

Coulrophobia & Fata Morgana

..... *Stories*

Jacob M. Appel



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Rosalie

Contents

.....

1. The Butcher's Music	I
2. The Punishment	24
3. Pollen	41
4. Boundaries	62
5. Coulrophobia	81
6. Saluting the Magpie	99
7. Fata Morgana	124
8. Hearth and Home	140
9. Counting	156
10. Silent Theology	170

The Butcher's Music

.....

Two days after she finds a packaged ham tucked in among the Pass-over brisket, the butcher receives a letter from her sister. Her sister is a professional musician who plays a Tecchler cello worth several times more than Rita's butcher shop and Rita's garden apartment and Rita's six-year-old Toyota combined. Her sister is also a rabid vegetarian. In this age of mobile phones and email, reflects Rita, when astronauts watch from outer space as their wives give birth, it is so damn like Tammy to send an aerogram handwritten on onionskin paper. She passes the letter around the cutting table, taking pleasure in the way the bloody glove prints of the stand-in meatmen are soiling her sister's delicate script.

"She's a big deal, your sister," says Langer. The octogenarian holds the letter to the light, squinting as though in search of a hidden watermark. "My old lady goes in for classical music and she lets me know what's what."

"I thought you and your sister was—how do you call it?—estranged," Finklebaum objects. Finklebaum is a squat, round-faced man with a hideous mole above his left eye. Rita suspects he doesn't wash his hands after using the toilet.

"We've had our ups and downs," she says. "Nothing to write home about."

She misses working alongside men she can trust. She'd hoped the letter might break the ice, but now she no longer wants to tell Finklebaum and Langer and Gonzales that she hasn't spoken to Tammy in three years, not since Papa's funeral. That all she knows of her sister—such as the cost of the cello—she has learned on the radio. From outside, she hears the muffled chants of her one-time employees: "*Union-Busting-Isn't-Kosher*" and "*Butchers-Aren't-Chopped-Liver*." The seven idle meatmen take turns marching in a narrow rectangle between blue police sawhorses, decked out in their freshly-laundered whites, and every morning at opening, Marty Katz serves up a one-man rendition of "We Shall Overcome"—although it sounds more suited for *The Gong Show* than a labor action.

"Take *my* sister," says Finklebaum, splitting apart a lamb shank, "What a strikeout. Pardon my French, but I wouldn't piss on her if she caught fire."

"Vera has always been musical," adds Langer, still focused on his own wife. "She's a hot number out on that dance floor."

Gonzales flashes his gold front teeth and says nothing. The Guatemalan is mute from a boxing match—but he works miracles on the chuck steak and boils a mean cut of tongue.

"I'll be back in a few," says Rita as she tears off her apron. "Hold the fort."

She has sworn to herself that she won't bother Lance while he's working—he is technically her competitor, after all—but Tammy's note is too much. (She has also received another letter, registered mail, warning of an impending rabbinical inspection.) What Rita needs is a hug, a pep talk. Someone to remind her that life is worth the exertion. Yet even as she crosses the parking lot to the Gourmet's Paradise, ignoring the taunts of the strikers, she knows she will regret this moment of weakness. Lance Forand is a gifted cheeseman, sure,

and a first-rate friend, but he's far from the right guy for Rita. He is somehow *too* easy-going, *too* comfortable in his own shoes. Not even remotely a tortured soul. Besides, he likes her because she is a big woman—they are both big-bodied people—and she can't help resenting him for not objecting to her weight. No matter how often she sleeps with him, he will *never* be the right guy for her.

The air inside the Gourmet's Paradise is damp and chilly and smells a bit like a public bus terminal. They have an entire room devoted solely to meats, a smoked-fish display as long as a tennis court, sixty vats of flavored olives. They even have a woman on-staff who specializes in artichokes. *Only* artichokes. How in hell's name is she supposed to compete with an operation that can afford to hire a professional artichoker? (Or are you supposed to say "artichokress"—is that feminist or just plain silly?) In any case, for all of their fancy-shmancy experts, the glistening new Gourmet's Paradise is nearly empty at ten o'clock on a Tuesday morning. The lone customer in the cheese alcove is an elderly woman sniffing the hunks of Parmesan while waiting for her bakery order. She has affixed the bakery number to her lapel like a brooch. Lance stands bent low over his wooden workspace, hand-grating a colossal, spindle-shaped cheese. When he sees Rita, he grins—revealing his crooked incisors.

