



6-15-2001

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Recommended Citation

Van Cleave, Ryan G. (2001) "The Escape Artist," *Westview*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol20/iss2/8>

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The Escape Artist

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

After the raving success of such feats as Houdini's Water Torture, The Crush, and The Hanging Box—which involved eighty-eight gallons of canola oil, an old-fashioned one ton safe, and a naked Amazon who wore nothing but a grass skirt and splinter of bone through her nose, though this show-stopper was usually shut down after the first night by local officials, claiming it was a “health hazard” while refusing to say exactly why—no one expected something like this. The Zircarelli Circus psychologist (Bilbo the Busa-Pygmy, actually, and though he never received a degree per se, he did take a section on abnormal psychology twice when he was at Rutgers in the 60s) spoke with him at great length and even resulted to prodding him with Ma Kettle's Sippin' Bourbon, the best squaw south of Ottuma, Iowa. But it was all to no avail: Erik the Escape Artist had become claustrophobic.

His fiancée, an Egyptian sword-swallower named Nephthys, was out-and-out pissed. Their combined incomes kept them in luxury, far surpassing the squalid life in the ragbags and gillys where they'd perfected their talents. Now all Erik did was sit on the blue vinyl loveseat in their double-wide, watching taped episodes of *Jerry Springer* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* he'd traded Al the Strongman their old Atari 2600 system for, including all the games she still liked. Dig Dug. Robotron. Everything.

“Something about being cooped up—it just makes my skin crawl,” he confessed over a third helping of Fruity Pebbles. On their 27” console TV, a five hundred pound black woman was pummeling a white grandpa with her purse, claiming he slipped a roofie into her strawberry spritzer and commenced to steal her virginity at a Sig Ep party twenty-three years back.

Nephthys hurried into her gold-colored armbands, brass bustier, and leather skirt covered

with tiny ianthine ankhs. She stood in the doorway of their trailer, letting August Alabama air steam into the room, the sunlight slanting across her dark body in a way that made her more squat, emphasizing the curve of her twice-tucked love handles.



Photo by J. Stoffers

“Someone's got to make a living around here,” she hissed.

Erik put down the plastic cereal bowl to sidle over and fast-forward a ginko-biloba infomercial. There'd been a remote, but no one'd seen it since that tequila party where Bilbo bet he could sing the entire score to *Brigadoon* from inside the freezer. He was right, though he later confessed it took a week to stop pissing slush.

The trailer door slammed. One of the plastic McDonald's Happy Meal toys—Ariel the pencil sharpener—shook off the knick-knack shelf. It cracked like an egg upon striking the floor. Erik pressed an almost-empty glass of iced tea to his forehead, letting the drops of condensation run unchecked down his face as his wondered just how the hell things got to be this way.

Erik was a born escape artist. He burst from the Goat-Faced Lady's womb in a flail of arms and



