I

How to Escape

2006

In the days after American and Northern Alliance forces took Kandahar, Osama bin Laden escaped from the caves of Tora Bora into Pakistan, handing his cell phone to a decoy and dissipating into the mountainous terrain. Repeatedly after that, the US government came to believe it knew where to find him. He was the target, for example, of the March 28, 2002, raid of a rented house in Faisalabad, Punjab Province, that netted his lieutenant Abu Zubayadh. But he escaped again and again. It quickly reached the point where—until he popped up spectrally on Al Jazeera—he might have been alive or dead, here or there, or, seemingly, both and all at once.

From the point of view of his potential victims, Osama's elusiveness might have been the most dangerous of his achievements because it hinted at something miraculous: all the world's police and intelligence and military, armed with everything from satellites to suitcases full of cash, couldn't nail him down. It's not killing but escaping death that begins to create a cult. The longer bin Laden evaded capture or death, the more dangerous he became, not necessarily as a terrorist but as a symbol.

The association of escape with transcendence is so intimate that saviors and spiritual heroes are always marked by their ability to escape: Jesus from

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the sealed tomb, Buddha from the cycle of becoming. Indeed, there is a sense that a real hero, or monster, or anyone who seems to have outgrown the mundane—someone who partakes in the divine or satanic—cannot be killed, and so such people are forever being rediscovered after their deaths: Bob Marley, Elvis, JFK, Hitler, Marilyn. There are people who believe that each overcame death and transcended suffering.

Most padlocks have four tumblers at the top of the key chamber. Each tumbler is spring-driven and consists of a driver and key pin housed in a vertical case. When the right key is inserted into the lock, the drivers are pushed up into the hull above the sheer line, while the key pins remain below, allowing the cylinder to turn. There are various ways to pick such a lock, but the classic technique is this: You take a tension wrench, place it into the bottom of the key chamber, and apply a slight torque, enough to "bind" one of the pins. Then, using a hook pick, a half diamond, or perhaps a snake, you "break" that pin, pushing its driver into the hull. When all four pins are broken, the tension wrench turns the cylinder and the lock springs open.

Some pin locks are almost absurdly easy to open. I have a bottom-of-the-line Brinks "Home Security" strong box that I can open as quickly with a pick as with a key. The standard Master Lock padlock—the one that consists of a stack of metal plates and that you used to see on television taking a bullet and remaining closed—is almost as easy to pop. But spend a little more money for a lock with pick-resistant pins, and you have something that's an art project to get open. Still, my view is that if it can be opened with a key, it can be picked.

The event of a lock popping open is small, but it is full. That click feels like a victory of your ingenuity over the security firms of the world. It has a slightly orgasmic quality, enhanced by the sexual symbology of lock and key. But above all, and relatedly, it brings into play the whole metaphysics of escape: the idea that you cannot be held, forced, incarcerated, that you can free yourself, transcend your mundane bonds and the oppressions that hold you, and release yourself into a place of freedom.

Perhaps that's why, like a lot of people, I've been a bit obsessed with escape since I was a child and first read about Houdini. In the early '70s I fancied myself an urban guerrilla, destroying construction equipment that

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was regimenting forests, or schools that were regimenting minds. I wanted to learn the chemistry of bomb-making and the tactics of concealment. But above all, I wanted to be the sort of person—if indeed there are any such persons—who cannot be held. Handcuff and manacle me and I would free myself. Imprison me and I would be gone . . . like a Houdini.

Our lives bristle with entrapment: legal, spiritual, political, economic. We're locked into institutions, into our schools, jobs, laws, taxes, poverty (or, for that matter, wealth); into our families or aloneness; into our bodies with their flaws or illnesses. And so our lives also bristle with escapes: leaving Pittsburgh for Jamaica, the evening drink or smoke, the darkened theater where, for example, James Bond—the films about whom are constructed almost entirely as a series of fantastic escapes—promises to divert us.

As a child, Charles Julius Guiteau was beaten savagely by his father, who accused him continually of violating God's laws. He ran away from home as a teenager in the 1850s, but internalized the criticism sufficiently to become a religious fanatic. Charles Guiteau published a plagiarized book of religious philosophy titled *Truth*, and eventually fetched up at John Humphrey Noyes's utopian Oneida community in New York, which taught that the second coming of Christ had occurred in 70 AD, and thus that we were all already redeemed and free of sin. Among other things, the residents of Oneida practiced "plural marriage," despite which the conspicuously unattractive Guiteau couldn't obtain a partner. The women of Oneida nicknamed him "Charles Gitout."

