

Lesser Escape Artists

1.

There's blood in the end. I'm not going to toy with your emotions by keeping you in the dark about that. He was, after all, an unusual rabbit. (Don't worry, an assistant meat man said, that critter could talk his way out of anything.)

There we stood: she, possibly pregnant, rabbit in hand; butcher, cleaver dangling, hand on skinned haunch (nanny or billy not clear); me, distracted by movement in a back shop corner.

It was your standard butcher shop: glass case, filigreed walls, wood chopping block (waist-high, double-wide), the small stage where the Pips would later perform. The metallic tang of raw meat. Behind the counter, shelves reached to the ceiling, packed with jars and cans (kidney pies, pickled pig parts). We failed to see the goat lurking in the shadows.

What I learned: what you escape to as important as what you escape from.

But first, the rabbit. We knew nothing of breeds. Suspected we might be breeders ourselves (what got us into this). Five-and-a-half pounds, deep red coat, wild ears, muscular flank, well-rounded hind quarters. We didn't appreciate what we had, even apart from his ability to wax philosophical. ("Desire fractures us all," said the rabbit, about to go on the chopping block.)

2.

Not even the butcher wanted a blind rabbit.

"What am I supposed to do with *that*?" he asked, cleaver in hand. Tall and thin, he wore a white apron over a crisp white shirt. That mesmerizing knife (wood handle, double rivets, angled blade). "Hasenpfeffer?" he spat. "Pot pie?"

We stood before the meat case. A chalked sign on top announced the day's special. She held the rabbit by its ears.

"Blind taste test?" she offered. He missed the humor.

We heard music coming from the thermostat, the heating vent.

"How do I know where that's been." The meat man made a face, fussy. The cleaver caught his reflection. "Besides, I've got my fingers in other pies right now."

He was no ordinary butcher. Logged thirty-plus years in theoretical physics. String theory (Einstein's violin, etc.). The last twenty of those working with the knowledge the theory didn't hold up. He told us: "You work on it even though you know it's not the real thing, because it's as close as you know how to get."

"Word," she said in solidarity. Her fingers touched my arm.

"Meanwhile," said the butcher, gaze softening as he reconsidered her, "the company is charming and the food is good."¹

From the next room, a man muttered something about mung bean stew.

On the shop stage, a string quartet set up and played. Two male, two female. Blood-stained white dinner jackets. The viola looked suspiciously like a loin of beef. They butchered Mahler.

¹ *The Trouble with Physics*, Lee Smolin

An assistant meat man hovered, awaiting instructions. Overhead hung a string of geese, their necks impossibly long.

She was looking for a way out. Eight days earlier had come home with a cleaver of her own: "This us isn't working."

Me: (flummoxed, flabbergasted)

She: "Hasn't been for a while. You see it too."

I didn't. Besides, I said, in a world this crazy we need something to count on, however imperfect.

Not so, she said. "What you call stability, I call stasis. It's stifling."

I got her to give it a fortnight. Sure she'd come around. We'd shake it up. A phase – lunar cycles, etc. Then, panic. Her period, already late, took a pass.

Step 1: To make a delicious rabbit stew, first catch you a rabbit.²

BRIDGE

Dorothy Dietrich was the first escapologist to perfect the bullet catch, taking a .22 in the teeth. A trick even Houdini never attempted – too much risk.

3.

The special that day was fainting goat.

The case contained the usual items: black pudding, head cheese, sheep's stomach, sundry sausages. The cellist sawed at his instrument. We needed to string together a convincing story to get rid of the rabbit.

² Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management*

I told a tale: young boy borrows gun, goes hunting; hare scared sightless. The butcher didn't bite. Went about his work. Cleaver sang against chopping block. In the shadows, the goat flinched, nearly fainted.

She (to me, incredulous): "Why lie?"

It was true I'd fudged our facts: I'd thought a kid would bring us closer. She was skeptical. Still, we'd always said if we did do it, we'd go old school. Home birth. Midwife. Doula. So naturally, I thought, the old rabbit test to prove pregnancy or no.

