

An excerpt from **Famepunk: Part 2, Middlemarch**, courtesy of Nostalgistudio.

When the proprietors of Long Island's Moscow Talent School are denied an (illegal) appearance fee from the organizers of a clay court tournament in San Antonio, their top student and her married chaperones keep driving west while more established figures on the women's professional tennis tour gather in the city of the Alamo, without their newest champion.

“This whole state of Texas is a hellhole! Whatever part of it isn't actually on fire is infested with evil and bigotry! Everything I've ever heard about the place is true.”

Two hunched men wearing headphones in a sound-proofed van stared at each other. They were trying to know whether this was some kind of threat. It was not a piece of cake to ascertain. The senior agent nodded and the junior one took his finger off Pause.

“I come to the state of Texas looking for nothing. No expectations, no demands to be met, I come in peace, I'm not gonna hurt you, I got money, I'll pay for my food and shelter. Just let me pass! But no! Because welcome to the world capital of hell hole-ishness and bigotry, thank you, here we are, step this way, we gotta special table for you. Yeah, US Open

champion, born in actual America by the way, here's your special VIP treatment in Texas: you want something to eat? Take your clothes off! I was forced to strip for pie! I repeat, I was born in America!"

The domestic strains of dangerous nut job were the special beat and study of the two federal agents listening for the umpteenth time. Their knowledge was vast and their insight acute. They still didn't get this.

"So here's my answer to that. Attention all bigots of Texas! Listen up! Bigot listeners of—what's this station?"

Some poor blindsided all-night DJ in Dallas-Fort Worth rendered speechless; four stations there she'd called; this was Tape 3, where the guy finally managed: "K."

"Uh-huh. Well, okay-kay bigots, gather round the old Victrola or whatevuh and listen to a gay commie Jew punk from New York tell you some facts. Yeah—attention all bigots and evil hellhole inhabitants of Texas! Raise your hands, bigots, I dare you. C'mon, it's radio. Okay—ready? You. Bigot. You, personally. Are not better. Than me. You aren't. Stop being un-American. Cause that's what that is."

Here was a red flag, going by the book at least.

All too often the deadliest wackos were super-patriots who'd gotten to feeling competitive about the matter. Then again, the I'm Most American types always had incontrovertible proof, sheaves of it, they went on and on about it for years as a rule, flourishing their records. And indeed they voted more, served more time in the army, sent more and longer complaint letters every time they paid taxes, knew the Constitution back and forth most of them, very knowledgeable about its flaws; they were dangerous people, but genuine citizens. This growly-voiced girl who with all her fame lacked most of an identity—including driver's license, passport, bank account, credit card, employment history, telephone—no. In another era, the Bureau might have considered looking into whether she was playing for the Soviets, a super spy-athlete-agitator sent out to undermine American values, institutions, and morale. But this was 1988. Secret agents with pulse-pricking figures had gone out with forty-cent gasoline; the battle for hearts and minds had wound down like a toy. While both sides kept busy seeking a leg up in the worldwide Cold War weapons trade, today's modern espionage professionals stole and falsified technical data, schematics, code; they looked mostly like pencil-pushers and *People* magazine never quoted them as

follows: “I like all the three-digit numbers but the fours I lost interest, the commas look crappy.”

As to Emma Jasohn’s Russian mob ties, the Bureau had this very well covered. She was backed by a small, fairly clean (they sold some guns but only to friends; no drugs) nightclub-owning clan with deep roots in Brooklyn and a penchant for show business investments, such as the girl’s crazy talent school; they dealt in cash profits on which they evaded income tax, their one major crime, in a colorful rock-around-the-clock kind of manner that kept the IRS wanting more. The two men in headphones hadn’t come to Amarillo for the IRS, however; thank God. Their job was exciting. They had to tell, right now, whether the girl who called Texas a hellhole was as nutty as she sounded and as dangerous as she looked at times from certain angles. Was she going to lash out? Would she pull a knife, a gun, would she pull a Squeaky Frome, in short, and maybe put a family at the top in mourning?

“Point number two! Irrelevant! Stop with the name-calling! I got normal feelings, normal feelings—I am not a pervert, Texas! There’s a difference, okay? Look it up.”

A small team back in Washington, DC was supposed to be working on whether she’d taken

dialogue from any known extremist manifesto. Almost nobody thought so, but they had a new computer program which should have been able to tell. It had cost the moon and it could not tell.

