

Blackballed

By Ellen Neuborne

The first one I torched was the stucco Tudor on the corner. It was easy. I just held my Bic under the two-foot grin of the pumpkin leaf bag. The jack-o-lantern mug dissolved in a heated puff of melted plastic and the leaves inside caught nicely. Eight more bags lined up neatly on the teakwood porch and the flames licked along the row.

Once the lattice work on the side veranda caught, the whole face of the building went up, fueled by the dying ivy. I watched my work from the driveway for a few minutes and then moved on. I had a long block to cover.

I'd been at the Montclair Starbucks when I picked up the message on my cell and I knew immediately what had happened. We'd been blackballed. I mean, there was no other explanation. We were perfect candidates for the Ridgeview Country Club. We were a nice, stable young family. Mark had a Wall Street job. Izzy was doing fine in kindergarten. I quit my agency job to write freelance for shelter catalogs so that I, like the other Ridgeview moms, would never, ever leave the Jersey suburbs for any reason. We were natural RCC members. So when I checked the messages and heard we'd been rejected, I knew exactly where to go. I left my post-lunch double-shot Americano on the bar and drove straight back to Maple Ave. I'd done 16 months on that tract of suburban hell and I still felt the heat of their stares as I wore my weathered Levi's jacket or bundled my daughter into our aging Subaru. So now it was clear, we were not getting into the club, literally or figuratively. Someone had blown my best chance. It was one of them. Maybe all of them. I had plenty of blame to go around. Not to mention lighter fluid.

My second stop was No.12. None of the houses on Maple Ave. had single digits. They started at 10. I guess that's some kind of real estate mind game. So that nobody would have to feel that their address demonstrated their lesser status. There were plenty of other ways to get taken down a peg in Ridgeview. Our first week in the neighborhood, we'd attended an open house at No. 12 – the home of Cassie and Hal Reiter. I'd brought a Napa Valley Pinot Noir.

“Oh, are you from California?” Cassie asked brightly.

“No,” I answered. “Canarsie.”

“Fascinating,” Cassie managed, taking the bottle from me and placing it label-to-the-wall on her breakfast.

The Reiters had bought in the 80s, renovated in the 90s and now had just finished putting in a Japanese reed garden where the swing set used to be. Nothing looked flammable on the porch, so I tried the front door. Unlocked. I snagged a rolled up newspaper from the kitchen counter and lit it from the stove. I carried my torch into the living room and graced every curtain on the ground floor before exiting and continuing my walk up-block. Behind me, I heard Cassie's Dominican maid run screaming out of the building. Smart girl. Keep running. This place is a tar pit for the soul.

Next in line: the home of Max and Fran Cameron, power attorneys in the middle of full-gut kitchen renovation. The front door was locked, but the mudroom slider was easy to jam. When I entered, the near-finished kitchen spread out before me like a *House & Garden* cover shoot: A six-burner Viking stove. A sub-zero fridge with cherry wood clad. A taupe-flecked granite cook's island. Storage drawers on silent ball bearing slides. It was the stuff of my fantasy. The kitchen I used to conjure up in my mind as I

juggled my dented nine-piece Revere set in a galley so narrow that opening the oven door meant nicking the opposing wall. I imagined myself in just this sort of sunlit expanse, preparing home-cooked meals in Calphalon pots, sharing coffee and confidences with my neighbors and soulmates. It didn't occur to me the club would be closed. Silly me.

The room was still littered with drape cloths and supplies. I kicked over the nearest can of paint thinner and used the smokes left by the plumbers to light the blaze. Singed my eyebrows a bit when it took, it was quite the heat blast. I made it out and to the curb and saw that not only was this taking the Cameron property, the flames were shooting across the dying October lawn to the Micheljohns, blackening the side of their 5-bedroom, 3.5 bath Colonial with home office and sun room. How about that? I was finally getting a break.

I crossed the street to what Mark called "The Milford Estate." It was a double wide. The Milfords were a third-generation Ridgeview family and now were the proud owners of two Maple Ave. lots. One held their house – a three-story Queen Anne with wrap around porch and – I swear to God – a turret.

