

Long
Island
Compro-
mise

New York Times
bestselling
author of
Fleishman
Is in
Trouble

TAFFY
BRODESSER-
AKNER

A novel



BY TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER

Fleishman Is in Trouble
Long Island Compromise



RANDOM HOUSE

New York

Long Island **Compromise**

A Novel

TAFFY
BRODESSER-
AKNER

Long Island Compromise is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Taffy Brodesser-Akner

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

RANDOM HOUSE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

The use of lyrics for *The Secret Garden* was granted by Marsha Norman. The Tony Award–winning stage musical adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's book *The Secret Garden* has a book and lyrics by Marsha Norman and music by Lucy Simon. For licensing inquiries and materials, please visit www.concordtheatricals.com.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Brodesser-Akner, Taffy, author.

TITLE: Long Island compromise / by Taffy Brodesser-Akner.

DESCRIPTION: First edition. | New York: Random House, 2024.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2023059400 (print) | LCCN 2023059401 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593133491 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593133507 (e-book)

SUBJECTS: LCGFT: Novels.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3602.R63457 L66 2024 (print) | LCC PS3602.R63457 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240117

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023059400>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023059401>

Ebook ISBN 9780593133507

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Mary A. Wirth, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Tyler Comrie

ep_prh_7.0_147466945_c0_r0

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[A Dybbuk in the Works](#)

[Part 1: Family Business](#)

[Your Future Now](#)

[The Hard Life Buffet](#)

[Semantic Evacuation](#)

[Veal, or the Dybbuk](#)

[Part 2: The Plastic Hour](#)

[Styrofoam](#)

[Lass, Wouldst Thou 'Low Me Rest Here? I've Ridden Quite Far](#)

[Part 3: The Fletcher Disappearance](#)

[The Terrible Ending](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

147466945

For my parents

Remember how you made me crazy?

—DON HENLEY, “THE BOYS OF SUMMER”

A DYBBUK IN THE WORKS

DO YOU WANT to hear a story with a terrible ending?

On Wednesday, March 12, 1980, Carl Fletcher, one of the richest men in the Long Island suburb where we grew up, was kidnapped from his driveway on his way to work.

It had been an unremarkable morning. Carl had awoken and showered and dressed and gone downstairs to kiss his wife, Ruth, goodbye, same as always. Ruth had already presented their two sons, Nathan and Bernard, with their bowls of Product 19 when Carl patted them on the head and left the kitchen and headed out the door into the bright sunlight. The weather was still generally straightforward back then, and spring peeked through the slush of a latest-winter storm that was taking its time to melt. The reflection blinded him a little; his vision was still pocked with dark spots when he inserted the keys into the door of the Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham he'd purchased the previous year.

His brain hadn't yet registered the sound of someone else's footsteps through the slush before a man leapt from behind onto Carl's back and hooded him in one fast, balletic move, turning Carl's world instantly to black. Inside the hood were the amplified sounds of Carl's own suddenly fast breathing and grunting. Someone else—there were two men—pulled the keys from the lock and settled himself into the driver's seat while the first man struggled with Carl. Now, Carl was a tall man. The two men seemed significantly smaller. It was only the shock of the attack that allowed them to successfully wrest Carl into the footwell of his car.

The Brougham drove away, down and out the C-shaped driveway, away from the giant waterfront Tudor on St. James Drive where the Fletchers lived. It drove through the township of Middle Rock, making a right onto Ocean

Vista Road, passing the Fletchers' neighbors' own colossal homes, then over the bridge, then gliding right by, at the 1.8-mile mark, the sixteen-acre estate where Carl had grown up and where his mother was sitting at a Queen Anne desk right at that very moment, writing checks to the electric company and to the synagogue. Then, past the library, past the butcher, past Duplo's Ski and Skate Shop, where Carl's mother had bought him roller skates as a child and where he himself had just recently bought a first tennis racquet for his older son; past the turnoff to the synagogue where Carl had been bar mitzvahed; past the reception hall where he'd gotten married; past the two-block ghetto of auto repair shops, making a right turn onto Shore Turnpike and out of Middle Rock, which, until that moment, was most famous for being the setting of a famous novel from the 1920s (and its author's residence there) and, since, for being the first American suburb to arrive at a Jewish population of fifty percent.