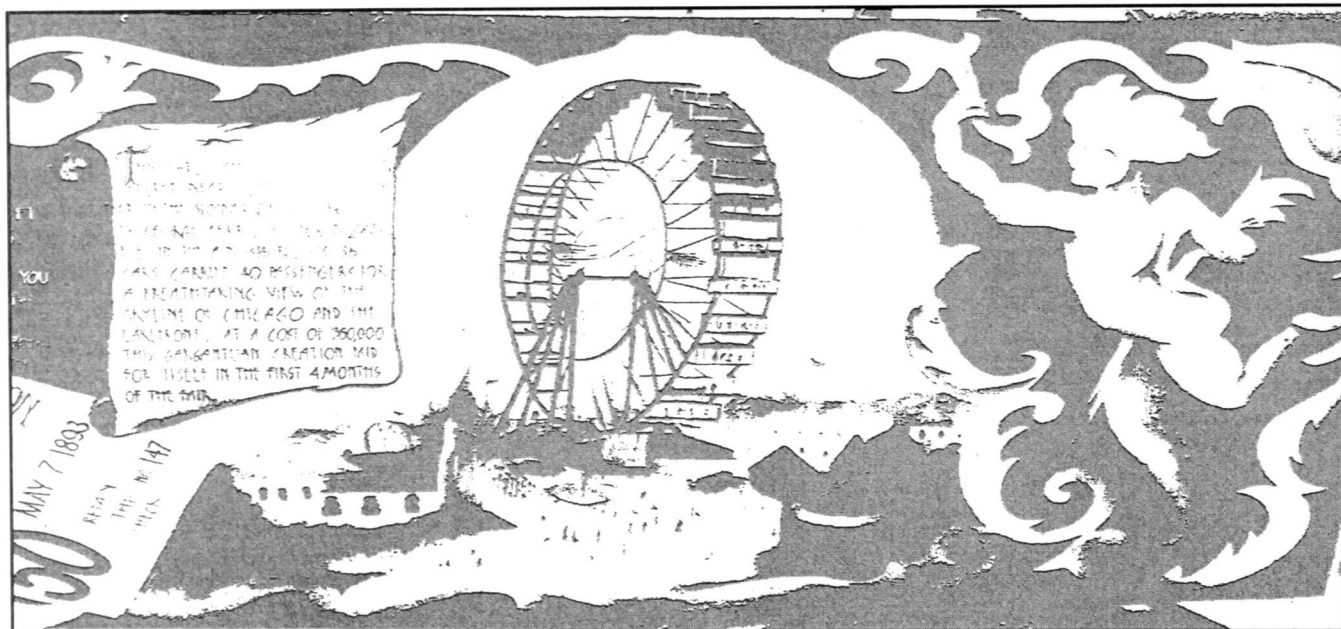


Photo (detail) by J. Stoffers

legs that took only eighteen seconds flat. No plastic carousel mobile distracted him enough not to slip through the PVC poles of the crib his father had built into the back walls of the ten-in-one, a freak show tent. Even unscalable mesh walls of the playpen were no match for his teeth. And the T-strap of a child seat? Erik was loose in nine seconds.

“Erik?”

Rufus Zingarelli stood just inside the doorway, silhouetted by the afternoon bright. Despite Hilfiger clothes and forty-two dollar haircuts, Rufus was a phenomenally ugly man. He had the face of a stillborn piglet. Still, he was Erik’s uncle.

“Come in. Just catching some shows,” Erik said, leaning forward to freeze the black woman mid-snort as Jerry told her “I’m not a doctor or anything, but it seems to me you’re addressing the symptoms instead of the problems. What we’re talking about here is self-esteem, right?” The crowd roared.

Rufus didn’t come in. The silence grew oppressive. Weakly Rufus lifted his hand, then let it fall. He was sweating passionately.

“Is this it?”

“My body’s pretty much given up a year back. Bound to happen, Rufus.” On wet nights, he had trouble breathing. His collarbone had cracked

twice, a femur once, and all but three fingers had been snapped more times than he cared to remember. Dislocations? He stopped keeping track long ago—it was part of who he was. Escaping from a metal box or straight-jacket and set of half-inch chains didn’t always go right. By his own reckoning, he was dead twice over.

“What’s this really about?” Rufus asked.

For the briefest of moments, Erik thought he meant the talk show. Outside, the pipe-organ music frolicked along well enough without either of them. Like a songbird that would not surrender. He pulled up the Harley t-shirt he was wearing and blotted his face.

“I’m through.”

Rufus’ jaws bunched and shifted. “You can’t leave me in a lurch like this. What would Dina say?”

“Don’t talk about her.”

“She’s *my* sister.”

Erik’s body tensed. “You run off like her and you give it all up. Everything. For all I care, she’s dead.”

Leaning against the corner where the hide-a-bed popped free was the coffin, seven feet of reinforced stainless steel. Even in the motley decor of faded parchment circus ads, 70s shag carpeting, and rainbow string of Christmas lights that



swooped from the nest of stuffed monkeys atop the fridge to the sliding bathroom door, the coffin did not fit. It seemed to suck all sound right from the room. Its front reflected the dots of rainbow light like the Mississippi's face during Mardi Gras. Or like looking through a Coke bottle at stars.

