



An Invitation to New Escapology

By ROBERT WRINGHAM

Illustration by Samara Leibner

If [the populus] were not mentally deficient, they would of their own accord have swept away this silly system [of work, money and status] long ago.

ROBERT TRESSEL—THE RAGGED TROUSERED PHILANTHROPISTS

Run Away! Run Away!

MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL

See Istanbul, Port Said, Nairobi, Budapest. Write a book. Smoke too many cigarettes. Fall off a cliff but get caught in a tree halfway down. Get shot at a few times in a dark alley on a Moroccan midnight. Love a beautiful woman.

RAY BRADBURY—DANDELION WINE

DURING THE 1900S, Ehrich Weisz—better known as Harry Houdini—made popular the art of escapology. By 1904 he had become a sensation, performing his astonishing routines on the Vaudeville circuits of Europe and America. He could defy handcuffs, explode from the beery guts of wooden barrels, flee locked jailhouses and escape unscathed from the maddening Chinese water torture cell. He was the David Blaine of his time, except for the fact that Houdini was adored by women and was seldom, if ever, accused of being a wanker.

It was surely no coincidence that Houdini's popularity as an escape artist came about during a time of technological and political revolution. It was during the 1900s that Ransom Eli Olds implemented the first mass production of marketable cars, Thomas Edison's phonograph made a commodity out of music and the colonial expansion of Europe and America prompted the birth of the somewhat unpleasant political period known now as New Imperialism. Technologies and movements initially plugged as liberating would soon be discovered by thinkin' types to

be nasty, horrible traps designed only to placate, segment and enfeeble. When people become dependent upon companies or governments to entertain them, to transport them, to plan their days and to import their goods, they forget what it is to be free, alive and autonomous. It must've been around this time that the concept of a person being owned by his or her property rather than the other way around was developed and the nostalgia for simpler times kicked in along with the desires to backpedal or in some other way escape this new world of consumption, detritus and gimmicks. And so the work of Houdini and his contemporaries escaped the world of mere curiosity into the world of metaphor.

This is not to say that progress should be resisted, nor is it to suggest that there was ever a time of perfect psychological or technological harmony. Nonetheless, the ideal of a less consumer-oriented, free and easy time provides something to aspire to and to consider when sitting in an open-plan office, doing pointless work to pay off your pointless debts or to secure your pointless social standing in a pointless city.

We are told to work hard and to appreciate our freedom to do so; to pay into a pension scheme; to pay money to the government; to pay a mortgage or else suffer the humiliation of hunger and squalor or be accused of being a crazy radical. But what if there were another way? What if it were possible to actually escape like Houdini and get away from it all, permanently, ethically and rewardingly? This is what New Escapologist was founded to discuss.

The first rule of leading an interesting, enriching life is to recognise your escape routes. The second rule, of course, is to know when to take them.

TWO TYPES OF ESCAPE ROUTE

WHEN ONE begins to think about the various ways in which people try to escape the boredom of the prescribed, expected life, two major types of escape route emerge. The first involves the temporary retreat into simple escapist pleasures—going to the pub, reading a cheap fantasy novel or consuming vast quantities of hallucinogenic drugs as

though they were Jaffa Cakes. The second is the attempt at permanent resettlement—by moving to a countryside ecovillage, by escaping to a lottery-funded villa on the seashore or giving up and becoming a tramp—and involves working toward a self-sufficient lifestyle and the marvellous feeling of turning your back on expectation.

So there are two types of escape route: the active (running away and starting a commune) and the passive (watching DVDs every night). Both allow for escape from normality but the approaches to each are worlds apart.

The latter is done every single day by every single one of us: it is the cigarette break at the office; it is the me-time at the end of the day; it is a cheap vacation in Prague or Ibiza or Blackpool. The former, however, is a path for the hardcore Escapologist: breaking out of the prison warded by managers and conventional thinking once and for all into a self-controlled world of one's own creation. But this is frowned upon by those in charge: try getting planning permission for a tiny woodland shack or see what the waiting list is

like for a humble city allotment. The bureaucrats don't do much to help freewheeling Escapologists, even if we've been funding their systems one way or another for the whole of our lives.

Paradoxically, the first escape route—the hardcore church—is essentially the easier of the two churches to which one might devote oneself. Despite the bureaucratic problems involved and the being branded as eccentric or a boat-rocker, it is comparatively easier to be hardcore than softcore. The 'simple pleasures' model involves a lifetime of dedicated scheduling and the constant seizing of spare time and stolen moments not to mention the continuing struggle of actually attending your unfulfilling job or checking bank balances or shopping in supermarkets. The hardcore church, on the other hand, involves submitting to one simple direction: walk away.