The kidnapers drove for about an hour until they stopped, pulled Carl out of the footwell, and dragged him up a few steps, into somewhere cavernous (the echo of the footsteps told Carl the place was cavernous), then dragged him down two flights of what felt like the same kind of serrated steel-tread stairs they had at the factory that Carl owned, Consolidated Packing Solutions, Ltd. From the steps he was pushed into a small space that he surmised was a closet. The dark became darkest. The Brougham was never found.

Carl was not suspected to be missing until around three o'clock that afternoon. An hour before that, Ruth had looked at the clock and realized that it was time to pick up Nathan from school. She was in the early stages of her third pregnancy and her morning sickness hadn't abated by the afternoon and she was concerned it wasn't actually morning sickness but a virus that had sent her to the couch that morning and kept her there for most of the afternoon, letting Bernard, who was four, watch three reruns of *Gilligan's Island* in a row. She considered calling her friend Linda Messinger and asking her to pick Nathan up, but she'd already asked Linda to take him to school in the morning in the first place with her own six-year-old, Jared. Linda did not yet know that Ruth was pregnant, and so Ruth didn't want to

ask her—a two-way favor would have sold Ruth and her condition out, and Ruth didn't want anyone to know this early, not even Linda Messinger, who she wasn't always so sure was rooting for her. She instead called her mother-in-law, Phyllis. Phyllis was a widow with a driver and lived just up the road, a spry fifty-five or fifty (she had destroyed all records of her birth when she turned thirty-six or thirty-one—nobody knew for sure).

While Ruth waited for Nathan, she called the factory to ask Carl if he could pick up eggs and spaghetti on his way home. Carl's secretary, Hannah Zolinski, answered the phone and made noises of delay and then confusion and then finally told Ruth that Carl had never made it into the office that day. Hannah had assumed he was taking a day off. She'd been surprised, she told Ruth, since there was a purchase order that needed fulfilling for the Albertson's account, and Carl had expressed concern the day before that the drafting department was lagging on the order. This would put the factory behind schedule by days or weeks. Hannah hadn't called him at home because, she told Ruth, there was no need to; the drafting department had delivered and everything was running smoothly for Albertson. (Secretly, Hannah was worried that Carl *had* told her he was taking the day off and she hadn't remembered, which would make Carl angry. Hannah had recently become engaged to a man from the factory's engineering department and had already been berated by Carl for her distraction several times in the prior two weeks. Carl, Hannah knew, took pride in a distinct form of management: running "a tight ship," which mostly meant walking around with the baseline assumption that everyone was stealing from him constantly—sometimes in the form of money, but especially in the form of time. This was a lesson passed to him by his own father, who had founded and run the factory all the way up to his death, and this was why Carl rarely took time off, much less spontaneous time, and also why Hannah later told the police that she felt she would have remembered it if Carl had told her he was taking the day.)

Ruth hung up the phone, her finger to her mouth. She stood for a long minute, the phone going dead, then silent, then the dial tone, then the obscene, too-loud clamor of a 1980s kitchen phone off the hook. Her mother-in-law walked in and looked from Ruth to the phone and then back to Ruth.

“What is wrong with you?” Phyllis asked.

Within twenty minutes, the local police arrived. Within an hour, Ruth’s mother, Lipshe, entered. Within twenty-four hours, the FBI was setting up camp at Carl and Ruth’s home: five full-time agents (two of whom were named John), one of them a woman (Leslie), around the clock, sleeping in the guest rooms and the kids’ rooms and the living room. There were three members of the Middle Rock Police Department assigned to the house, but they were mostly useless. Owing to its wealth and relative distance from anything that resembled a working-class neighborhood, Middle Rock was a preternaturally safe place in the 1980s, and the police there had no experience dealing with something as strange and theoretically violent as a suddenly missing person.