Rufus followed Erik's eyes to it.

"You owe me something, Erik. You owe this circus something."

"To hell with you."

"Jesus," Rufus said but left it at that. Moments later, he left in a self-conscious shuffle.

Erik refused to watch his uncle leave. Finally, he rose, turned off the TV, and ambled to the port-hole-shaped window. Even through the heavy chintz curtain, he could feel the press of bodies outside, one up against the other, all that oily flesh rammed together in the narrow labyrinth of alleys that snaked between rides. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember not feeling this way. And to squeeze into a coffin?

But he was alongside it, looking at his face looking back at him from somewhere within those billions of molecules that somehow held that steel together, locked it into a shape so firmly that it was immutable. Erik didn't think he looked scared. At least his reflection didn't. But appearances only counted for so much. A fresh, well-polished poison apple would still kill you.

He shuddered and dumped out the ice tea, then refilled with a double Gibson. Extra onion. And a Granny Smith wedge.

With an Orioles cap and purple muscle shirt, Erik slid through the crowd like a shadow. Every brush of another body against his caused him to recoil, all the muscles and tendons within him to tighten and pull in as if in defense. He almost ducked into the alcove behind an elephant ear grabstand to catch his breath, regain his nerve, but he had to see her. In the years they'd been together, he'd not once seen Nephthys' act. Erik needed to see those shafts of death-hard metal disappear into her mouth, all those swords be devoured between dark lips he knew as well as his cadence of his breath.

There was a good crowd. Twenty or thirty encircled the painted cheese barrel platform where she stood, making sinewy movements with her arms and waist. Starlight winked off her costume and more than half the guys there wouldn't have been able to say what color her hair was, Erik realized with a start. Exotics was an understatement.

The rapier with the sharkskin pommel went in smoothly, slowly and showily to milk the ooh's and holy-shit-would-you-look-at-that's. When the top of the pommel rested fully upon her lips, the skeptics beside Erik began even as the next blade began its slow descent.

"Retractable blade. Gotta be."

"Maybe she's got some tube down her throat. She just lines the blade up inside it and lets it slide down. Like a sheath."

"Mirrors. A smoke and mirrors job."

"Nah. Retractable blade."

Idiots, all of them. Each night when she returned, Erik was the one who helped load up the cotton swatches with iodine and that gelatinous goo from the medicine cabinet. He was the one who attached it to a dowel rod and eased it between her lips, past the gap where tonsils should've been but had been removed with tin snips years back, when the circus was too far from any hospital and her tonsils were the size of sausages. He was the one who coated the scratches and slices in her throat with dark, sewage-stinking ooze, raising and lowering the rod as he turned it, like he was dusting a curtain. Or painting a pole.

And the way she shuddered with each pass of the swatch—eyes pinched shut, fingers crooked into her palms, a small grunt from deep in her chest as if in orgasm. These were the times he loved her most.

He needed to see the reason he was able to do this to her each night. He needed to see what caused this.

"It's a god-damn scam. She's faking," said some wise-ass high school jock to his girl, a blonde who looked about eleven.

Erik couldn't take another minute. He ran back to his trailer, his mind working with unexpected



clarity. That jock had it right: whether she swallowed those swords or not, it *was* all fake. Every bit of it.

Lynda came by just after eleven, prime-time to rope in the last round of suckers. Tinny music leaked in with a flash of ash-gray moonlight as she eased the door shut.

"I've only got fifteen minutes. This'll have to be quick," she said while fixing herself a drink. "Want one?"

Erik shrugged from where he sat on the floor, doing deep breathing exercises he'd read about in *Reader's Digest* to combat anxiety. Perspiration bled into his eyes and stung.

"Suit yourself. I was just talking to . . . God! It's like an icebox in here." She went over to the thermostat and kicked it up a few degrees.

He switched to pushups, doing them one-armed like in his brief stint with the marines. Thinking back that far made him dizzy, as if the weight of all those years was heaped on his back like fifty pound bags of popcorn seed.