"Try this," he says.

"Please, I don't—"

"It's called *Oscypek*. From the Tatra Mountains in Poland," says Lance, holding up a clear yellow slice between his thumb and forefinger. "The first recipes date from the fifteenth century."

Rita lets him lower the morsel into her mouth. The flavor is sharp and salty. To Rita, it tastes like tears. "It's hard," she says.

"One hundred percent sheep's milk," explains Lance, glowing. "It's probably the oldest continuously-produced wood-smoked cheese in the world."

“I didn’t come here to talk about cheese,” says Rita. She does not want to cry while standing in front of the dairy counter, but she senses the tears rising behind her eyes. “Is there someplace we can talk?”

“I’m off in twenty minutes,” says Lance. “What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong, she thinks, is that you can’t see how upset I am. What’s wrong is that I’m about to burst out sobbing onto the Camembert and you’re working up to a goddamn lecture on cheddar-ing processes. “My sister’s coming to visit,” says Rita, waving the bloody letter like a battle flag. “Out of the blue. *I’ll be giving a series of charity concerts in New York at the end of the month and I thought I might drive up to Westford.*’ After nothing for three years. How am I supposed to respond to that?”

Lance reaches across the cheese counter, taking hold of Rita’s hands. He turns her palms upward to expose the prominent veins in her wrists and kisses each of them. He calls these veins liferores. “The way I see it, you’ve got two choices,” he answers, matter-of-fact. “Either you see her or you don’t.”

“I can’t not see her . . .”

“Then that’s that,” says Lance. “Anyway, is she really *so* bad?”

“There’s the problem. She’s not bad at all—at least in the way you mean. She bends over backwards not to do anything wrong. It’s just that deep down she thinks she’s better than me—and it drives me up the fucking wall.”

“That’s ridiculous. Better than you? You’re the most amazing human being I know.”

“I’m a butcher,” says Rita.

“So? What’s wrong with being a butcher?”

Everything, Rita wants to answer. But she is her Papa’s daughter to the marrow. She loves butchering—the sense of craft, of accomplishment—except when Tammy is around. “There’s a big

difference,” she says, “between being a pioneering woman cellist and a pioneering woman meat-cutter.”

“Nothing sexier than a gal who cuts meat.” Lance leans across the counter and kisses her on the lips, his massive body dislodging a pyramid of Appenzeller wedges. She relishes the tickle of his mustache. “Whoever said *music* tames the savage beast—or breast—or whatever—should have gotten hold of a cleaver,” he says. “But what do I know, right? I’m just a glorified milkman.”

Rita has an urge to tell him that she loves him—even though she doesn’t.

.....

Tammy arrives the following Saturday morning, driving a Jaguar convertible. The consortium of charities that is sponsoring her concerts cannot offer her an honorarium—that would alter their tax status in some arcane and inexplicable way—so they’ve made it up to her by renting out the most expensive car on the lot. The chassis is painted ash gray with black bumpers. The hubcaps gleam like circular saws and the silver trim, fashioned into lightning bolts, reminds Rita of bayonet blades. She would never want to drive a car like this. She’d be terrified of scratch marks, or pigeon droppings on the hood. That is another difference between her and Tammy. Tammy is confident.

Or at least Tammy *was* confident. The woman who steps out of the Jaguar is noticeably jittery, unable to keep her cigarette still in her hand. She sports reflective sunglasses and a floral-print batik kerchief—both of which would look stylish, even sophisticated, on a younger, thinner body. But the butcher’s sister, never a spare woman, has put on considerable weight. Fifty pounds? Seventy-five pounds? Enough to build hoops of fat around her neck. These hoops jounce as her body quivers. Rita wonders if

her sister has developed a drug habit or an eating disorder. Or both. The only thing unchanged about Tammy are her trademark woolen finger-warmers.

Rita is kneeling outside her apartment—the apartment they inherited jointly from their father, the apartment her sister technically still owns half of—tending a modest stand of crocuses and hyacinths. On her days off, she enjoys light gardening. (And it's good exercise too—maybe not *as* good as jogging or swimming—but it *is* exercise.)

“I wasn't sure I'd find you home,” says Tammy.

“Well, you did.”

Rita peels off her gardening gloves and tosses them into the wheelbarrow. She considers hugging her sister, but it doesn't happen. Instead, she stands arms akimbo and offers a non-committal expression—neither smile nor frown.

