

The Outlaws

by Daniel Passamaneck

The sky was colorless; so was the neighborhood. As Jim's rented midsize gently navigated the right turn onto Shadyway Lane, Bronte was pretty sure she was making the biggest mistake of her life. If she only knew.

Jim glowed with barely-suppressed excitement as Bronte let him drag her along to the Plainfield Plenary (as his family insisted upon calling their annual confab). As they approached the end of their journey, the gleam in his eye finally made sense to her: not eagerness but naivete; not clarity but callowness. Her curiosity about his innocence died utterly as she spied what was obviously their destination halfway down to the cul de sac. It had to be the house with two cars parked in the driveway and two more at the curb in front. None of the others had so much as a bicycle on the porch. The Plainfield front yard also boasted a reflecting globe and a fake birdhouse. These were not, in Bronte's eyes, good signs.

Jim was bouncing on his pleather seat as they pulled up to the curb. "Sugar, you're gonna love my family. Salt of the earth, they are. You'll see. I can't wait to show you off to them." He ran around to open her door for her, an affectation that had already begun to tire her when he had arrived to take her to the airport that morning. He'd acted all gallant as he superfluously guided her into their cab but that was six long hours of travel ago. Now she was booger-eyed and sour-breathed; her back was sore and her legs tingled with lethargy. All she really wanted was a tall G&T and a dim room in which to sip it in peace. She doubted she'd find it here.

She scuffed her way up the concrete walk, glancing from the reflecting globe on its pedestal (yes, it made her look fat, shimmering with its total lack of irony) to the rubberized doormat that offered an indiscriminating "welcome" to anyone willing to trod upon it. With every step of her patent black high heel boots she felt more sure that she should have broken up with Jim two weeks ago rather than to have taken him up on his offer of a Florida vacation. It

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had sounded fun at first blush but every subsequent revelation about it had diminished the luster - central Florida with nary a beach to be visited; a small town with nothing going on anywhere nearby; every day dedicated primarily to catching up with a family she'd never met before. Hell, she'd spent 27 years getting away from her own damn family. She'd only been seeing Jim for a couple of months now, more out of boredom than anything else, and he'd roped her into this boondoggle of a reunion (oops, "plenary") before she'd realized how pointless it all was going to be. Now she was good and stuck.

The doorbell chimed inside the house and a muted many-throated cry of delight reached her ears. She automatically rehashed the names he'd been drilling her on ever since she'd agreed to come here with him: there were Mom and Pop - Mildred and Richard, though she'd been strongly cautioned not to refer to either of them by name, which would somehow inject unwarranted formality into the proceedings while depriving them of their proper familial honorifics. The eldest of their offspring was Richard Jr, or "Little Ricky" as he, incredibly, apparently preferred to be called - an actuary living, as it were, in Tulsa. He was married to someone or other - Bronte couldn't be bothered to keep spouses straight. Jim was the #2 son, and there were also two sisters - Stacy, a homemaker in the greater Texas buttfuck region, and Mary, who was in hospitality grad school, whatever the hell that was, and who had hooked herself up with a college sweetheart with nauseating traditionalism. Richard (oops, "Pop") had earned his nut as an insurance exec of some mid-level sort, and he and his ever-widening wife had dedicated themselves to raising offspring who, judging from Bronte's knowledge to date of Jim and her impressions of the fleet parked in front of the house, made up in conventionality what they lacked in imagination. She could already smell butter cookies and mayo as she stood on the porch, waiting with fatalistic resignation for the front door to open.

Glancing down, she noticed that one of her black stockings had twisted on her calf during the drive. Automatically she bent to adjust it. The door opened and a lardy voice called out, "Jimmy!" Bronte

stood up again, expecting from the timber of the salutation to see Mom at the door - but instead it was Pop, all beaming smile and florid jowl, reaching out to embrace his sub-prodigal. Pop wore a short-sleeve polo shirt in dusty rose, tucked into well-ironed pleated khaki shorts from which his ropey calves emerged like skittle-pins. Shortly behind him, blocking Bronte's view into the house, Mom hovered with eager delight, dressed in a sea-foam green smock under a - good god - baby blue, lace-trimmed apron. Her face and her husband's could have been interchanged without seriously affecting either of their looks. The foyer in which they stood contained an occasional table and a framed reproduction of scriptural art. The walls were three tones of beige.

Mom and Pop embraced Jim with appreciative squeals and then fell back to meet Bronte with restrained enthusiasm, her black frock and stockings and shiny pointy boots apparently putting their corn-fed hospitality to the test. "How nice to meet you, dear," one of them mumbled. Bronte stood with her arms dangling at her sides, distinctly conscious of the passing of time. Then Mom and Pop sidled back into the living room, and Bronte started paying closer attention.