Lynda shed her gauzy shirt and black silk trousers, then took a drink and peeled off her undergarments. Every move was a flirtation, an invitation. The thing that'd first drawn him was her eyes, like a splinter of dusk that roiled with latent energy. He wasn't even sure what color they were, though he'd stared into them long enough that he should've known, but somehow they called to him as the distant splash of ocean water. Like most carnies, he'd never learned to swim.

"I've been thinking that we should take a vacation together. Maybe Puerto Vallarta," she said, then paused to knock back the tail end of a second Mary Pickford. "Boy, am I cooked."

Just like that, she said it: cooked. And Erik knew what it meant. He was getting to know her despite himself. He redoubled the pace of the pushups and tried to ignore the growing feeling of refrigeration in the room.

Erik felt fingers on his back, wet with oil maybe, or maybe just his own sweat, but they were



Photo (detail) by J. Stoffers

rubbing, kneading thick stress-knots from his flesh with a strength he couldn't have imagined in such small, well-formed hands. With the knuckles of one hand, Lynda traced the line of his jaw, then opened her fingers to caress his throat.

Rain ticked steadily against the curved metal roof as she doused the bedside lamp and they clung together, their bodies tainted gold by a flash of lightning. The air was tainted with ozone, her lips with vodka. He did not feel safe but he succumbed anyway.

Alone in the king-sized bed, he'd dozed and jerked awake, sometimes to the thunk of a coffin lid shutting. The windows were cracked open and still he was baking. He fumbled a half-empty cup of water off the bedside shelf and drank.

Nephthys materialized at his side and cooed, "Miss me?"

"You bet."

She pressed up close. "You sat in here tonight, all by your lonesome?"

Indeed, he didn't think about Lynda. Try as he might, he couldn't recall what had happened earlier that night. It was as he'd slept, or been in some kind of daze.

She snuggled up to his back, her arm draped over him when he noticed it. A stink. A cloying, moldering smell like in a graveyard. No, it was a feeling, the crawling of a hundred caterpillars down

his throat and across his genitals. No, it was everything at once, closing in. The entire circus was collapsing atop him. Somewhere, Rufus was screaming, stabbing a finger at Erik's picture and damning him. Suddenly, he remembered.

Erik scrambled for the door.

Everything was dark and wet, though the rain had long ago stopped. The cotton candy kiosks, the elephant ear grab-stand, all the hanky-panks and other games, the Tilt-A-Whirl, the four story Ferris Wheel, the thick power cables connecting everything like a huge umbilical cord. A watchguard had to be cruising the grounds, but he was nowhere in sight. It was just Erik and the gaudy glamour of a darkened, dripping carnival lit intermittently by security floodlights.

"What the hell are you doing? It's cold out here!" Nephthys said, hugging her robe tight as she sloshed towards him.

The ground stank of urine and fungus, over-ridden only by the unsavory pine disinfectant the food vendors used to scrub down grab-stands. Rain had done nothing to wash away all the unpleasantness.

Sirens wailed in the distance, grew louder, then louder, but died away with a moan that became an unconscionable silence. Erik couldn't stand quiet so absolute that he could hear his own breath as he could now. It flooded him with guilt, made him think of the rancid apple smell of Nephthys' throat ointment.

"What's going on?"

"Shah." Erik was not clairvoyant as Lynda was,

but he felt images, impressions that were vague and confusing. It began the night of his new trick, simply called The Casket. That was also the night the claustrophobia struck. They'd locked on the manacles, then blindfolded and placed him into the steel coffin just like they'd rehearsed. But when the locks snapped into place, shutting out the world from the inside of the coffin, it became too much. A kaleidoscope of every bleak mood, each innocence-extinguishing childhood fear, all the nightmares that'd ever stolen hours of sleep were wedged into that moment. One teeth-grinding scream and that show was over.