Yes, you can walk away. Jean-Paul Sartre tells us that all human beings are essentially free: there are no physical shackles keeping us in these awful places. You can get away from it all at the drop of a decision—the stinking cities, the traffic, the stress, the daily commute, the

mind-numbing boredom, the tabloid witch hunts and the carcinogenic food—by simply walking away. This is the one doctrine of the church of hardcore escapology: *walk away*. Remember that song from the mid-nineties by a band called Cast? One of the verses went like this:

*If you've played all the games they play
You played them yesterday
Walk away, walk away
If you've been, where they want to go
Seen all they got to show
Just walk away, walk away, walk away*

TURNING NOW to the church of simple pleasures and temporary retreats, we can see that there is very little walking away involved. In fact, the central doctrine of this church is to continue plodding through the tough, prescribed life of work and government but to make the most out of those oases of me-time. It is the 'fight' to the hardcore church's 'flight'. The problem, however, is that it's a losing battle. Our grandparents (and some of our parents) all

fought in at least one Great War on behalf of their government and all they have to show for it in the winters of their lives is a beat-up old Volvo and a house on a council estate in which they live in fear of the various anxiety-producing fictions generated by the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*.

The church of simple pleasures is healthy in moderation. Even if I were to escape properly and were to live on an arable farm in the middle of nowhere with my best friends and some Playboy bunnies and a solar panel, I would probably want to take *The Simpsons* and Stephen King along with me. Let us not throw out the baby with the bathwater. But it is important to remember that this church, while acting as a balm to sooth the modern ailment, is temporary and ultimately only goes to further feed the systems of oppression. These escape routes have, after all, been provided by what Ken Kesey would call The Combine to act as distractions from the ideas of anarchy or more permanent channels of escape. The doctrines of this church, while being immediately liberating, are ultimately fallacious and should ideally be employed as a stepping

stone path toward the hardcore church. It is a recreational drug and it is important not to be sucked in entirely.

The hardcore church is about anarchy and self-sustainability. It is about the rejection of government, the rejection of corporations and the rejection of dependency at large. It is about liberation and self-empowerment. Once a fully paid-up member of this church, one will not need anything from anyone else other than good company. The comedian Simon Munnery once opined that the only way to escape the rat race is to refuse to be a rat. This sounds logical enough to me and this is what the hardcore church preaches. If you can grow your own veggies and milk your own cow, you don't need Tesco anymore. If you can recycle your own poop and filter your own water you will never again need to tangle with those goobers at the council. If you have a solar panel or a small wind turbine or both, you can forget the meaning of electricity bills. You will at last be able to say that you have escaped the rat race.

MANIFESTO

IN 1929, the gay poet and journalist Brian Christian de Claiborne Howard wrote a sort-of manifesto of Bohemianism. He divided a page into two halves labelled *J'Accuse* and *J'Adore* and listed within the two halves the things of which he approved and disapproved and by extension what should and should not be tolerated or aspired to when enjoying a Bohemian lifestyle. It was a bit like a Facebook profile but ninety-odd years prior to their invention and 200% less ugly. Among his *J'Adores* were love, food, freedom and art and among his *J'Accuses* were missionaries, bureaucrats and other self-righteous party-poopers. It is with Howard's model in mind (for the Bohemian tendency to be free and to rebel is at the heart of Escapology) that something akin to an Escapologist's Manifesto can be drawn.

ESCAPE FROM	ESCAPE TO
Protestant work ethic	Idleness
Convention	Rebellion
Boredom	Excitement
Consumption	Creativity
Celebrity	Equality
Cars	Public transport
Noise	Sound
Greed	Humanism
Stagnation	Exercise of mind and body
The corporation	Self-sufficiency
Supermarkets	Cottage industries
Television	Books
Anxiety	Rationalism
Government	Anarchy
Solitude	Community
Vanity	Altruism
Objects	Information
Fear of otherness	Enrichment by otherness

NEW ESCAPOLOGIST

This is where *New Escapologist* comes in. Here at *New Escapologist* we believe that the retreat into fantasy and consumption and vice are valid elements of everyday life and a result of uniquely contemporary boredom, strife and pointless toil. At the same time, we take the stance that these retreats are temporary at best and that there are a multitude of ways in which one can discover that another world is possible.