“I thought maybe you'd be out,” says Tammy. “Or still at the shop. One of the Jewish holidays is coming up, isn't it?”

“But I'm not out,” answers Rita. “I'm right here.”

“I suppose you are.”

Rita knows she should say something kind, but she is feeling defensive. She recognizes the psychological damage these visits can do. “You couldn't have chosen a more perfect day,” she says. “Fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” She recalls this last part from a book she was assigned in high school; she never finished the book—she rarely finished any books because she read too slowly—but she had fallen in love with that particular sentence.

“Let's drive someplace,” says Tammy. “Someplace quiet—with-out too many people. I'm not up to being around people right now.”

“Okay. You're the guest,” agrees Rita. She wants to be accommodating—and, in truth, she's never ridden in a convertible before. “Let me just put my tools away—”

“Can’t you leave them?” asks Tammy.

“Well, I guess.” Rita looks up and down the block. “But only for a few minutes. . . . Anyway, I can’t stay out too long.”

“Hot date?”

Rita ignores this. She hadn’t dated anyone for so long that now, frankly, admitting to a boyfriend embarrasses her. It seems almost unnatural *for her* to have a boyfriend. Even Lance didn’t ask her out for months because he’d thought she was a lesbian. Or asexual. Also, she dreads telling Tammy that Lance sells cheese for a living.

The inside of the Jaguar is cluttered with fast food wrappers and scattered sheet music. It stinks of cigarette smoke. Tammy removes a wooden box of compact discs from the passenger seat and stashes it in the back beside her overnight bag. They drive in silence for nearly fifteen minutes before Rita thinks of what to say.

“When’s your first concert?” she asks.

“Oh, that. Tonight, I guess.”

“You *guess*? What are you playing?”

“Nothing you’ve ever heard of.”

“Try me.”

“Von Dittersdorf’s Prelude in A Minor and Clementi’s Milan Suite.”

Rita gazes out the window at the burgeoning spring foliage. A rabbit darts through the low grass alongside the roadbed—and although the animal is not Kosher, Rita can easily imagine roping its feet and draining its blood through its neck. She has never heard of either Von Dittersdorf or Clementi.

“Something like Mozart,” Tammy elaborates, “and something like Beethoven.”

“Do you tell that to the audience? Now we’re going to play something like Mozart and then we’re going to play something like Beethoven.”

“We don’t need to,” Tammy answers earnestly.

They loop around the reservoir and cross over the Van Buren Turnpike, then veer onto a rough dirt road. This is the state game preserve where Papa took them hiking as kids. In the mid-morning, the countryside is alive with catbirds and warblers. Kingfishers perch on low-hanging braches, diving periodically for prey. Hostile black-and-yellow signs warn against carrying firearms onto public land. Also against harvesting mussels without a license.

“The human brain is fascinating, isn’t it?” chatters Tammy. “It’s uncanny how you can go away for a long time and then come home and still remember the layout of the streets.”

“You *have* been away a long time.”

Tammy cuts the engine. Eyeliner is trickling down her cheeks. “I’ve done something stupid,” she says. “Really stupid.”

Rita knows that her own idea of stupid is different from Tammy’s. But she imagines her sister is capable of forgetting her cello in a taxicab—like those spoiled nitwits one hears about on the news. Or maybe she has pinched rare recordings or musical manuscripts from a university library—in some sort of compulsive burst of kleptomania. That would just take the cake.

She follows her sister around the back of the vehicle, navigating an archipelago of mud puddles. Tammy pops the trunk. The encased cello—much to Rita’s dismay—lies horizontally beside two paper shopping bags. From one of the beige bags comes the sound of whimpering.

“Jesus Christ,” says Rita. It is a baby. A naked baby girl. What kind of lunatic locks a baby in the trunk of a car?

“I couldn’t go through with it,” rambles Tammy. “I did the one—and then I couldn’t go through with it. You’ve got to help me.”

Rita does not know what the woman is blubbering about. Then she peaks inside the other bag. The second baby, a boy, is the color of undercooked crab.

"I don't want to go to jail, Rita. You've got to help me. Please."

"Good God. What do you expect *me* to do?"

"Something, anything," pleads Tammy. "I don't know. Maybe you could cut them up and hide them."

Rita rocks the living child against her chest. She feels frantic—as though she might unravel—but the baby's presence is soothing. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" she says. "Good God! Just who the fuck do you think you are?!"