"What is *this*?" she'd said when I brought him home. She unveiled his privates. "The rabbit has to have girl parts. That's the whole point." On top of that, he was blind. She was unhappy with me. She'd been reading Mailer – *The Fight, Executioner's Song*. "There's something to be said for brutal honesty," she said.

So: what to do about the furry fellow with the wrong parts.

"We take him to the woods," I said. "Turn him loose."

"He's BLIND," she shouted. "You might as well kill him yourself." I suggested a search for an adoptive home. She was adamant: rabbit disposal; drugstore pregnancy test.

Back at the meat counter, she explained our true circumstances.

"You know that test is long debunked," the meat man said. "No science to it."

She looked daggers at me (eyes aflame with butchered Mahler).

"Science also shows us that all orbits are elliptical," the rabbit offered.

Me: (There's truthiness here. I could learn from this fellow.)

To which the butcher replied, "Your pickle is of a different nature." The meat man spoke of the failings of theory (string and otherwise). Once a firm believer in

parallel worlds, "Now I tend to trust what's in front of me." He arranged chicken hearts in a corner of the display case.

"Trust this," she said, proffering the rabbit. "Please." Her pause pregnant. "We need to settle our situation – once and for all." Looking back, you could say I was blind to certain signs.

Step 2: Remove lungs heart liver kidneys.

The butcher smiled. Sweet on her, but a man of principle. He took three yellow pills from an apron pocket, mouthed and swallowed them.

On the counter, pig's trotters. Sow's ears.

He pointed the knife skyward. "Monogamy is counterproductive," he said. He had a full hermeneutic for human relationship modeled above him in sausage and string. "Besides," said the butcher, "why bring a child into such a world?" Cleaver whacked meat, wood. "Particles flying everywhere. No strings connect."

Bits of bone clipped our clothing.

"Abstractions," she said. "Here we are in front of you." She batted her eyelids. "What's one rabbit more or less?"

Me (waffling): "How can we do this to a sentient being?"

"A fair point," said the rabbit. "Why make me your scapegoat."

She lowered him, as if out of earshot. To me: "His plight is not your problem. For you," she said, "two things matter only: sympathetic story; dip stick urine test."

Fine. I phoned a pharmacy, discreet. They'd deliver. From the next room, a meat man requested the Moroccan workers' remix.

The quartet stopped playing. Slunk away in shame.

The sausages suspected a link.

Me (to her): "He doesn't want the rabbit."

She: "Convince him."

Somewhere a gun had gone off (a .22), a bullet raced toward me, and I remained (mostly) unaware. Distracted by the goat in back, now furtive in tan raincoat and porkpie hat. Unsteadily biped. Scruffy chin hair. It saw me see it behind sunglasses. Its legs stiffened; wobbled. I sensed forces at play. I watched the animal – rubber hands attached haphazard to sleeves – handle a can. Remove it from a shelf clutched between hooves: two pounds of Spotted Dick.

"Do us all a favor," the butcher said. "Take your rabbit and go home."

The rabbit's ears twitched. "Given half a chance," he told the butcher, "You and I could get along."

The meat man wrapped two brown paper packages. Tied them with string.

"Today's special," he told us. "On the house."

He reclaimed his cleaver. The packages quaked, toppled over.

The goat in back dropped the can, clattering, to the floor.

BRIDGE

Turned out the rabbit was something of an expert in legerdemain. He'd learned from the best: "For Houdini," he told anyone who would listen, "identity was something you escaped *into* from your past, leaving behind lovers, limitations – whatever bound you."³

³ *Houdini's Box*, Adam Phillips (Butchered Edition)

She: "I want someone I'm willing to stick my neck out for."

Mahler: (crescendo)

Mailer: "A cleaver is the only knife designed to be swung like a hammer."⁴

Me: I like Mahler more than Mailer (much).

Rabbit (dangling): "What Houdini's audience came to see him escape from was shame."⁵ He paused. "Oh, and death," he added. "Let's not forget death."⁶

4.

