

*Paula Carter*

## COMMUNING WITH STRANGERS

It was late September when I arrived in Boston, fresh from the flat Midwest, to live on the first floor of a three-family house with a vegan roommate who left a bucket of coffee grounds, eggshells, and vegetable peels on the kitchen counter for composting. My new apartment was in Somerville, a neighborhood north of Cambridge, and the street was lined with houses similar to the one I had just moved into, each wedged in close to the next. I had lived outside of the Midwest only one other time, when I studied abroad in Paris two years earlier.

That first evening, after unloading my few belongings, I went outside and sat down on the front steps. I looked at the street, with the low telephone wires dipping between each house, and searched for some clue, some connection, by which I could relocate myself. An orange cat sat in the window of a house a few doors down. Someone, somewhere, was practicing the piano. As I listened to the tentative notes, I felt dwarfed by the houses upon houses, streets upon streets that grew out exponentially from those cement steps. Each house, each street with its own history, its own inhabitants, its own life, all churning on and on and on, oblivious and indifferent.

My apartment was about two miles from Harvard Square, where I was to work, and after trying the different forms of transportation, I found that I preferred to walk. I left the house every morning at the same time and followed the same route, down the large hill between Summer Street and Somerville Avenue, across the commuter rail tracks and past the big mural of Somervillians feasting together, into the Cambridge neighborhoods and finally onto the Square. It was my commute.

I found, after tracing the same path for a couple of months, that others shared my commute. Every morning, as I crossed the street that signaled the line between Somerville and Cambridge, the same woman would walk past with her dog. She was an older woman, probably mid-fifties; she had cropped hair and wore tinted glasses. Her dog was a short scruffy thing with an underbite and a tan coat. For months the woman and I would catch each other's glance as we passed, but we would make no sign of recognition. The dog would sniff in my direction and look up at me and I would mentally say

good morning to him. I imagined that he understood. I figured the woman must know me, but then thought maybe she was thinking about something else and so when we glanced at each other she passed over my face without taking it in. She was from the city, had probably lived her entire life there; unlike me, she was used to the strangers who lived unknown lives all around her.

One morning, before I reached the intersection where we normally met, the little dog came running up the street, leash dangling behind him, stopping to sniff at the sidewalk and lick at a piece of chewed gum squashed on the cement. I asked him where the woman was and he looked up at me without concern. He walked over and sniffed my shoe and I bent down and picked up his leash. A few seconds later I saw the woman coming toward us, walking quickly, both arms swinging. I held up the leash as she neared and, for the first time, she smiled at me.

"I asked him where you were," I said as she came up. "But he didn't know."

"I opened the door and he just ran out of the house," she said. It made me wonder which house was hers.

I held the leash out to her and she took it, thanking me. I thought perhaps she and I would then walk back in the direction she had come, the direction I was going, together. Maybe we would talk about the dog and she would tell me his name. But we didn't. She thanked me again and then pulled the dog along in the other direction. He trotted off, oblivious to our few moments alone together. I walked on. As I walked, I realized I'd hoped for something more in our encounter. I felt myself stutter, wanting to turn around and call after her. But I didn't know what I would say or do or even why I felt this impulse. Did I imagine we would walk her dog together, that I would bring him treats in my pockets? I don't think I even wanted that. But somehow I had hoped for more.

That incident occurred sometime during my first year in Boston. I lived there for three years and continued to walk the same path every morning for all of that time and continued to see the woman most of those mornings. In summer she wore beige sandals, in winter black snow boots. After that incident, she and I would smile at each other or even say hello. But some time passed, months and months, and then we would just nod. Sometimes one of us would turn away, not in the mood to be friendly, perhaps

distracted. Our waning friendliness felt like both a disappointment and, at times, a relief.