"I'm begging you," pleads Tammy.

"I should let you go to jail . . ."

"I know," says Tammy. "Believe me, I know."

"My boyfriend sells cheese, goddammit," says Rita—surprised by her own words. "You so much as blink the wrong way about it and I'll turn you in myself."

.....

Tammy is for burying the dead baby immediately, somewhere in the dense woodland off the hiking trails, but Rita insists on thinking the matter through. She drives them back to her apartment complex and rifles her linen closet for an infant-sized blanket. Eventually, she gives up and swaddles the girl in an old cotton tablecloth. Then she sets a cup of hot tea in front of her sister. "When you're ready," she says. "You'll tell me all about it."

"There's not much to tell," says Tammy. She toys with her tea bag, coiling the string around her index finger. "You know how it is."

"Honestly, Tam, I *don't* know how it is."

"I don't either," answers Tammy. "It just happened. There was this intern at the philharmonic in Berlin—"

"Please don't tell me he was a college kid."

Tammy shakes her head. "Younger. Sixteen. Seventeen. I asked him at one point, but I've blocked it out . . ."

"*Sixteen?*"

“I never even told him . . . I was going to do something about it—you know—but I kept putting it off and putting it off—because the thought of the vacuum and all that, it just scared the shit out of me. I mean, what if they suck out something you need . . . ? A liver or a kidney or Lord-knows-what. . . . And then it was too late.”

“So nobody knows about this? Nobody could tell?”

“I don’t think so,” says Tammy, smiling anemically. “I knew being a fatty would pay off one of these days.”

“Some payoff.”

“Anyway, I got the idea in my head that if I came here, you’d know what to do. That I could have the baby up in my old bedroom or something—and give it away. . . . But I thought I’d have at least a couple of weeks. And then last night at the hotel . . .”

“Maybe it was the stress . . .”

“I didn’t *set out* to do it. I was just so upset—overwrought, really. . . . The pillow was right there . . . and then it was all over before I knew what happened . . .”

“Until the second one came.”

Tammy nods. “I’m not a bad person. . . . You have to believe me, Rita. I’d kill myself if I thought you didn’t believe me.”

“I don’t know what to believe,” says Rita. “The only thing I know for certain is that we need to buy formula for that child.”

“It could have happened to anyone.”

“I suppose so.”

Tammy pushes the tea cup away. “Do you have to be like that?”

“Like what?”

“Judgmental.”

“How can I not be judgmental, Tam? You’ve murdered a baby, another human being. *Murdered.*”

“Why do you have to put it that way? You’ve got a freezer full of cold cuts and you don’t hear me making accusations. . . . I don’t

want to make excuses, but when you think about it, infants don't have any more cognitive ability than cattle . . ."

"I can't believe you're even thinking this."

"There are studies, Rita. I'm just saying."

"They don't put you in prison for killing cattle." Something about the word prison energizes Rita. She glances at her watch; it is nearly noon. "There's no point in arguing about this," she says. "What's done is done. Now you'd better get ready for that concert tonight."

"I'm not going. I'll tell them I'm sick."

Rita stands up. "Don't be foolish. Of course, you're going. You don't want to look suspicious." She can't believe she's talking this way, like someone out of a television crime drama. "You'll give your concert—and when you come back, we'll figure something out."

.....

When Tammy departs—somewhat assuaged by a double slice of strawberry shortcake—Rita phones Lance to cancel their dinner plans. No, she isn't angry at him. No, she isn't trying to let him down easy. It's medical, she explains. A female thing. Why can't he *please* give her some basic privacy?

"Let's get married and have a baby," he says.

Lance says this every time they speak on the phone—he's being both playful and sincere—but this time Rita feels her skin go hot.

"I don't want to get married," she says.

"Ever?"

"Look, I've got to go."

She scoops the living baby into her arms, careful to keep her palm under its head, and she drives down to the Quick & Easy for diapers and formula—bracing its tiny body against her chest with one hand while steering with the other. Rita's mind is suddenly

cluttered with additional responsibilities: finding a car seat, baby clothes, a pacifier. And there must be other necessities too, obvious ones, but easily forgotten over decades of adulthood.

