

PASSING

BY DAVID OWEN

Twenty-eight years ago, when I was twenty-four, I did something that adults often fantasize about doing: I went back to high school, and for four months I pretended to be seventeen again. With the help of my literary agent, who posed as my mother, I enrolled at a large public school about an hour and forty minutes outside New York City. I worried at first that one of my teachers or classmates would pick me out as an obvious impostor, but none of them did. Later, I wrote a book about my experience, called "High School." I appeared on "Good Morning America" (where I charmed Joan Lunden by telling her that I felt she could pass for seventeen, too) and on "To Tell the Truth" (where I fooled all the panelists except Kitty Carlisle Hart). And Barry Manilow optioned the movie rights—and the song rights!—to my story.

Well, nothing came of any of that, but my memories of my time-reversing escapade are still so vivid that it's hard for me to believe that nearly thirty years have passed. Recently, I had a brainstorm: Why not try to pull it off again? I'm fifty-two now, but I'm still a kid at heart. Yes, I said to myself, I'll do it: I'll try to pass for forty-five.

The first thing I had to do was make myself look seven years younger. Twenty-eight years ago, I did that by swapping my horn-rim I-need-a-job glasses for a pair of wire-rim aviators and buying a Led Zeppelin T-shirt. This time, I required a more drastic makeover. I went to the men's department at JCPenney and, with a couple of quick glances over my shoulder, picked out a pair of Dockers with a thirty-six-inch waist—the size I used to wear back in my mid-forties, before I gave up and started buying pants that almost actually fit. The Dockers felt pretty darn snug when I pulled them on in the dressing room, but, by inhaling deeply and hopping quickly from one foot to the other, I managed to get them buttoned.

As I carried my new pants to the counter, my heart was pounding. Would the cashier spot my deception—and, perhaps, ask if I wouldn't like for her to gift-wrap the pants so that I could give them to someone seven or so years younger? But no. She rang up my purchase and put the pants in a bag. I had passed! Over the next couple of weeks, I also let my hair



grow out about a quarter of an inch.

In addition to changing my physical appearance, I had to modify my world view. Rather than thinking like someone born in the mid-nineteen-fifties, that is, I had to train myself to think like someone born in the early sixties. "Do you remember where you were when President Kennedy was assassinated?" I asked a middle-aged stranger. "Because I sure don't." At a party a couple of weeks later, I fell into conversation with some people I didn't know, who appeared to be about fifty or fifty-one, or maybe fifty-three or fifty-four. The subject of the nineteen-sixties came up, and, instead of joining them in bragging about all the drugs I used to take, I said, "Boy, did I ever miss out! I was still in elementary school, or possibly early junior high school, when all

that cool stuff was goin' down!" Some of the people I said that to looked at me with scorn, and others looked at me with pity, but none of them looked at me with suspicion. They believed me! I had passed! A little later at the same party, I referred to the American invasion of Grenada as "the first television war," and some guy with slightly graying hair jumped all over me. He not only believed that I was in my mid-forties, more or less; he rubbed it in my face.

Little by little, like a Method actor immersing himself in a role, I began to think and act like someone 13.5 per cent younger than I actually am. I started staying up a half hour later on weeknights, until ten-forty-five (after working up to it, five minutes at a time). I asked my wife if she would like to go out to dinner sometime, or something, instead of doing what we usually do on weekends, which is waiting for a new movie that we've read about to come out on DVD and then forgetting to order it from Netflix. I received a somewhat humorous e-mail from someone I vaguely knew and reflexively deleted it, the way I used to, rather than almost deciding to forward it to fifteen or twenty other people under the subject line "GET A LOAD OF THIS!!!!!!!" Without even thinking about it, I ordered a bacon cheeseburger for lunch again, instead of just a cheeseburger, and I didn't ask for fruit or salad instead of fries.

All in all, my temporary transformation into a slightly less middle-aged person was probably harder on my wife, who is five years older than I was pretending to be. Or maybe it wasn't. In truth, I never told her what I was doing, mainly because my first experiment in time travel, twenty-eight years ago, had been so difficult for her. At that time, we had been married for just a year, and when I took her as my date to a high-school dance she had a severe reverse-nostalgic experience akin to an LSD flashback or a grand-mal seizure, and for a couple of hours it looked as though we might have to get divorced, even though we weren't finished writing all the thank-you notes for our wedding presents. This time, I decided, I would keep my little adventure to myself, and see if I could fool her, too. And I'm pretty sure I did. At any rate, she's never mentioned it—at least, not in so many words. ♦