Eventually, he broke with the community (or rather, they with him—they accused him of laziness and insanity). He then lived from boardinghouse to boardinghouse, absconding in the middle of the night to avoid payment, while creditors tracked him down repeatedly and repossessed his belongings, if any. Here is a sample of his correspondence with a creditor: "Find $7 enclosed. Stick it up your bung hole and wipe your nose on it." His profession was itinerant preacher, and one of his sermons was described as follows in a newspaper:

> Is There a Hell? Fifty Deceived People [are] of the opinion that there ought to be. The man Charles J. Guiteau, if such really is his name, who calls himself an eminent Chicago lawyer, has fraud and imbecility plainly stamped upon his countenance . . . Although the impudent

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> scoundrel had talked only fifteen minutes, he suddenly perorated brilliantly by thanking the audience for their attention and bidding them good-night. Before the astounded fifty had recovered from their amazement . . . [he] had fled from the building and escaped.[1]

Whatever his merits as a preacher, he moved on to politics. Guiteau declared his support of James Garfield in the 1880 election, and gave a series of speeches to that effect. Puzzlingly, he expected Garfield to reward him with the consul generalship in Vienna. When this was not forthcoming, he met Garfield's train at Union Station in DC on July 2, 1881, and shot the president in the back with a .44. The wound was not considered mortal, but like many people before and since, Garfield escaped this mortal coil under the auspices of his physicians. Meanwhile, Guiteau himself believed that Garfield would survive and that he, Guiteau, would be let off due to insanity. And so, still in search of a spouse as Garfield's various infections worsened, Guiteau placed a personal ad from prison for a "nice Christian lady." He spent much of his final year at the United States Jail in Washington, and he received so many death threats (along with a bullet fired by a drunk through his cell window) that a special cell was built for him on death row with a bulletproof oak door. Guiteau was executed June 30, 1882.

Late in 1905, officials at the United States Jail invited Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss, the son of a Wisconsin rabbi) to test the security of their death row, and on January 6, 1906, they locked the naked Houdini in Guiteau's cell. There were twenty cells on death row; Guiteau's was ordinarily occupied at that time by a man who had smothered his wife and then slept with her corpse. Each cell was brick-lined with a recessed door, equipped with a state-of-the-art five-tumbler lock. When the officials returned twenty-seven minutes after they'd locked Houdini in, they found that he had not only opened his own cell, but had switched every prisoner to a different cell.

One suspects that Houdini's career, during which he challenged any police department to hold him, in which he successfully escaped from any handcuffs and manacles by which he was constrained, in which he was chained inside trunks and dropped in a river, wriggled free of straitjackets, mail sacks, milk cans, and so on, was concatenated from equal parts skill, trickery, and bribery, though Houdini certainly denied the latter. He said that he had been trained by a German locksmith, and there is ample evidence that he was a master of the art of picking locks as well as an excellent athlete. But

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no doubt in a pinch he could substitute in a pair of gaffed cuffs, or get a little help from a guard.

But whatever his method, his name became synonymous with the miraculous. Arthur Conan Doyle was sure that, despite Houdini's repeated assertions that there was a perfectly mundane explanation for every one of his performances, he could de- and rematerialize, traveling back and forth to and from the spiritual realm. And a circle of magicians still gathers on the anniversary of his death to determine whether he can manifest himself from the Beyond, despite the fact that Houdini devoted much of his life to exposing fraudulent mediums.

Handcuffs are of necessity rather simple mechanisms. Keyed so that many people can open them and so that the police don't have to carry around dozens of keys, they can in general be opened quickly with a skeleton (say a regular key the bit of which has been filed down slightly). Their security depends on the prisoner not having such a thing about, and, more importantly, not being able easily to get anything into the keyway.

For such reasons, police departments have learned to prefer single-use plastic ties, essentially of the sort that are sometimes used to secure toys inside their boxes for sale. The preferred method of escape here would no doubt be a blade, or better, access to a sharp surface and some time. But again, their effectiveness depends on the thoroughness with which a prisoner is searched, the care with which his environment is controlled, and the surveillance that can be maintained.