He didn't look like a butcher. Long head and wire-frame glasses, he looked like the kindly pharmacist in a nostalgic television drama. Behind the counter, he wrestled thrashing hoofs. He had the goat spread-eagled on the chopping block.

Stacked neatly beside: 1 raincoat, 1 porkpie hat, 1 pair folded Ray-Bans.

The can of Spotted Dick lay abandoned on the floor.

I felt faint. "I'm not comfortable with where this is headed."

"It's too much," she told the butcher. "What we swallow to have someone to hold." The rabbit wiggled in her grasp.

Me: "It's the cost of companionship."

She: "It can't be." Desperation in her voice. "Why settle for so little?"

In the thinking fortnight, there'd been little discussion – little dissension. I'd read this as progress. Now, before the meat case, the rabbit dangled between us like a foregone conclusion.

⁴ *Mr. Mailer's Big Book of Husbandry*

⁵ *Houdini's Box*, Adam Phillips

⁶ *The Rabbit's Guide to Escape Artistry* (Wild Hare Edition)

“Come on,” she urged the meat man. “Sometimes humans have to help each other.” He seemed to soften. But then:

Clad in rabbit-fur coats and Ray-Bans, three goats (bipedal) took the small stage. Two carried Fender Stratocaster guitars with some urgency. The third held a boom box, the chalked Special sign tucked under his wing.

The rabbit: "Tell me we're having goat for dinner."

An assistant meat man bleated in the corner, a handful of string cheese.

I felt culpable. I liked quantifiable solids. Stable trajectories.

Hooves scratched against chopping block. The butcher stayed the squirming with an expert hand. Tightened his grip on the cleaver.

Onstage, the disguised goats started to sing:

It's poetry in motion

She turned her tender eyes to me

Guitars jangled. A boom box behind them kept the beat.

Spheres are in commotion

Elements in harmony

The butcher sharpened his blade on a long steel. I felt my innards go fluid.

Step 3: Joint the rabbit into back legs, front legs, saddle. Cut the saddle in two.

The stage goats executed a wobbly shuffle step.

The butcher tested the blade's bite. "I'm a meat man. Not some second-hand shop to ditch undesirables."

She: "Think of it as mercy. This us is over. The string's played out." She turned to me. Tenderness in her eyes. "Sorry, but someone had to cut the cord."

I took the bullet in the teeth – it shattered them and kept going.

The stage goats executed a wobbly shuffle step:

She blinded me with science

Failed me in biology

The butcher raised his cleaver in the air.

The rabbit: "What lesser escape artists fail to learn: getting free is the adventure, not being free."⁷

BRIDGE

Houdini's binary: paralysis = failure; mobility = success.

Mailer: "There is nothing theoretical about a punch in the face."⁸

Mahler: "I want it to fall like an axe."⁹

Step 4: Turn up the heat in a heavy-base fry pan.

5.

Cleaver poised in mid-air, goat on the block, the head man attempted to place it all in terms of the cosmological constant: "There's a counter-energy required to keep the universe in static equilibrium."

Until then, I'd never thought of myself as a repulsive force.

He brought the cleaver down.

The goats, adjusting Ray-Bans for maximum coverage, gave it all they had:

Blinded me with science

SCIENCE! SCIENCE!

⁷ *Houdini's Box*, Adam Phillips (Open Door Edition)

⁸ *Mr. Mailer's Book of Bluster* (Blockbuster Edition)

⁹ Score Notes, Symphony #6 in A Minor, Gustav Mahler

That was when things took a turn – goat hindquarters now divided into equal loins. With a clatter of hooves, the band’s lead goat keeled over.

My life flashed. Safe. Small. The bullet clipped my jaw, veered south.

A trio of meat inspectors – each wearing amber-tinted alchemist goggles – arrived to investigate.

The butcher (blood-spattered) raised an eyebrow.

The rabbit hung perfectly still in her grip. She watched the door, intent on a different arrival.

The butcher pressed a button under the counter. Cat’s cradles emerged on tabletop displays. A web of string filled the air. I brushed some off my face. Felt her bullet lodge in my back. Painful, but I’d live.