“Point number final! You think I’m a pervert? You think you’re better than me? Lemme tell you something, you buncha hellhole dwellers, Texas—yeah. The hole is silent. Listen to me, I can beat any bigot in this entire state. Man, woman, child—sure, why not, child. If you’re some bigot child sitting there thinking you been sanctificated to be better than me, screw you! Bring it to the court. This is a two-day challenge event, two cities, me versus you.”

Abilene and Amarillo, at their respective fairgrounds: Dallas, she explained in Tapes 1 and 4: “Dallas is finished as a concept.” In tape 2 she added: “Obviously.” Since she and her friends were heading to the Grand Canyon en route to Palm Springs for a tournament there, these other two places were more on the way, also. Interestingly, to investigators, both bookings dated from the player’s last week in Florida; tickets were already selling, slowly, at the time of the Nudie Pie incident, which they were not supposed to call it but the headline from New York had stuck—and which remained in any case a tangle of conflicting accounts with no

means of verification in sight. Had she stripped bare naked on the counter, as reported in Kilgore, and made some threats against the government? Probably not. No one had pressed charges, if so, nor taken pictures.

“Here’s the set-up. I don’t wanna play you, I wanna knock you to the ground with a tennis ball the first chance I get. Be prepared. And if you’re a bigot or a bunch of affiliated bigots but you’re all too damn fat and weak to lift a tennis racquet, then go find someone to represent you. I’m serious, Texas, bring out your bad guys. I want gay-haters, Jew-haters, obviously, also if you hate Gypsies then c’mon cause I got some of that, just all racists, across the board, you’re invited, woman-haters, what else? Oh yeah, and some of my best friends are Communists!”

Texas law enforcement had handled Abilene, last night, in tandem with four Russians, down from New York, who took their orders from a big guy and checked every single weapon at the door. There hadn’t been any trouble, at all; nada. The stands around the biggest rodeo ring in the county could barely contain the multitudes willing to pay to watch bigots get knocked to the dirt by a pretty girl, and they hadn’t left disappointed. Tonight in Amarillo shouldn’t have been any different.

But it was.

In her white dress, which was a little small now, she stalked the edge of the makeshift court at the Sports Arena where they'd dismantled the wrestling ring for the night and laid some canvas painted with lines over the wooden floor. The television lights were hot, the place was close and smoky, another full house, very alive to itself, very vocal. As in Abilene, she perceived a lot of cowboy hats, a lot of sideburns and handlebar mustaches; the women were a howling blur. The line of challengers had developed a knot at the front that Ilya was solving. He and the men he'd ordered from the Café Pushkin worked from a script, quizzing the challengers as they presented themselves, at top volume:

“Bigot or mercenary for bigots?” There were separate lines.

“Reason of hatred?” Then came a few set follow-ups.

“Christ was Jew!” This did have a culling effect, especially among the mercenaries, some of whom had never known that.

“You are gay! Psychology!” Delivered sharply by a large bellowing leather-clad Russian, this was also somewhat dissuasive. By now, the crowd had picked

up on it and the gay-haters waiting in line were being taunted mercilessly. “*You are gay! Psychology!*” They kept slinking off to the exits.

It was a one-knockdown rule, no scoring. Sometimes Emma served, sometimes she didn't. The bigots were averaging under two minutes apiece on their feet. Brava had faxed some legal-looking form each one had to sign where dotted promising for all time not to sue in case of injury but Emma had been cautioned, please to go soft on the bigots in case the words might not be binding: who knew with the American court system? All contestants received, from Gretchèn, a paper cup of apple juice and a red button pin reading BIGOT in black letters which according to some really fine print on the form, Gretchèn showed them a copy, they were required to put on and wear in front of the television cameras, flash bulbs, and clamorous reporters in the official courtside press corral; this much press would be pleasing to Brava. The felled bigots kept putting on their buttons in hopes of being in the news, which they were; many of them remained very bitter about this experience and how it made them look: bad. Just, bad

As for the crowd, it wanted some bigot bones cracked and work for the stretcher-bearers. An hour of skinned knees and sore behinds was enough, the

thrill was fading. Emma scanned the line of challengers for a large, fit, traction-ready specimen to fit the bill. In truth, she was hoping they'd run out of bigots as quickly as they had in Abilene because one of the house midget wrestlers had offered to come out and play exhibition-style in a white robe and pointy hood; he was resume-building for the national circuit; also, he was a fairly good player, they'd practiced together that afternoon. A rumor that one of the Bush boys planned to show up had sparked a universal shrug earlier: weren't they snobs, anyway? And not bigots? Emma didn't know, she wasn't an expert on political families. Her expertise lay more along the lines of knowing that this good audience would rather see a three-foot lefty Klansman hit Laveresque forehands; rightly so.