This night, though, Erik's nerves were assaulted, like dragging barbed wire across exposed veins. He stared into the plenitude of stars and thought about the immensity of space, which made him feel lonelier than ever. Some things you simply could not escape, he realized.

"We need to do it."

"Huh?"

"The Casket. Right here. I'm going to do it," he said, nodding as if hearing those words was furthering his resolve.

"Now?" Nephthys asked.

"Yes. Now." He could breathe again.

Together they lugged the seventy pound coffin out of their trailer and laid it in the mud. No one came out to What-the-hell's-going-on as Nephthys snaked the chain through his linked arms, around his chest, then over and over until looked like a ridiculous parody of the Tin Man.

Nephthys gave him a strange look. For the briefest of moments, he thought she might ram one



Photo (detail) by J. Stoffers



of her swords down his throat. He wouldn't have tried to stop her.

"Don't do this for me. If you're not ready," she said, letting the unspoken part hang between them like a thick, darkening fog.

He inched over to the casket and frowning, she pulled the eyeless executioner's mask over his head and helped ease him into the velvet-lined box that had been tailored to fit him snugly. Just like that, he was inside.

The casket top shut with a snick. Then came the muffled clicks of the locks that clamped the lid down. A current of fear sizzled up Erik's spine and his concentration slipped. *The third time's the charm.* one part of his mind hissed. *The third death counts.* He felt the hollow part within him deepen.

An "Oh, God" slipped from his lips.

He was in a casket. His nose only two inches from the top. The outside of each arm touched a wall. No room to move. No room. No.

Like in those lousy Disney movies he watched as a kid where the years would pass as a hand reached down and tore pages off a calendar, his own life was peeled away, bit by bit, as if the fear constricting his chest was a knife removing layer after layer of an onion until there was nothing left. All the knowledge he'd ever had about escaping, about breaking loose of confinement had vanished into the nothingness that was slowly grinding him down. It was a cancer metastasizing in his lungs and stomach.

Out of this growing sense of purposelessness, of helplessness, he found definition. His voice. It'd been incessant since the top shut, but it was only now that he heard it.

"C'mon, Erik. C'mon, c'mon."

It calmed him. Reminded him who he was. What he was. Erik the Escape Artist of the Zingarelli Brothers outfit. Erik the Great. Erik the Conqueror. Erik, He-Who-Can't-Be-Held. Erik, who had purpose.

And then the hood was yanked off through a clever manipulation of teeth, lips, and jaw muscles. Then Erik shed the chains with tiny shiftings of joints and muscles, worming the links slowly to-

wards his ankles where they bunched like a dead metal snake. It took longer than it should've, but there was no rush.

Erik took his time locating the hidden catch that popped the side panel open and he eased out, unable to keep from laughing as he slid headfirst into the mud (where the curtain would've hidden him from view, had this been on stage).

"You did it. You're back," Nephthys said, arms akimbo as she regarded him hungrily. Without her constant tugging, the robe folded open, revealing her dark skin that was the contour of a deep starless night.

Erik held her face in his hands and planted a kiss with as much tongue as he could muster. She pushed him off. Hard.

"Jesus! What's that for?"

For the first time in recent memory, Erik smiled. "For the star attraction."

"Where the hell are you going? You just licked your problem."

"Only the symptom, Nep."

And before she could figure out just what the hell he was talking about, he retrieved a paper bag stuffed with talk show videos, then headed to the giant maple where he'd parked his steel-colored Volvo. He didn't even look back as he got in and roared the engine to life.

On the gravel road atop the hill to the north, Erik stood like a statue of himself, casting his stone glance at the Zingarelli Circus that spread below him like a well-lit junkyard, the only faithful part of his life for twenty-one years. Somehow it all looked smaller, like children's toys spilled from a storage chest. The type of mess that'd have to be cleaned up before suppertime, once it was noticed.

He eased back into his Volvo, popped the clutch, and let it roll down the hill, the festival of lights and dark skeletal frameworks of the rides slowly vanished beyond his rearview mirror. He opened the windows and gave the Volvo a whole lot of gas. His body was asking for anything except calm.