Of course, being "handcuffed" has become a figure of speech for any situation in which we are constrained. And we are constrained continually, among other things by our physical limits. Manacles mimic the action of paralysis, but all of us face the constraints on our physical capacities at all times.

In one ferocious jaunt starting in 1876, the great conjuror and hero of Houdini, Harry Kellar, played Boston, Philadelphia, DC, Rio de Janeiro, London, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Gibraltar, Malta, Madrid, Madeira, Cape Town, Kimberley, Mauritius, Bombay, Allahabad, Cawnpore, Lucknow, Melbourne, New Zealand, China,

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Japan, Vladivostock, and Bangkok. Then he performed his way across the Pacific and thence back to the east coast of the United States. This and many like tours by many like magicians suggest that magic is universally comprehensible, which in turn suggests that more or less all people everywhere understand the mundane physical limitations under which we all labor, as they (and we) could hardly fail to do. "DECAPITATION FEAT: Or—LIFE IN DEATH. A LIVING HUMAN HEAD suspended on a common Tea-Tray, three feet above the Body. The Head Eats, Smokes, Talks &c." Virtually anyone anywhere would be bewildered by such a demonstration of liberation from gravity, from mortality, and from whatever you were doing that day before you took your seat in the theater. Illusion serves to emphasize the implacable reality of our physical world.

The idea that the body *(soma)* is the prison *(sema)* of the soul *(psyche)* is traditionally attributed to Pythagoras in the sixth century BCE. The factor most responsible for keeping us locked in this prison, according to Pythagoras, was the consumption of beans. Hence the second Pythagorean theorem: "Wretch! Keep thou from beans." What promised to free us, on the other hand, was pure mathematics. The idea that the body is the prison of the soul was probably already ancient when Pythagoras taught it, and has had a venerable history since.

As Socrates prepared to swallow the hemlock, he argued that "those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for death." And he says of death: "Is it [not] simply the release of the soul from the body?" He then argues that the wise despise the pleasures of the body and have been seeking their whole lives to purify their souls of the pollution of the physical: its desires, its transgressions of the moral law, and above all its illusions. After death the soul will freely experience the pure forms of goodness and beauty: "So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be the truth."

When Jesus faced execution, he told Simon that "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," and he cursed the cowardice that made him hesitate in the face of his own release from suffering. After the crucifixion they laid

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him in his tomb and rolled a stone over the entrance. But when Mary and Mary Magdalene came to pay homage, a young man dressed in white told them, "He has been raised; he is not here."

In Augustine's interpretation, mankind was cursed at its inception by original sin (embodiment, more or less) and Jesus came to redeem us, to aid our escape into God's kingdom. And countless Christians have tried to emulate Jesus and so realize the promised transcendence of sin and suffering. The saint yearns above all for transcendence, for a way out, and finds it in an overcoming of and escape from the prison-house of the body.

Michel Foucault in his history of prisons reversed the ancient formula and declared that "the soul is the prison of the body."[2] He argued that our consciousness is shaped by institutions: schools, prisons, families, employers, hospitals, armed forces, in which we are more or less continually under surveillance and subject to punishment. Thus, we learn to control ourselves, to take command of ourselves in accordance with what the institution demands. That is, we become the slaves of ourselves, or our bodies become the slaves of our minds.

His classic example is the Panopticon, the ideal prison designed around 1800 by Jeremy Bentham, on which many later prisons (such as Stateville in Illinois) were based. The arrangement is circular, so that the whole of each cell is visible from a central tower. The guard in this tower is in turn screened from the prisoners, so that they never know whether they're being watched. In such an institution, says Bentham, one learns to be the prison guard of oneself—that is, one gains a conscience, "reforms." All of our modern megainstitutions are devoted to giving us that sort of self-mastery and hence self-enslavement. This creates a pervasive situation of power in which we may well yearn to escape not only from our institutions, but from ourselves.

But perhaps in America, the prison is the prison of both the body and the soul. More than two million Americans are currently incarcerated.

