthusiastic but stops short when I talk about getting a dialect coach. (He seems to reject the philosophical underpinnings of the transformation entirely, focusing less on diction and class than on adopting a pastel palette and cutting white flour out of my diet.)

"Why would you want to lose your accent?" he says. "It is charming. It is food for conversation."

"Because I feel like people make certain assumptions—"

"People," he says, "can be quite foolish. We live in a global community now—an accent is *interesting*. It makes you memorable. *Embellish* your difference, don't assimilate!"

"Even in high society?"

"In high society," he sagely replies, "all one needs is quiet grace. Some of the best society ladies are Southern ladies."

I feel as quietly graceful as a canned ham, so I reduce all my existential despair to this: "What if I knock over my water glass?"

"It's called being a human being," he says. "As long as you're apologetic and don't do it again on the same day, you're fine."

Over coffee he adds, "Honey, you've got to release your own chain. I see so much more out of you than you can ever see."

**The next week I meet Monty at Donna Karan to be** outfitted. He is wearing a thick cable-knit sweater in butter cream and wire-rimmed glasses: "Robert Redford with some Jay Gatsby, which is a good look for me."

He introduces me to public relations director Aliza Licht, who has assembled a row of frocks in her airy white office. I have a schoolgirl crush on Aliza; she has long, glorious auburn hair and a diamond ring big enough to serve appetizers on. She is the kind of girl who has always had a pony.

I take a black jersey gown that drapes, Grecianesque, off one shoulder and go into the fitting room. My heart is chugging like a freight train because I am, gentle reader, several funnel cakes past a sample size. I pull. I tug. I suck in. I hope.

And when I look in the mirror, I get it. All that jersey rises to meet me, and I am woman. I tip an imaginary champagne glass to an imaginary Captain of Industry.

*Honey, you've got to release your own chain.* I walk out to Monty and Aliza.

"You've got it on backward," Aliza says.

"I'm country come to town!" I bellow.

Throughout this experiment I notice that in moments of doubt or confusion, I am the first to remind everyone that I am just off the bus from Dogpatch. If I make the joke before anybody else does, then the shame is mine; I own it.

**Monty books a haircut and color for me at the** swanky Julien Farel salon. Julien is a darkly handsome Frenchman with his initials stitched on his right breast pocket. I am imagining the

two of us in a sun-dappled vineyard when I abruptly apologize for my \$15 haircut, a Chinatown special.

"Is it awful?" I ask.

"I wouldn't say that." He pauses. "I wouldn't say anything."

There's Moroccan music on the stereo, and Monty is playing Auntie Mame, entertaining us with stories of royalty he has met: Diana in Paris, Andrew and Fergie while they were still married. "I have never met the queen," he says, "which is very disappointing." (Today's persona: Natty Rogue, in a Richard James suit with a Prince of Wales check.)

I throw out some famous names and ask how he'd make each one over. "Fidel Castro," I say.

Monty doesn't stop for breath. "Let's get rid of the beard. Put him in some soft grays and chocolate browns, not that militaristic garb. We want to see him casual. Fidel Castro at home."

Here's the special genius of Montgomery Frazier: I can see the iconic despot in some heathered Ralph Lauren separates, and I bet you can too.

I like my new chin-length haircut, which is wispy and layered. Colorist Peter Oon makes my faded red hair a copper penny color with rich-girl blond highlights. Forlornly, I wonder if it will ever look this good again.

**Monty invites me to a gala awards ceremony for the** Cabrini Mission Foundation, a charitable organization that promotes health care, education, and other social services. I may get to meet Rudy Giuliani, I tell my mother excitedly.

"Isn't that wonderful," she says. "Every generation stands on the back of the one before, like the Chinese say. Or is it the Indians?"

On the big night I go back to Julien for a blow-out, then struggle into my gown so makeup artist Randle Doss, a fellow Tennessean, can gussy me up. She draws on smoky drifts of eyeliner while Monty stands by crying, "More! More!"

"Monty," Randle says, "I still want her to look like herself."

I don't know if myself is what I look like when I finally stand in front of the mirror. My hair is more structured than I like it, and Monty has given me a shrug to put over the Grecian gown—presumably because it's November and cold but also, I fear, because I have the upper arms of a teamster. I feel like a cat in doll clothes.

But also, oddly, fabulous: This is who I am today. I get my mink evening bag and sweep down to the limo.

My original mission, you'll recall, was to hobnob in New York society and see if I could pass. But then Monty and I get to the party at Chelsea Piers, I sit down behind my calligraphed place card, and Monty introduces me to my dinnermates as a writer from ELLE. This strikes me as a great lark until it occurs to me that I actually am a writer from ELLE.

And I realize I don't have to pass, because this-is-who-I-am-today has turned into this-is-who-I-am. Which is a writer from ELLE in Donna Karan with \$300 highlights. Who also happens to know all the words to "The Devil Went Down to Georgia."

Which may mean that America is a meritocracy after all.

I'm not the fattest person in the room, so I lean in to ask Monty if I can take off my shrug and he says yes. I feel a rush of affection and want to kiss his apricot cheek. Instead, I ask if well-

bred people typically leave some food on their plate. Monty says they do.

The evening's entertainment comes courtesy of the Cabrini Singers. They're high school girls from underprivileged backgrounds who, tonight at least, don't have the luxury of wondering whether they can pass in New York society: New York society is funding their education by sitting down to \$1,000 plates of mahogany-glazed filet mignon.

There's always something heartbreaking about girls this age—maybe because I remember how raw it felt to be one—but the Cabrini women are so brave and bright and gorgeous that I snivel into my caramelized shallots. Senior class president Tibusay Hernandez gives a speech in which she says she plans to be a doctor *and* a lawyer, and I want to rush the stage. I'm so proud I forget that I didn't even pay for my own dinner.

**My hair has fallen by the time I get to the ladies' room**, and I feel sexier: In Montyspeak, I'm Rene Russo in *The Thomas Crown Affair*, after a six-month Ho Ho binge. I'm fixing my lip gloss when one of the choir girls, in regulation plaid, stops at my elbow.

"I like your dress," she says softly and turns away.

What I really want to do is run after her: *It's not mine! This dress is borrowed! Nothing is what it seems! I see so much more out of you than you can ever see!*

Instead I just smile and say, "Thank you." But she's already out of sight.

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