A city is full of strangers. In "The Uses of Sidewalks," Jane Jacobs says that "Great cities are not like towns, only larger. They are not like suburbs, only denser. They differ from towns and suburbs in basic ways, and one of these is that cities are, by definition, full of strangers. . . . Even residents who live near each other are strangers, and must be, because of the sheer number of people in small geographical compass." I grew up in a small town, devoid of anonymity, and although in many ways I had been defined by the known, I had also longed to be released from it; I found the cool veil of strangerhood tremendously appealing.

The complexity of my interactions with the woman and her dog reminded me of the strain I experienced as a child, smiling next to my mother in the grocery store, watching her cheerfully make small talk with someone when only moments before I had heard her complain of being tired or stressed. I didn't feel that her chatter was disingenuous, only that she was choosing in that moment to be true to what was expected from her. The woman with the dog, I guessed, felt that she had no responsibility to me, no need to be sociable and adhere to expectations.

The connections made in small towns are built on expectations different from those made in cities. In small towns your neighbor is also your teacher, your dentist, the deacon at your church. It is not that residents in a small town know everyone else in that town—a misconception that delights some people. But people in small towns always know that these strangers may soon become friends, their child may soon join your child's play group, they may move in next door—their proximity to you is never far, the chance of seeing them again is great. And so, although there are strangers, there is no anonymity.

Small towns offer more opportunities to be sociable, chat with friends, run into people. And while there is something intrinsically lonely about a city, that aloneness creates space for the internal self that is harder to find in more intimate communities. In small towns picking your child up from school or going to the store will likely become a social event, while in cities sitting on the bus or shopping will likely become a meditative event. And so I guess in some way, the woman with the dog and I were trying to balance these two

things, holding onto the subtle and comforting feeling we experienced upon recognizing one another without pushing those feelings into expectation.

When I was in high school, my piano teacher's son, who was a few years older than I was and whom I knew only by name, asked me out on a date. In one moment, my years of plunking away in his living room became mortifying. My complete lack of talent was no longer a secret between my teacher and me, but now a defining characteristic known to my potential suitor. And what was worse, after one date I realized I was not interested in a second. Still, I continued to venture to his house once a week and meekly peck out "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," while he sat in his room, door closed. In the end our fathers became running partners, attending 5k races together. And so, our mothers became friends. And then our families became friends.

In an odd turn of events, this same boy moved to Boston while I was living there. He looked me up and we met for drinks. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, or what I was looking for. We got together at a swanky bar not far from Harvard Square and caught up, talked about our families, glad to encounter someone familiar with our own hometown but aware of how much we had each moved in different directions. At the end of the evening, he said we should do it again. I said, just e-mail me. He said, sounds good. But he never e-mailed and neither did I. And so, calmly we moved away from the encounter into the invisibility of the city in a way that was impossible in the small town where we had grown up. By leaving our friendship at that bar and choosing not to acknowledge it again, in some ways we had erased it altogether, as one can do only in a city.

I recognized many people on my walk, but I became friendly with only one other pair. Not every morning, maybe two mornings a week, as I neared Harvard Square, I passed two grown men walking together: twins. Their twinness caught my attention, but not as much as the fact that they dressed alike. Not exactly alike, but perhaps the same shirt in two different colors, the same brand of coat, just slightly different styles. I had overheard them speaking to each other and knew that they were not American. I guessed that

they were German from the hard tones in the language, but wasn't sure. I smiled, more amused than friendly, every time I passed them. They took this as a neighborly gesture, and they began waving to me as we neared one another, calling out "Hello." If for some reason I was walking on the opposite side of the street, they would be sure to get my attention, shouting across the cars and buses "Hello," "Good morning," and I would do the same. I looked forward to seeing them. I would look for them, hoping it was a morning that brought them to the Square. Unlike the woman with the dog, their enthusiasm created a genuine feeling of closeness. We never said more than hello, never had a conversation. I never asked them where they were from or what they were doing in Cambridge, grown brothers still living together. Instead, I made up my own story, imagining them as scholars, both studying the same thing, maybe genetics or chemistry, moving together to a new country, shopping together at Filene's, living in a small apartment in Central Square. I didn't know these things about them, but I felt as if I did, and we greeted each other as if we were friends expecting to see each other later that evening for dinner.