Ruth showed the agents recent pictures of Carl from their nephew’s bar mitzvah and gave a description: six foot three, meaty but not fat, a prolific head of beautiful brown hair that defied logic—at thirty-three, a mere one on the Hamilton-Norwood baldness scale, same as when she met him—brown eyes that always looked like they were in a squint but were nonetheless kind, and a nose whose apex pointed downward so that he almost always looked like he was slightly repulsed by the thing he was looking at. Ruth’s eyes stopped on a picture of the two of them dancing, her looking over her shoulder, perhaps her name being called by someone or just the photographer who took the picture. “This is us dancing,” she said. The agents nodded thoughtfully and wrote in their notepads.

And they asked questions: Was anyone *angry* at him? Did anyone have reason to *threaten* him? Did he ever talk about *enemies*, or even something more innocuous, like a random person who hated him? Was there—just hear us out—was there possibly another woman?

“You keep mentioning this Hannah Zolinski,” one of the Johns said, checking his notes.

“She’s his *secretary*,” Ruth said, exasperated. She did not like feeling accused; she did not like that in addition to managing the stress of this absurd situation, she had to also clear her husband’s reputation when it seemed very clear to nearly everyone that he was a victim of something. “If you knew how

he gets frustrated with her,” she tried. Then, quickly, as if this might vindicate him in his absence: “She’s engaged! Hannah is recently engaged! To a Socialist!”

It was chaos. Men Ruth had never seen before walking in and around her house. Vans in her driveway. The phone ringing and ringing. Into this walked Phyllis’s nephew, Arthur Lindenblatt. He was a wills and trusts lawyer, and, more importantly, the family’s wills and trusts lawyer, which made him the family lawyer, since prior to just that moment, the Fletchers had had no need for a lawyer beyond their extensive wills and their massive trusts. Phyllis had called him right after the police had contacted the FBI. He’d been working from home that day at his house in Roslyn because he had a date at the Nassau County courthouse for a will declaration in the late afternoon. He had been headed into his car when his wife, Yvonne, bellowed to him from the doorway and told him that his aunt Phyllis was on the phone and that it was urgent.

Arthur never made it to court that day. He arrived at the Fletchers’ house amid one of the first of several tense exchanges between the agents and Phyllis. One of them had just referred to Phyllis as Ruth’s mother—“What time did you call your mother again?” asked one of the Johns—and Phyllis was treating them to a long-form lecture on the Fletcher family tree and how it wasn’t too complex to keep it all together and how a person should do his job correctly if a person wanted to seem competent to the people relying upon him.

“So you see, this is my daughter-*in-law*,” Phyllis was saying when Arthur walked in, wearing his trench coat, his briefcase in hand. “It is *my son* who is missing. This isn’t so much to keep straight.”

The agents stared between them, more confused than ever. Phyllis and Ruth shared a specific pointiness of the face. They shared chins that curved to a forward point (an aspect that was prettier on Ruth than it was on Phyllis) and noses that had been reshaped by the same plastic surgeon in Manhattan, a doctor known throughout Long Island for being able to coax something parenthesis-shaped—or curly-bracket-shaped even—into not the ski slope that all the Jewish girls thought they wanted but should not have for its

dissonance with their other fairly prominent, highly Semitic features, but something more appropriate: the dignified snub nose instead, with its 106-degree nasal tip rotation, narrowed at the end to a slightly wider point that might seem more coherent with the rest of a Jewish face. So many mothers and daughters ordered that same nose from that same doctor that it stands to reason that if Lamarckian evolution theory was real, the daughter's daughter would just be born with that exact new nose, which itself would come to define the American Jewish nose. Phyllis and Ruth were not mother and daughter, obviously, but they both had paid separate visits to this doctor years before they'd ever met. Phyllis and Ruth also shared the same hint-of-mahogany hair and brown eyes, ironed dry at each shampoo (Lamarckian evolution theory would also finally yield straight-haired Jewish girls, though this would stymie the American economy). All to say that Carl had married a version of his mother, and even a gifted federal investigator, if Gentile, might reasonably be mixed up over who was biologically related to whom.