"Emma!" Ilya was calling her to the front of the line. She guessed the Bush kid had shown up but that wasn't it. Her eyes widened in astonishment as Ilya spoke solemnly and gestured at the next contender. "Bigot child."

Emma was taken aback. "He passed the quiz?"

"Definitely." The Pushkin guys were nodding.

The beaming house emcee beckoned cameras, approached trailing two miles of microphone cord, and chatted up the bigot child, who was nine, came from Lubbock, and spoke with a strong regional

accent. Emma gathered he was here because he wanted to reach full manhood in a world living under one American government, run by the Bible, where certain people returned to being slaves, both kinds of homosexuals received accelerated hellfire, and Mexicans had to speak English, even the old ones, even in Mexico. Also, women belonged in the home. He used the most offensive language imaginable and the speech from beginning to end was one of the worst things Emma had ever heard, she just let it sort of wash over her. There were gasps from the wrestling crowd, it was shocked.

“Parents!” she called in a shattered voice. “Where are the parents?”

A young couple stepped forward, nice-looking, even kind of leftish, college graduates, yes, in fact—he hadn’t gotten this from them. He was just like this. They didn’t know where he’d heard these things, why he believed them, why he was credulous this way. A mystery. And his mother had always worked.

“I’ve always worked, Bradley!”

The bigot child looked up at Emma through his smudged glasses. He was wearing sneakers, belted shorts, a white short-sleeved dress shirt and a clip-on tie of crimson hue. “You’re from the devil,” he told her.

The father jumped in to add that the family only ever went to church at Easter and Christmas; plus their local school system was very well-regarded. Bradley was an excellent student but an intolerant bigot, his teachers were equally stumped as to the cause.

“Yeah,” said Emma. She regarded the bigot child, which parted its gleaming hair on the left. “Lose the tie,” she ordered.

“No,” replied the bigot child in the spirit of compromise.

“How do you expect to knock me down looking like that?”

“I look professional,” he replied. “And my God will make me strong enough to smite you dead.”

“Oh, Bradley!” The mother of the bigot child sounded perplexed, heartsick and tired, like her eyes. “Don’t hurt him, please. He’s our only child.”

Emma asked, “Did you guys sign the form?” Both parents nodded weakly.

The bigot child marched into the center of the arena and faced the 1987 US Open champion across the net. She handed him a tennis ball, directed him to the service line, and told him to start smiting. They hit the ball back and forth a few times, she kept putting it in reach, he was not the best athlete, below average even. She forced him a

little further back with every shot until he reached the baseline. Then she swung hard and bounced a forehand straight into his thorax.

The bigot child went down with a squelch and set to weeping voluminously. Brought to its feet by a propulsive roar of wild and unanimous approval, the crowd prolonged its demonstrations. Emma Jasohn stood at the net.

“GET UP!” she thundered.

But the bigot child had pretty much had it. “I wah I want my mommy!”

Signaling broadly with her long arms to forestall aid from the sidelines and draw down some silence, the champion sneered at top volume: “Yeah, yeah, bigot child! Where’s your bigot Gawd to save you now, huh?”

“Do you see what I mean, Freya?” Cookie Toms asked socratically. There was a big color television in the players’ lounge in San Antonio and a lull in the tournament coverage because this was on instead. The lounge was pretty packed but the two great champions had prime seats right in front of the screen. The atmosphere was charged with disbelief. “Do you see how she’s taunting a crying child? Do you see how this looks bad for women’s tennis?”

“But,” said Freya.

Vivvy Helm spoke from the doorway. “He had it coming.”

This caused a stir. No one believed her capable of making a joke. She was drinking a beer; they all were.