"Good for keeping a weather eye out for advancing Saxon hoards," I joked the day I'd met the Milfords. They hadn't laughed.

The adjacent lot was given over to Penelope Milford's expansive heirloom vegetable garden. Out of the loamy depths, she grew Jacob's Cattle beans and Rouge Vif d'Etampes pumpkins and we all oo'd and ah'd like the dirt was giving up diamonds. I walked past the rows of Cushaw Green-Striped Squash to the back yard, where David Milford had just stretched the winter cover over the L-shaped inground pool. I unhinged the propane tank from the Weber Grill and poured the liquid onto the pine green surface. I flicked my Bic and tossed it into the puddle. It morphed into a nifty L-shaped lava lake. It was so nice, I almost overcame my remorse at losing my Bic. 'Cause it was a good one, nice thumb action. Flames were jumping from the ecru cushions on the brushed oak chaise lounges to the striped canvas awning and up towards the house.

As I emerged back onto Maple Ave., the commotion was starting to draw attention. Smoke alarms wailed from the houses I'd hit. Lights and sirens were pealing onto the wide tree-lined asphalt strip. Residents were streaming, horrified, out onto their lawns. At 1:45 p.m., it was just moms and nannies on the block. The office people were still in the city, the kids were all at school. Just us, the stay-at-homes, the lifers, the POWs of upper middle class warfare. Just us and the help. Mark had promised me I would get used to the leafy silence of this street in the daytime. It was easy for him to say. He still spent his days in the crush of the city's action, while I tiptoed around my post-tunnel exile. It will be good for us, he'd insisted. It will be good for the family.

Sure, if we want Izzy to grow up and be a lawn ornament. This was just the place.

I walked out to the narrow perfunctory strip of sidewalk that nobody in this car society ever used. As I stepped off the grass, two police cars gunned up to the curb and screeched to a halt half a block from my spot. I froze. Four uniforms sprang out the car and ran towards me. I held my breath and waited. They raced in my direction, flanked me, and then passed me, leaving me standing untouched in my grey flagstone square. I turned and watched them tail the Micheljohn's gardener as he dropped his tools and ran for cover. I relaxed a moment, but even my relief itched. Any Caucasian woman could

rob this zip code blind and be in the Bahamas before local law enforcement got over its own racial stereotypes, I thought. I missed Brooklyn.

It's not like I hadn't been warned, mostly by my mother. Just yesterday, in fact, when I was so lonesome for conversation, even the sound of her gloating seemed appealing. So I called.

"Hiya, Square Peg. How's life in Round Hole-ville," she said.

"You could be a little more supportive."

"Why? I told you the move was a mistake. I told you that's not your kind of people. You'll never fit in there."

"Mom, I'm not an idiot. I'm a college graduate. I'm sure I can keep up with this crowd."

"It's not a question of education. You can read all you want. You won't find what they've got in a book. You don't have beach stickers on your car and lift tickets on your parka. You think most of what you write about in those catalogs is overstuffed and overpriced. How can you want these people as friends? You can barely stand them as customers."

"That's really over-stating it. I'm not used to the social currents here. But I'm working on it. I'm reaching out."

"Good luck with that."

"You so don't mean it."

"Wouldn't matter if I did."

I hung up on her, enjoying the lingering ping of the slammed-down receiver. But then the tone faded. And it was quiet again.

When I approached No. 17 Maple Ave., Elinor Grier came running out of her house to meet me, cordless phone in hand. She stopped at the edge of her blue slate garden path and paced like a trapped chicken in front of her property. "What's happening? What's happening?" she shrieked at me.

"What's happening," I answered. She made no acknowledgement of my response and ran down the block towards the first fires, shrieking the narration of her experience into the phone as she went. I watched her go. Then I walked through her open front door and dragged her Tournai Rug so that the fringe sat comfortably perched on the fake logs in gas light fireplace. I flicked the wall switch to high flame and stepped over the smoking carpet's edge to head out the back door.