“I can answer any questions,” Arthur told the agents, setting down his briefcase and shaking their hands. “Why not let Ruth see to the children?”, and Ruth absconded to her bedroom, where her own mother comforted her in Yiddish as Ruth cried into her lap. (Arthur's protectiveness was, at first, interpreted as a need to control information and would later be the main reason the agents took a brief interest in him as a possible suspect. But Arthur wasn't controlling; he was performing from muscle memory. Arthur was a mild, kind man who was prone to co-dependence and had years of experience by then defusing his aunt Phyllis's great temper through obedience and servitude.)

So the agents asked their less gentle questions about the family to Arthur. These new questions were, of course, about money. For those agents had perfunctorily sniffed around for women and car accidents and nervous breakdowns, almost out of politeness, but they had taken one look at this house—the largest on a block of extremely robbable homes, the deck that reached over the Long Island Sound like the Sound was their own personal swimming pool, their own personal swimming pool, the crescent driveway, the modern appliances, the marble bathrooms, the velvet couches, a Jaguar

XJ6 (Ruth's) in the driveway. Then they'd heard from the local police all about the mother who lived a mile away on a sixteen-acre estate on the same water and they pretty much knew immediately what was really going on here, which was that the Fletchers were not just rich but extraordinarily, absurdly, kidnappably rich.

Meanwhile, Phyllis had set herself up in Carl's study and responded to phone calls from the shul's Sisterhood and from the women of the Historical Society of Middle Rock (she was the president of both). Phyllis rolled calls to her various connections—the president of the township, the mayor, their councilman, a state senator who had been helpful on factory matters in the past, one of the several local representatives that the Fletchers had regularly welcomed to holiday dinners and their children's bar and bat mitzvahs—all of whom reassured her that there was a multitude of help set on finding Carl, a task force coming out of every office, that every resource was being deployed, that they knew exactly who she was and therefore exactly who Carl was. The Johns and Leslie begged Phyllis to halt her interference and let them run point, but there was no stopping her. Phyllis had a suspicion, a deeply Jewish one borne of events that had played out in her very lifetime, that actually it was her connections that would help her here instead of the law enforcement that was tasked with it—that the fast and enthusiastic location of her missing son, more and more missing as time went on, would happen not by someone obligated to help her but by someone trying to please her.

By the time the synagogue's Men's Club was forming search parties, the FBI agents were passively condoning them. They saw that they couldn't stop Phyllis's force, so they let it inform their strategy. The agents figured that this might be the kind of thing that showed a potential kidnapper that nobody had a clue where to look, which, in turn, might reassure him and make him lazy. There were all-points bulletins and sketches sent over something called a modem out to various police networks. There were wiretaps and surveillance cameras installed all over the property. There was license plate monitoring on the Long Island Expressway, as though Carl might just be driving back and forth from Middle Rock to Riverhead, Middle Rock to Riverhead.

But nobody could find him. They couldn't even *imagine* where he was. His car was gone; it might as well have been sucked up into the sky. As the first day turned into the second and then the third, the people forming guesses about Carl's whereabouts couldn't even finish their thoughts, the guesses becoming vapor in their mouths before they could even become full sentences. A person couldn't square these scenarios with the gruff, soft, totally bland fixture of Middle Rock who suddenly had a story—who suddenly had a *soul*—the minute he was disappeared from his driveway on a random Wednesday in March.

—

A KIDNAPPING. IN Middle Rock. A *kidnapping*? In *Middle Rock*? A place that watched the world from a safe distance—a place that got to choose when and how to interact with that world—now inside its grit, inside the dirty, crime-filled movies it had seen at the triplex on Spring Avenue Road, inside of the clandestine cesspool that belonged to tabloid newspapers and the thankfully put-to-bed 1970s and the irredeemable cities they'd long since abandoned. A kidnapping! In Middle Rock!