"Come on, everybody's here now, make yourself comfortable and catch up with the fam," Mom (Pop?) chirped to Jim, leaving Bronte to navigate her own way. The living room was mostly beige, with off-white trim, gauzy drapes and overstuffed couches. Mass-produced paintings hung on the walls; precious glass-front cabinets held worthless accessories - ormolu clocks, porcelain kittens. The air was thick with gratuitous contentment. Mom and Pop scurried around their various progeny, gorging themselves on parental satisfaction. Little Ricky, Jim, Stacy and Mary circulated energetically among themselves, a fiesta of khaki and pennyloafers.

All told it looked to Bronte as if one weak personality had been split six ways among the members of the Plainfield clan. But that was not to suggest that no one of interest was present. Bronte had failed to take the significant others into account.

Standing at three corners of the living room, almost as if to distinguish themselves from it and all it contained and represented, three other guests honed their eyes upon Bronte as if she were a sharpening steel and they were carving knives - eyes fixed, lips pressed thin, postures carefully framed so they wouldn't resemble each other too much. Bronte wasn't fooled. They fit together like a tailored suit. They each wore monochrome outfits and sported glossy hair; their shoes all looked a little threatening. Even as she realized that she was just going to be ignored by the reunited Plainfields, the three other outsiders assessed her with frank curiosity.

She knew her next move would be important so she took her time making it, casually opening her beaded clutch and drawing out from it a tube of gloss. Bronte's eyes locked onto those of the tallest outsider as the glistening applicator stroked her lightly pursed lips; then she strode out of the living room and into the den beyond.

The den was underlit, pine-paneled, smelled like television and Febreze. On the other side of the venetian blinds, a manicured backyard butted up against a sterile deck. After a discreet pause, someone followed her in - but not the guy she'd invited. Without diverting herself from the view, such as it was, Bronte knew it was the other woman who had joined her.

"Wrong choice. The tall one's mine."

Bronte turned to face her with a small chuckle. "Yeah? You divvied up already?"

The other woman remained on her side of the room. "Not as such." Her words clinked, bright and cold. "They're both mine. But if you're gonna be hanging around, I'll let you use Carlo."

"Both yours? Sounds... cozy." Bronte tried to mask the weariness

in her voice. It had been a long day, she wanted a smoke, and this sudden twist her afternoon had taken was demanding more focus than she'd expected to need.

"Cozy? Not exactly. But definitely entertaining. Around here I take my entertainment where I can find it." The two women faced off from opposite corners of the Plainfield family den, raking each other with their eyes. The other woman was trim and flinty, with high cheekbones and a pert nose that suggested a cuteness the rest of her face belied. She was hot, but she was not cute. Her chest was small and high; her legs were slim but solid. She wore a short black skirt over black stockings. Ladder-patterned. Nice stockings. Bronte noticed herself staring impolitely. Instead of stopping, she licked her glossy lips.

The other woman laughed, deep in her throat. "Iris. You're Bronte. I heard the introductions."

"They seem... conventional."

"That's even giving them too much credit. The kids are okay if you get them on their own, but together they're an egg white omelet. No color, no flavor."

"I'm not always satisfied with such wholesomeness. Sometimes I like a little yolk down my chin, you know?" Bronte turned fully toward Iris - in invitation or challenge, neither was sure which. They both took a few steps forward and met in the middle of the floor. "Yuri's mine," Iris purred. "You can have Carlo, I guess. But most everything's negotiable."

As if she'd rung a bell to summon them, Yuri and Carlo entered. Yuri wore a double-breasted dark grey suit and a white shirt open at the throat, black hair upswept above an aquiline nose and a professional grade tan. Carlo was a little shorter, thicker, more substantial. His

smirk dripped confidence right down the front of his grey silk shirt and black silk blazer. They looked at the women, then at each other, before introducing themselves to Bronte by respectively stating their first names. Then both turned to Iris, expectant, obedient. The room was getting warmer.

Bronte broke the brief silence. "So, what do you do for fun around here? I mean, other than each other?" Carlo's smirk broke into full-fledged laughter; Yuri feigned shock. Iris leaned forward and breathed into Bronte's ear: "We misbehave."

"For real, or just kid stuff?" Bronte's pulse was racing. She fought to keep it out of her voice.

"Damn real." Carlo spoke with the smoothness of fine bourbon. "We met here first four years ago and got something going right off. Regular life, we've all got normal gigs; nothing like this for any of us. Come the Plenary, we go out and do stuff. Turns out, now we're pretty good at it."

"Good at what?" Bronte felt herself rising to the occasion.

Yuri stepped to the far corner of the room and pulled out a notepad. "Your choices tonight:" - a quick glance to the others - "Pharmacy, bank branch, car dealership."

"What kind of cars?" Iris and Bronte were standing nearly collarbone to collarbone. They spoke as one, turned to each other, communed subcutaneously. "Jinx," said Bronte. Her voice, for once, masked nothing.

Iris inhaled deeply, then gestured to the living room, still busting with Plainfields. "In there, we're the in-laws. Outside, in about six hours, we're the Outlaws. Welcome to the family." Yuri and Carlo

kept one eye each out the door as Iris laid a leisurely kiss on Bronte's unresisting lips.