As I adjusted to Boston, to my life away from school, to my life as a young professional working nine to five in a strange coastal city, I found their presence, as well as the presence of the woman and her dog, important to me. I found my heart cheered at the sight of the twins' matching boots and matching smiles and disappointed as their appearance on my walk became less and less common. When I did see them, I had a strange inclination to ask them to coffee or lunch. But I realized that this was bizarre, even risky—a woman meeting two strange men—and so I never did. What did we know of each other, what did we have in common besides searching for some familiar face in the hordes of people we passed every day? But these small moments, my daily communion with strangers, felt powerful—all the more so because of the blank space of unfamiliarity and created, plucked out of the blank space of unfamiliarity and singularity that abounds on the streets of a city.

I'd had my first experience with city life two years earlier, when living in Paris. I moved there on the eve of the millennium, to study for the year, and was startled by how little I understood about

participating in a city's culture. Many of my experiences in Paris informed my exploration of Boston. In Paris, I learned that bridging the distance between yourself and a stranger is to make yourself suspect. I learned how people walking daily on city streets read the faces of passersby, and someone who is too friendly, too open, is not living by the city's code. I learned that people who are overly friendly in a city are most often asking for something—a dollar, your signature on a petition; wanting you to buy something—a postcard, a newspaper, a necklace; or take something—a pamphlet, a flyer, a coupon. People in cities learn to harden their faces and turn away from these advances.

But when I first arrived in Paris, I was unfamiliar with this code and I found myself smiling willy-nilly at people passing by. My obvious naïveté made me a target. I remember walking down the street once and passing a man walking alone. He smiled at me and I smiled back. At the first flicker of my smile, he turned and began walking with me. He spoke small snippets of English, asking me where I was from and where I was walking to. He told me I was beautiful. I laughed nervously, more threatened than flattered, and walked faster. He continued on, using his hands to express how much he would like to accompany me wherever I was going. I told him I had to go, that I could not talk. He continued to entreat me, asking me when he could see me again. Unlike those on my commute in Boston, he became someone I was trying *not* to see. I was working hard to learn how to look past him so he would look past me too. I turned away from him, wishing to be invisible, feeling scared and unsure of what his advances signaled. I soon learned that in a city making your face like a wall, avoiding eye contact with the men who sat alone on the subway, could create that invisibility, which meant safety and peace, but of course also meant solitude. So when this solitude was momentarily breached in Boston, by people whom I interpreted not as a threat, but as a saving grace, I felt a profound sense of relief.

I was not friendless in Boston. I knew a girl from college, I made friends with co-workers, my roommate and I became close. But when I think of myself in Boston, I think of myself alone. Even these connections seem shrouded in distance—an hour I ride to Roxbury, where my friend from college lived, drinks after work with coworkers followed by the solitary half-hour walk home. And when

I think on it now, I realize that my attachment to the people who populated my routine in Boston was directly connected to this idea of visibility and invisibility. I felt that I was unknown, and without the flicker of recognition in someone's face, I was unseen—slipping through the streets, on and off the T without ever being noted. I was invisible. And so, when I came upon the twins, waving and calling out, I felt suddenly embodied, my presence on that street real. Seeing them meant I was also being seen. And this moment, perhaps for all of us, became an important validating factor in our day. Implicit in this is the phrase "to see and be seen." What is it about this phrase that draws us together? It seems to me that we give each other this gift and ask for the same in return: "I will see you if you see me. I will acknowledge your existence, if you acknowledge mine."

Although I see them as very different events, I recognize in my desire to connect to something in Boston a remnant of the way I had felt in Paris, when experiencing that cool veil of strangerhood for the first time.