Both Nathan and Bernard were kept home for the first two days of the family's ordeal. At old Mrs. Annette's playgroup, Bernard Fletcher's cubby sat empty of its usual inordinate amount of Wheat Thins and Fig Newtons. Mrs. Annette thought about Bernard, so curious and fearless. How hard it would be on a boy like that to learn so early why the limits they were constantly struggling to impose on him existed. At Middle Rock Grammar, in classroom 1B, the laminate fiberglass desk of Nathan Fletcher sat empty, too. What a nervous kid Nathan was; surely this would not help. In the faculty lounge a few doors down, Nathan's teacher told the other gals that her sister had dated Carl briefly when the two of them were in high school, and now it seemed like she remembered her sister saying he was prone to depression. Had Carl offed himself? Had Carl run away? Did Carl take all his money and try to go live out his life not under the thumb of his terrifying mother and that oppressive, judgmental wife who always seemed so filled with suspicion at

Nathan's parent-teacher conferences? The principal of the elementary school wandered into the lounge to pour himself coffee and mentioned his memories of the Hearst kidnapping, and at this the teachers' eyes became starry: Were there Hearsts in their midst? Were the Fletchers their Hearsts?

Elsewhere: In Walter and Bea Goldberg's new avocado-colored kitchen, Bea closed the clunky door to her humongous new microwave, setting it for three minutes to cook from a recipe book titled *Dinner Like Magic! Five Minutes With Your New Microwave* (published by the company that made the microwave) and dialed her matching avocado-colored long-corded landline phone to ask Marian Greenblatt if she supposed that Carl had run off with that secretary from work that they'd seen at his thirtieth birthday party. Marian, who was standing in her newer, mustard-colored kitchen on her own matching landline phone, staring warily at her own new microwave and wondering how it could possibly *not* give a person cancer, said that her money was on Carl's kook of a sister, Marjorie, being behind all of this. Marian had heard this theory from the caterer's wife, Rona Lipschitz, who reminded Marian that Marjorie had been cut out of her mother's will when she'd been engaged to that con artist years ago, which she knew because Marjorie told anyone who would listen until her mother found out and put an end to it. Then, just a few months before Carl went missing, Marian and her husband, Ned, had run into Marjorie and her *new* boyfriend out to dinner in Manhasset and determined the new boyfriend to be unscrupulous-seeming, though they were careful to say that Marjorie seemed as innocent (clueless) as ever. The Lipschitzes would make no such assumptions about Marjorie. The Lipschitzes had seen too much by then. The Lipschitzes would not even allow a microwave into their home.

Meanwhile, at the Hadassah bowling league that Linda Messinger had coerced Ruth into joining, the women (minus Ruth, of course) sat in their plastic molded seats and breathlessly traded information—not just the kidnapping, but the insanity of the concept of the idea of a kidnapping among them. They were speechless, they kept saying, speechless!

And yet, for all their speechlessness, none of them could stop talking about it. They hadn't even planned on bowling that day; they'd shown up in

order to change the setting of their ongoing discussion of these unimaginable events, to share bits of information they'd gathered or inferred or made up, to process what was happening to their friend and to the children—dear Lord, those poor boys—and to their town and therefore to the world. Only Cecilia Mayer was wearing her bowling shoes, though she, too, had arrived with a point of view and began quickly delineating several ways she'd seen on Ruth that all! was! not! well! in her family in the months leading up to this. She had seen Ruth and Carl at Michael Feldman's bar mitzvah and they were not dancing and they did not take advantage of the Viennese dessert table, which, of course, supported the theory that Carl was having an affair and therefore had probably run off with a woman. It was Linda Messinger, loyal to the end, it turned out, who cut Cecilia off and reminded her that not only was there nothing wrong in the Fletcher family, but since when was Cecilia Mayer close enough to the Fletchers to notice anything different about them, exactly? Had she been invited to dinner at their home? Ever? Cecilia began to whine a high-pitched defense of herself, telling Linda to back off and confessing to the group that she, Cecilia, was pregnant, and that Linda shouldn't be criticizing her in her condition! The women shifted their conversation then, gathering around Cecilia to ask the usual questions while Linda Messinger smiled an assassin's grin.

Our grandmothers would often tell us that no matter how much you envy someone, if everyone threw their package of problems into the center of a room and was given a choice of anyone else's, you would, guaranteed, pick up your own. We didn't know if that was always true, especially when it came to the Fletchers, but perhaps now we did. Perhaps now we would truly say that we would pick our own problems over even theirs.