A synthesized fanfare, and the assistant meat men burst through swinging doors, moving to the back beat and singing the background parts.

Sci-ence! Sci-ence!

Onstage, the two unfainted goats – stunned, saddened – did their best to carry on. Slashing guitars. The boom box played a keyboard fill. The meat cutters moved as one. A half-dozen, a chorus line in blinding white butcher coats. Their choreography impeccable. Shuffle step on the downbeat. A flourish of arms. They were Pips: supreme. They wore splatter shields. Half-turns and hip flourishes, proto-Motown moves. Bodies in profile, they turned their heads to us:

When she’s dancing close to me

I can smell the chemicals

Full turn. Hand clap. They sliced the air with synced cleavers. We wiped blood from our brows.

Step 5: Sear the rabbit joints in the hot pan.

The rabbit listened close, sniffing for opportunity. I, too, strained to see.

The lead goat struggled to his back feet. Rejoined the band and brought the tune to a close. The meat inspectors discovered the chalked Special sign. Regarded the cleaved goat. On stage, the band eyed the exit. Elaborate string structures obscured the way. I spied her across the room, as already at a great distance.

The inspectors huddled, goggle-eyed. One typed into a handheld device that then spat out a paper. He handed it to the butcher.

Meat man: "What's this?"

"Restraining order." The inspector fingered the Special sign. "Til we decide if it's a protected species."

Rabbit: "Are any of us really protected?"

I caught his blind eye. Determined to help him how I could.

The goats, rejuvenated, kicked off a deep groove.

The butcher, now meatless, began to see the rabbit in a new light.

BRIDGE

A partial list of things to escape from: handcuffs, straitjackets, cages, coffins, small boys, large guns, steel boxes, a firm grip on your ears, barrels, bags (cloth), dead relationships, burning buildings, string quartets that butcher Mahler.

6.

In the end, of course, none of us escape the blade.

The rabbit saw it coming.

The butcher grabbed a marker and a blood-stained chunk of poster board.

Today's special, he scribbled. *Blind rabbit*.

By now, cat's cradles connected everything in the shop. The butcher waved his cleaver to slice free a space for the sign.

The music got festive. The goats shed their coats and became a horn section, swinging side to side to Motown ("Ain't Too Proud to Beg"). The lead goat did the Funky Chicken.

I watched for an opening.

Rabbit: ears cocked.

Behind us, the door opened and the pharmacy lackey strolled in.

In a fine bit of choreography of her own, she tossed rabbit to butcher, grabbed drugstore package. Tore it open.

The meat man held the hare. Laid its head on the chopping block.

The rabbit, remarkably calm: "Historically, butchers did not serve on juries because their work was thought to harden their hearts."¹⁰

The meat man raised his cleaver high. "Nothing against you," he said. "It's the way the world works."

"Here goes," she said. Stuck the pee stick between her legs.

¹⁰ *Emile or, On Education*, Jean Jacques Rousseau (Approximated)

We all waited. Butcher, blade raised. Me, eyeing rabbit escape routes. Lackey looking for a tip. Inspectors, goggle-eyed.

Rabbit: "All history is the history of unintended consequence."

"Pink," she pronounced. "I'm free." Pecked my cheek and left.

The band kicked into a Memphis groove. The lackey left behind her (leaving the door open). Inspectors and meat men cheered. Even I felt happy for her.

In the melee, the rabbit wiggled free. I saw the way, clear. Tossed a coin to signal him. It bounced on the cutting board. He executed an elegant backflip, landed on all fours. High-tailed it for the open door.

It happened so fast: Hare hops into street. Blind to oncoming meat truck (oh bitter irony). You can imagine the rest. Me, I closed my eyes. There are two theories about what happened next. The prevailing one is simple: blood; traces of fur smeared a considerable distance. Critter crawls off to die. That's the official story. Even a body, found later. I almost bought it. Then, a few weeks after, I got a package in the mail – a manila envelope containing only a blood-stained coin. Real? Some assistant meat man's cruel joke? What do you think?

In a world this chaotic, I choose to believe.