Her errand proves anything but quick and easy. It turns out there are dozens of varieties of formula—containing whey proteins, containing casein proteins, with and without palm olein oil. Parent’s Choice, Parent’s Choice Plus. Super Similac. Carnation. Angled mirrors run above the highest shelves of the minimart—to prevent shoplifting—and she notices the salesclerk is watching her. He is a tall, elderly Sikh with a full hoary beard. Rita quickly selects the most expensive package of formula. It’s like buying wine, she thinks. Wine for babies. She purchases enough diapers to survive nuclear winter—at least, a short one. When she checks out, the old man smiles approvingly at the infant.

“A beautiful child,” he says.

He does not mention the tablecloth—which Rita is prepared to pass off as an ancient Jewish tradition.

“Thank you,” she says.

“What is her name?”

Rita’s mind goes blank. She has somehow forgotten that babies have names.

“Carnation,” she blurts out.

“A beautiful name,” says the clerk. “Very American.”

Carnation. How ironic. While Rita rocks the infant to sleep—in a toaster-sized cradle she retrieves from the storeroom—she remembers the grammar-school Mother’s Day pageants of her childhood. All the girls with living mothers wore red carnations. She and Tammy wore white ones. Maybe that is why they have no mothering instincts of their own. “Don’t worry, Carnation,” she whispers. “We’ll find a mommy for you. A good mommy. I promise.”

Rita feeds the baby her gourmet formula. After that, she kills time until dark. The entire afternoon is a blur; she picks up a magazine, but rereads the same sentence several dozen times. She takes a fitful nap on the sofa in the living room. The springs on the sofa are busted and keep poking her under the ribs. While she is dozing, Lance leaves a lengthy, apologetic message on her answering machine. Then another. Later, a mechanized voice named “Charlie the Computer” phones to offer her a “sensational deal” on a cruise vacation. Meanwhile, the infant dozes soundly, indifferent to the surrounding chaos, to her dead twin in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator.

The apartment feels frigid, draughty. When the last sliver of sunlight drops behind the tree line, Rita rummages through her closet again—this time for a shoe box. She finds one, but it is too small. Her second search produces a larger container left over from a pair of hiking boots. This fits perfectly. Rita lowers the dead baby into the makeshift coffin, touching its pallid little fingers, its postage stamp nose, its tiny uncircumcised penis. She removes one of the rusty free-weights from her father’s old dumbbell—ten pounds—and places it gently on the infant’s chest. Then, reluctantly, she begins wrapping up the package like a birthday present. Without thinking, she flips on the radio. Her sister is playing. Something like Beethoven. It is uncanny how normal everything seems.

Midnight arrives and Rita drives out to the public marina. She had fed the infant again and left her cooing in a makeshift crib fashioned from three bath towels and a plastic laundry basket. This is risky, admittedly irresponsible, but some things a child—even a newborn—should never see.

She takes a stroll on a long, abandoned pier. Many of the slats in the jetty are missing. When she returns home, her sister is waiting at the kitchen table.

Tammy is simultaneously chain-smoking and spooning chocolate ice cream from the carton. “Did you . . .?”

“Everything is taken care of,” says Rita.

Almost everything. At least ½ of everything.

The baby starts crying and they exchange uncertain looks.

.....

They are not in agreement about Carnation. They cannot even agree to call her Carnation. Tammy insists that it is her right to name the child—it’s *her* baby, after all, not Rita’s—and that she isn’t ready for such a drastic step. Such a *commitment*. Rita doesn’t understand what’s so drastic about giving the girl a name. If not Carnation, then something else. Jennifer, Helga, Africa. Even Karnation with a “K”! Obviously, not naming the baby isn’t a viable option. They argue in loud whispers, so as not to wake the subject of controversy.

“I suppose we can let the new parents choose a name. They’ll probably change it anyway,” concedes Rita. She has slipped into her angora sweater and is sipping hot cocoa while her sister paces the linoleum—although, at Tammy’s weight, it might better be described as shuffling. Has she *no* shame? Does she really refer to herself as a fatty? Rita can hardly bear to look at her sister; it is like peeking into a reflective glass, a warped and prophetic mirror. She suddenly regrets the hot cocoa and pours the remainder of the mug into the sink. Time to take control of her life. “I’ll start calling adoption agencies first thing on Monday,” she says.

“Who says I’m putting her up for adoption?”

“What else is there?” demands Rita. “I can look after her for a few days, but I’m not a parent, Tam. I just don’t have that in me.”

“I wouldn’t expect that of you. Honestly—and don’t take this the wrong way—I wouldn’t want you to keep her.”