Or would we? It wasn't just the puncture of crime into the community that itself kidnapped the Middle Rock imagination; it was the stench of glamour associated with it. It was the Fletchers' wealth. Their *money*. Middle Rock was the kind of suburb that no longer exists, a community defined by common ethics and values and populated by a variety of middle-to-upper-class people who moved to be among others who shared those same ethics and values. The problem of extremely wealthy people living amid a clamor of

plain middle-class people—forcing those middle-class people to contend with not their enormous luck but their remaining dissatisfactions—was a problem solved with the 1990s proliferation of the McMansion. Suddenly the middle class had plenty of space inside their hollow stucco walls to store their delusions. But we're talking about the 1980s here, and Middle Rock still contained its own neighborhood ghettos—the extremely wealthy on the waterfront and the merely comfortable farther inland. Everyone knew who had a lot of money and who had some; who vacationed where and who had a second home. The Fletchers, in that enormous waterfront house, just down the road from the even more enormous waterfront fenced-off estate where Carl had been raised, well, they were the pinnacle.

But all that money was like the white picket fence around the Fletcher estate: It obscured the view. You couldn't see the Fletchers clearly through the mist of their fortune and whatever it was that you brought to your viewing of it. But now—now, with Carl gone and the streets humming with his disappearance—the people of Middle Rock could finally really see the Fletchers. It was all out in the open now, and the Fletchers' neighbors, under the subterfuge of concern, could finally let their anxieties about their own finances and their own success and their own futures and their own legacies surface right in front of each other, and the ugliest part of themselves found them whispering, late at night, across the pillow to their spouses, not where was Carl Fletcher, or are we in danger, or has the world changed, but: Why not *us*? Why aren't *we* rich enough to be kidnapped?

—

ON THE FIFTH dawn that Carl was missing, Ruth lay in bed, staring at the walls as the sun came up. The shadows created by the trees outside her second-floor window made a tic-tac-toe board pattern that reminded her of the garden trellis outside the house where Carl grew up. As the room brightened, the shadows were slowly absorbed by the wall they'd been cast against, and she felt like she was losing him all over again. The kids lay next to her: Nathan, who maintained four-limb contact with some part of her; Bernard, who had

fallen asleep at the bottom of the bed, sleeping across her feet like a puppy, but not nearly as loyal.

Ruth's thoughts wandered to Brooklyn, where she'd been raised. Each night she lay awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering which of the superstitions that she'd been taught as a girl could have prevented this. She'd stopped summoning those superstitions, those shots in the dark for protection, pretty much completely after she met and married a man whose wealth was its own elaborate system of safeties. She had, as a girl, been taught reams of rituals to forestall injury and demise—to spit three times upon hearing a scary thought; to step into the house with her right foot to avert disaster; to not cut her fingernails and toenails on the same day because that's what's done to you on the day of your burial; to not sit at the corner of a table, lest she not get married for seven years. She'd been taught to whisper "God forbid" over and over, to spit on the ground upon hearing the names of her enemies. But in recent years, since her marriage, she had begun to see all the superstitions that were her heritage as the silly burden of a poor and desperate people who had no control and no explanation of why they were constantly being chased to their death. If all those superstitions were to protect against the dangers that their poverty endowed them with, then money was the solution and it was time for them to finally relax.

But now she saw that the money had tricked her. It had made Ruth, a woman born a mere four years following the liberation of Dachau, believe she was insulated from danger. How could she forget the lessons of her Orthodox girlhood? This was all in God's hands! Look at what happened if you allowed yourself to assume that your good fortune was guaranteed simply because it was vast. Idiot!

The walls were now completely faded of their shadows. It was morning again. Ruth braced herself for another day. She had come to accept that this was not a blip in her life; that whatever this was, however it ended, it would never not have happened. It was time for her to think deeply about it and its inevitable repercussions, to prepare herself: Maybe Carl had fallen in love with another woman, maybe even, yes, Hannah Zolinski, with her small waist and her daffy manner and her dark eyelashes and flushed cheeks. But it could