For generations by the 1810s, the Seminoles of Florida had given haven to escaped slaves from the American South, and they were by the early

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nineteenth century an interracial tribe. The United States made war on the Seminoles—starting with attacks by Andrew Jackson and finishing up with attacks by William Tecumseh Sherman—in order to recover the escapees and their descendants and force the Seminoles onto the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma. Resistance was initially led by the great war chief Osceola. In 1835, when Osceola was visiting the trading post at Fort King, his wife Morning Dew—the mother of his four children—was seized by slave catchers. From that moment, he was an implacable foe. He once reportedly "signed" a treaty by stabbing it with his knife, declaring that "I will make the white man red with blood, and then blacken him in the sun and rain, where the wolf shall smell of his bones, and the buzzard live upon his flesh."[3] Fifty-two of the fifty-five warriors in Osceola's retinue were of African descent. He was captured by the army in 1837 when he came in under flag of truce to negotiate, and died of malaria in a cell at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine.

His two lieutenants Wild Cat and the Black Seminole John Horse were transferred to Fort Marion, where they were held with two dozen others in an 18-by-33-foot cell. Wild Cat later wrote that "We resolved to make our escape or die in the attempt." They spent weeks loosening the stonework in the jail's roof and starving themselves in order to fit through the hole. The band escaped south for five days, surviving on roots and berries, and finally rejoined Wild Cat's tribe near the Tomoka River. They were pursued by Colonel Zachary Taylor, 180 Missouri riflemen, and eight hundred regular army soldiers. Wild Cat and John Horse lured this force into an ambush in the swamp (the Battle of Lake Okeechobee), one of the great victories of the Seminole wars, in which twenty-six US soldiers were killed and 112 wounded, while the Seminoles lost four warriors. Wild Cat and John Horse remained free and for many years prosecuted a successful guerrilla war.

But over the years they were worn down by starvation. Wild Cat's twelve-year-old daughter was kidnapped by the army. Eventually the whole band was sent west under Wild Cat's leadership to the Indian territories. They faced starvation on the way, and then again at their destination, where they were assigned the same territory as the Creeks, a tribe with which they had been at war for decades. Slave traders continued to capture Black Seminoles, despite government pledges of protection that had been the condition of the surrender. In 1849, Wild Cat and John Horse with a band of their people

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escaped through a gantlet of Creeks, settlers, and slavers to Coahuila, Mexico, where they disappeared.

Most prison escapes do not occur directly from the cell, but from work details or recreation periods. A long period of confinement no doubt acts as a spur to human ingenuity, and it may be that the prisoner has little to think about but the weaknesses in the security system. But the range of techniques mirrors Houdini's maneuvers, from misdirection to fakery to bribery to the actual ability to open locks. And like some of Houdini's stunts, a jailbreak often requires genuine courage and the willingness to risk death. Unlike Houdini's stunts, however, a jailbreak also often involves the willingness to kill other people, and though there is little future in a hostage situation, getting hold of a weapon and shooting your way out is still the direct method.

But often a prison escape, like the perennial illusions of stage magic, relies still on the old standbys of deception: misdirection, diversion—the dummy in the bed, the gun made of soap, the escape that is itself faked and then perpetrated after the search is on. And there are still escape artists who claim to be able to pass through the bars of a prison cell, for example David DeVal, who accepted a challenge from the RSPCA in Oldham, England, to allow police to search him and place him, handcuffed, in a dog kennel, from which he promptly emerged. DeVal markets gaffed locks, handcuffs, boxes, whipping posts, and straitjackets.

Raymond Hamilton was born in a tent on the banks of the Deep Fork River in what had been Indian Territory. His father worked in a lead-smelting plant near Henryetta, Oklahoma. At 5 feet 3 inches and 120 pounds, the younger Hamilton was tiny, but vicious. He grew up in the same rough West Dallas neighborhood as Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker. In 1932 he joined Bonnie and Clyde in a rampage of robberies and killings, raiding federal armories, robbing oil refineries, and killing police officers from Missouri to Texas. The gang's ability to escape and survive was remarkable. They shot their way out

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of a house in Joplin, Missouri, a motel in Platte City, Missouri, and an ambush meeting with relatives in Dallas County, Texas.

Hamilton split with the Barrows, formed his own gang, and was captured in Michigan. Sentenced in Texas to 362 years, he was sent to the Eastham Prison Farm. On the night of January 15, 1934, Clyde Barrow hid guns in a woodpile near where he knew Hamilton would be laboring. Hamilton retrieved his gun the next morning and started shooting at the guards while Clyde Barrow supplied covering fire. Bonnie, in a black Ford V8 about a mile from the shootout, stood on the horn. A bunch of prisoners piled in, and they headed for Fort Worth.