Marcy Oberhiem's was next. I felt a little twinge as I crossed her lot line. She hadn't been all bad to us. She'd tried to steer me into some semblance of acceptance. It was even she who suggested RCC as a way to make the leap. "It will help you settle in to the neighborhood. You'll forget all about Brooklyn," she promised. But either she hadn't delivered or the whole thing had been a set up, I decided. Her sage green Honda minivan was parked at the precipice of her steep driveway. I used a cobblestone from her lawn edging to smash the passenger window. Once inside, I made use of the cigarette lighter and the glove compartment stuffed with road maps and travel team schedules.

When the back seat looked like a campfire, I put the monstrosity in neutral and sent it rolling down the hill through the lowered door of the two-car garage. I was pleasantly surprised when the crash was followed by a terrific boom. I'll bet Steve had something else in there, like one of those illegal gasoline-powered leaf blowers. Tsk tsk.

Good thing the block association would never find out. That's a triple digit fine.

Now I arrived at my own home sweet home. No. 28, Maple Ave. I'd lived there more than a year and neighbors still called it the Caldwell property, for the previous owners. They'd sold out after Mr. Caldwell's hedge fund career suffered an attack of regulatory attention. The day Mark and I moved in, we thought we were home. But the hints to the contrary came quickly. The day after we had a hot dog barbecue, someone slipped the Whole Foods Catering menu into our mailbox. Our positioning of the Super Cans at the curb was never quite right and twice we'd been warned by the block association about the infractions. About a month after our arrival – when we still had New York plates – someone called to have our car towed from the residents-only curb in front of our house. I had made it to the street just in time to see the tow truck disappear around the corner. I turned and looked down the block and wondered which of my new neighbors had wished that I was still inside my station wagon as it was dragged away by the local authorities.

I walked into my house and wiped my gritty Reeboks on the straw woven welcome mat. The noise and smoke from outside was getting annoying, so I closed the door behind me and moved into the center of the living room. I looked through the stack of mail on the telephone table. The light on the answering machine was flashing. I pressed play.

“Good afternoon Mrs. Caldwell. This is Personal Process Carpet Cleaners. We see you are due for your annual steam clean and we wanted to let you know we have a special this month. So give us a call. Your coupon code is 492.”

I looked behind me at the tracks I'd left on the hall runner. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. Message 2.

“Hi, Jess. My lunch meeting ran way over and the Citicorp deal is turning out to be a huge operation. I'm already looking at networking three vice-presidents and a director into my conference call next week. Anyway, I think I'm going to be late getting home tonight. Start dinner without me. I'll try to make the 7:42.”

Mark. What a guy. Toiling away in the intellectually stimulating world of Manhattan adults while I tried to atrophy enough to get accepted by the local ladies club. Message 3.

“Mrs. Greene, this is Melissa at the Ridgeview Country Club. I'm calling to say there was a miscount and in fact, you and your husband have been accepted for admission. Congratulations. Please call the office to arrange a fee schedule.”

I stood still and let the weight of the moment settle around me. Then I knew what to do.

I marched into my kitchen and took a bottle of Top Job from under the sink. I popped it into the microwave and set the timer for three minutes on high. Then, I scooted out to the front door and stood at the threshold, counting. At 2:45, I sprinted away from the house and was close to the street when the explosion blew. Shattered glass from my picture window sprayed clear into the crosswalk at Forrest Street.

I looked away from my house and down the block, down to where they were gathered in the middle of the street. I began to move towards them, first at a walk, then jog, then I picked up speed and began to run. And as I approached, they turned to me: Cassie, Marcy, Elinor, Penny. And I ran into their arms and we stood there, sobbing into our sooty shoulders and professionally dyed hair. I felt their arms circle around me. I reached mine out in the group embrace. “Why is this happening to us?” Elinor wailed.

And I swayed and sobbed and joined in the keening. In my head, I turned the word over lovingly, again and again: us, us, us.