Freya laughed. She agreed. “I agree. He’s a bigot, Cookie—look.” Pillowing a close-up of mottled bawling, spelled out in white, they could all read: BRADLEY HALLORHAN, CHILD BIGOT. “It’s best to nip that in the bud.”

“Granted,” said Cookie Toms, as Emma’s shapely calves invaded the frame. “Granted.”

“Get on your knees, bigot child, I’m gonna smite you now and cut your head off!” It was a furious snarl. The crowd roared and the camera panned wider. There she stood, raising the red Kneissl in both hands like an axe, a killer nymph. Choking on tears, the bigot child writhed and screamed in terror at her feet. “Oh yeah?” she mocked him. “Speak English, Bradley!”

The greatest champion of all groaned over the future of women’s tennis. “Cookie, relax.” Vivvy Helm was unsympathetic in the doorway. “She’s good with children.”

She kicked him. “I said get on your knees!”

“Jesus!” the senior Secret Service agent observed. He exchanged a look with the senior Bureau guy; this put a whole new complexion on things. The Vice President’s son was upstairs in a secured suite, raring to go. The limousine was on stand-by, the phone lines to the fairgrounds were open, they could be there in plenty of time and cut right to the front, naturally. The junior Secret Service agent, at a signal, called up. It was kind of a party scene in the suite; this was reported. They watched the muscular girl in the tight white dress grab the little kid by its shirt collar and yank it upright.

“Change your ways, bigot child!” She gave him a shake.

Nerveless, boneless, Bradley sobbed and hung from her fist like a marionette in a tornado. Where indeed was his bigot God—where indeed? How could this be happening? It was so unexpected. “Are you gonna change, Bradley?” He heard the question, it gave him pause. *Who’s Bradley?* he thought. *I’m Bradley.* He felt completely new. “Or am I gonna cut your head off!”

“No—no! I’m changed!”

“Oh yeah?” He nodded as she held him up to eye level and examined his sincerity. Her eyes

frightened him and he really did want his mommy now, but he had changed. She snatched off his clip-on tie and brandished it in her left hand. "Souvenir. For me." He didn't know what she meant, what that was; he didn't know anything. He was starting from scratch. Now his head rolled back on his neck and he looked around wildly at shapes and colors as she held him up, up at arm's length for the approval of the ecstatic crowd and proclaimed: "Welcome our newest citizen!" Then she carried him back to his mother and slipped him a twenty-dollar bill which shut off the remaining waterworks and turned Bradley's frown upside down. Like all children, he loved cash money. She gave him a bag of BIGOT buttons for his teachers as a bonus prize when he refused to wear one; the press was extra-clamorous so Gretchen let him go on anyway. He stared into the cloud of lights and questions for several moments, then spoke, then walked away.

"She hits hard. It was fun."

Thereafter, he practiced tolerance towards all and was much nicer to live with, although he remained a picky eater.

"I dunno."

"Don't ask me."

The Secret Service, weighing in. They'd been

out until 2am at a local golf and tennis club where the Vice President's son had dragged the whole detail, intending to practice. He hadn't practiced that much. He was so gung-ho about taking to the court against Emma Jasohn, he'd ducked out of work and helicoptered up here from Oil Town without his wife, who thought he was hare-brained. Now he was upstairs in tennis whites and a party crowd and they were all invited, this was the new plan, for the whole party to just pile in the cars and head to the Sports Arena to watch Junior avenge an insult to the great state of Texas. He would tell her flat out: he was no bigot, but Texas wasn't a hellhole. That she'd knocked eight strong men and four furious women who'd tried the exact same thing on their fannies in Abilene could not deter him; he was better than those people—he'd summered in Maine, he'd played every day, all those years. His honest wrath would make him strong, anyhow. They'd see, everyone would see, who in that family had the real patriotism when it came to Texas. It was where you were from that mattered: your home. "It won't stand," he kept saying. "It won't stand."

The ground team in Amarillo had a decision to make. It was giddy-up time. The men from the Bureau submitted their expert opinion that the girl

wouldn't kill Junior, this wasn't a threat. She would make him look like a horse's ass, however. God only knew how much federal wealth and manpower had gone to waste all week over this adventure—if it were up to them, they'd let him face her anyway. At least the taxpayers would get some entertainment out of the deal. The Secret Service agreed, it really did; but horse's ass was a red flag and orders were orders.

They kept Junior in the room.

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