After Bonnie and Clyde were ambushed and killed in Louisiana, Hamilton was apprehended again, sentenced to die, and placed on death row in Huntsville, Texas. Having bribed a guard to smuggle him a gun, he shot his way to a perimeter tower, disarmed the guard there, made his way over the fence, and launched another spree. Recaptured in the Fort Worth rail yards, he was immediately executed at Huntsville.

That was in 1935. The next prisoner to bust out of death row in Texas was Martin Gurule, who had been convicted of killing two people during a robbery in Corpus Christi. On Thanksgiving in 1998, Gurule and six other prisoners colored their thermal underwear black using a magic marker, put dummies in their beds, cut through a fence in their recreation yard, and made their way to the chapel roof, where they were discovered. Guards fired on them, and they all gave themselves up, with the exception of Gurule, who kept going over two ten-foot fences, leaving blood on the razor wire. Cut and wounded, he drowned a few hours later in the swamp.

Philip Brasfield is a writer who has been imprisoned in Texas for a quarter-century and who was on death row at Huntsville at the time for the murder of a six-year-old child, of which he claims to be innocent. Brasfield writes that "I don't know how many times a day I thought of leaving. Most of us entertained fantasies of daring escape. Release from death row was a perpetual prayer." And Brasfield hints that dying free and in defiance in a swamp is preferable to dying as a prisoner, that Gurule's death had a transcendent quality.

Gurule escaped, but he did not escape, if you follow me.[4] And perhaps, in the long run, none of us does. Perhaps there is no way to transcend death

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or the mundane or ridiculous constraints imposed upon us by our bodies and our lives in them. Maybe there really is no escape from people, from the physical constraints that surround us and the physical limitations that give us shape. Maybe also, liberation from human institutions, from the giant grinding bureaucracies of modernity, is at this point impossible.

Our need to escape arises in the nature of desire itself; once freed into consciousness, it has no necessary limit, but constitutes an infinite series of aspirations, envisions an infinite freedom even from itself. Like that other perverse artifact, the mathematical number series, desire exceeds the possibility of its own calculation and increases indefinitely: it exceeds every bound that could be conceived. The series of natural numbers is mad: it bristles with infinities, which bloom between any two numbers no matter how tight the gap. Every momentary whim entails its own infinity, and the question is whether you pursue it or not. If you do, you will quickly experience the barriers entailed by your own finitude. We can in some sense conceive the infinite infinities of mathematics, but to achieve a comprehension or to actually traverse any given series is impossible, because we quickly find the limits of time, concentration, alertness. And once we start wanting, there is no logically necessary place to stop. The first three of the Buddha's fourfold noble truths: "Life is suffering. Suffering is caused by desire. There is a way out."

The great stoic Epictetus, who was born a slave, taught that the key to freedom was renouncing desire and realizing that there is no freedom in the world, that we must distinguish what is under our control from what is not and surrender the desire to control what we cannot. What we cannot control, for Epictetus, is the way other people act or think, and in general the way the external world is. The world exists exactly the way it must and it unfolds without our having any control over how it unfolds. Nature and culture are our prisons. It is the inner world that is free: for example, we can genuinely choose to accept the world as it is and find peace, or to reject the world and make ourselves miserable.

But as Epictetus recognized, that is no simple matter. We can feel just as imprisoned in ourselves as by our world, and accepting the world just as it is is an immensely difficult discipline, fit for sages and bodhisattvas. The ropes, we might say, always chafe at least a little. The figure of the outlaw or revolutionary is always the figure of the escape artist: someone who ignores our world of

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commuting, work, bills, debt, housecleaning, cooking—routine. On the same day Raymond Hamilton was executed,* John Dillinger—who had dematerialized from an escape-proof jail in Indiana and who burned mortgages when he robbed banks—was killed in a hail of gunfire at the Biograph Theater in Chicago, though a 1970 book titled *Dillinger: Dead or Alive* asserted that the Biograph operation had killed a double and that Dillinger—like Jesus, like Marilyn—was still going strong. Frankly, I think he didn't escape the bullets and hence became immanent in all things on July 22, 1934.

*That is false. Dillinger was killed about ten months earlier. For purposes of the essay, however, it is perfectly true.

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