I had moved to Paris to study French, of which I knew little. I moved into a single room in La Fondation des États-Unis, a dorm-like building in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. The room was equipped with a sink, a large window with thick orange curtains, and a telephone. The telephone was part of the building's system, not a private outside line. When I first picked up the phone, to call all the way back across the ocean, an automated voice informed me that I had two voice mail messages. I punched in the code I had been given, and expected to hear my mother's voice, but instead heard a man's voice that I did not recognize. The first message, dated from a week before said, "Lauren? Are you still in Paris? If so, I'd like to see you." The next, from only a few days before, said, "I guess you must have gone on to Spain now. I don't know how I'll get a hold of you, but if you somehow get this, call me, okay?" The man never said his name. He had a soft voice and spoke these things calmly with an American accent. In the horribly lonely first moments of my new life, I felt a connection to him, and to Lauren, who must have occupied my room that summer.

During the next few days, in my small Paris room, I found long strands of black hair, almost as long as my arm, on the floor and windowsill and I figured they were Lauren's. I tried to imagine what she looked like and why she had been in Paris. The Fondation was the "American" dorm, but people of many different nationalities lived there. I wondered if she was Spanish and if she had returned home. I wondered if she was American, and if so, where she was from in the United States. But mostly, I wondered how she had felt while sleeping and being in this room, our room. I felt that some bit of her, some part of her energy, still hung in the air. I was utterly lost at that point, rolling through waves of homesickness and culture shock, stuck in a silent world enclosed by the language barrier. I wanted to feel as though this woman and I shared something—at least, I imagined, we would share memories of the same room—life events occurring within the same space, separated only by time.

The man called back twice more. The first time he left another message giving Lauren his forwarding information, as he was leaving for England in a few weeks. I recognized his tone as an ache, and knew he must have loved Lauren, or at least been well on his way to loving her. The next time he called I answered. It was sometime in the second week of my being there and when I recognized his voice, I felt I knew him, knew something intimate about him. I expected us to perhaps discuss Lauren. He could tell me how she had broken his heart. I could tell him how surreal Paris felt and how I was glad to be living where this woman whom he had loved had lived. But, when he heard my voice he was instantly awkward. He said that he was sorry. I told him that I was living in this room now and he hung up without saying anything else. I felt profoundly in that moment how solitary we all are—always returning to the self, alone, unable to cart familiarities with us, unable to hold on to anything but ourselves.

After some time, on my walk to work, I stopped seeing the twins altogether. I figured their work had taken them somewhere else, that they had left the area. But then one afternoon, perhaps a year or so after last seeing them, as I was walking up Mass Ave, there they were. It was summer. Each had on a short-sleeved button-up shirt. They were sitting against a cement wall, waiting for a bus. I

wondered if they would recognize me outside of our normal context. I smiled and instantly one of them called out, "Oh. Hello there." They both waved their characteristic wave and the other said, "We have not been seeing you." I walked up to them and agreed that I had not seen them in some time. We stood there in the heat. The others waiting for the bus paid no attention. I had just gotten off work and felt tired and disheveled. "How are you both?" I asked, realizing I had never really known how they were, ever. They just nodded and then none of us seemed to know what to say. I wondered for the first time how much English they spoke. "You are doing well?" I said. They stood there nodding. The moment was awkward. I thought how we didn't even know each other's names. Why was it I felt so drawn to them? Why had they been such important fixtures in my day? It felt in that moment as though we had crossed a line we were not prepared for. Never had we stood still in front of each other, never had we tried to say more than hello. We had always just passed each other, hurrying off to accomplish the day before us. After a few more seconds of silent nodding, I pointed up the street and said that I had to go. This was the last time I ever saw them. Before I moved to leave, they began to wave and so I waved back. There we were, the three of us standing in a small circle on the sidewalk waving, which was all we knew to do.