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On the Road with the Evasion Kid

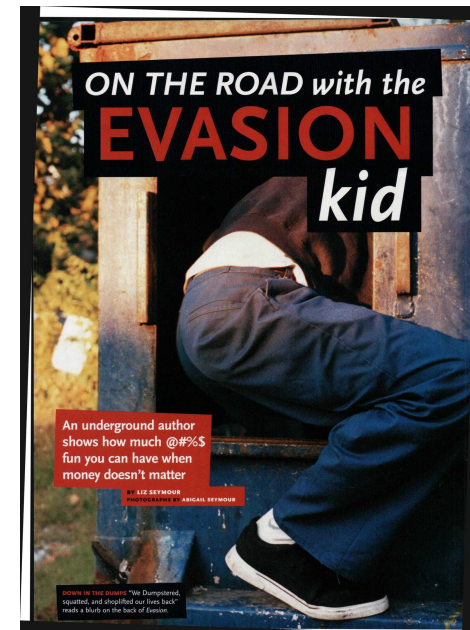
An Underground Author Shows How Much @#%\$ Fun
You Can Have When Money Doesn't Matter

Liz Seymour

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The Kids Are Alright

What happened next? Quinn went back to Australia and fell in love. Vernon spent three days in jail in New Orleans for taking change out of a public fountain. Starfish caught a freight train to Chattanooga. Fuzzy was pepper-sprayed in D.C. at an anti-capitalist demonstration. Sal found an old typewriter and began writing stream-of-consciousness poetry. Emma sent me a postcard from Florida to say she was back with the radical cheerleading squad. I came home and took a hot bath and slept for twelve hours. Six weeks after it was released, *Evasion* sold out its first printing; with a second printing, there are now 7,500 copies in print.

As for Ray, he came through town again not long ago. He'd spent some time in Florida, gone up to Minneapolis, toured with a band. But his best experience, he said, had come shortly after we said goodbye. Hitchhiking back to Florida, he and Emma had been picked up by a trucker hauling a transport stacked with new cars. Ray had idly remarked that he had always wondered what it would be like to ride up high in one of those cars, at which the driver pulled over and said, "Pick one." That's how it was that the last remnant of the *Evasion* tour consisted of Ray flying down I-95 at seventy miles an hour in a shiny red Pontiac twelve feet up in the air, watching the world from an angle that you and I will likely never see. Life serves the risk taker.

For more on *Evasion*, log on to www.crimethinc.com.

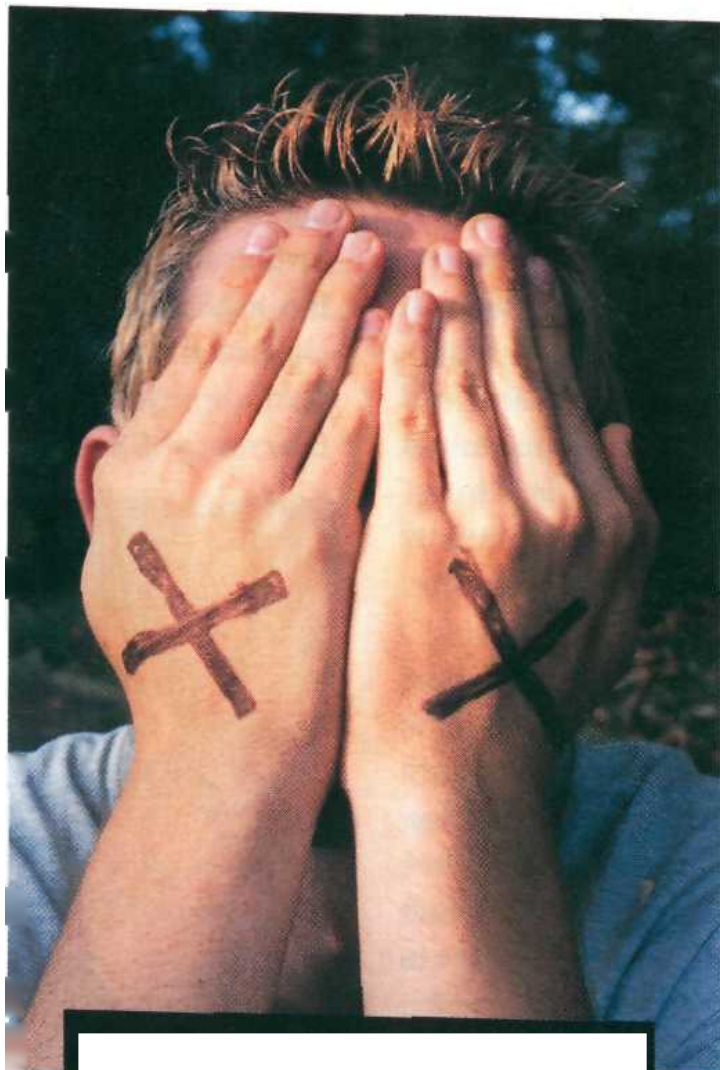
Mart. Starfish reads a poem about train hopping. The town is lovely, the hospitality is warm and I have a sofa to sleep on all to myself. *Books sold: three.*

Pittsburgh: Eight people in a small van is really a lot—all big feet and sharp elbows and a lot of grumbling. Pittsburgh will be our last stop. When I miss the exit, the three-hour ride turns into four. By the time we park in front of the punk house on a narrow cobbled street east of downtown, everyone is pretty subdued. We make a dinner from whatever we can find in the refrigerator, plus some rice left over from Chicago. A new discovery: The bottle-top scam. Fuzzy uses his new knife to pry out the linings of Coke bottle tops while Emma, Fuzzy and Vernon slip in photocopied facsimiles of “Free Coke” offers. Starfish and Vernon go get free Cokes for everyone. By 9 p.m., the basement where the show takes place has filled up with people, and under the strings of blue Christmas tree lights our spirits begin to revive. Quinn reads a speech about traveling to America; Fuzzy reads from *Evasion*; Sal sings. Molotov Sock Tales rises to a new level: It turns out that anything is funny if you put in enough swearing. Applause is thunderous. Maybe we will take over the world. The next morning we head home. *Books sold: five.*

Final accounting: Ninety books sold, one place sneaked into, no meals or rooms paid for, and we heard later that one kid who had been at our show in Pittsburgh was so inspired she quit her job. Some lessons learned. I relearned things I had nearly forgotten, about the excitement of risk and the pleasures of making something happen. And I learned something new and useful: It’s amazing how much fun you can have if you don’t care about the money.

A few caveats to begin with: All of the facts you are about to read are true, but not one of the names is real. This story is about a book that will never show up on any traditional best-seller list, will never be carried in a chain bookstore, will never cross Charlie Rose’s desk, a book whose success is never going to be measured in anything but the amount of pleasure the writer got from writing it—and by the difference it made in the lives of the people who read it. It’s about a fifty-two-year-old middle-class woman (me) driving around with a bunch of good-natured anarchists less than half my age—members of a surprising underground community you probably don’t know exists. It’s an author tour of sorts, and while you won’t find any of the usual book tour complaints about bad airline food or early-morning-talk-show hosts, there is quite a bit of the language usually represented as @#%\$. I’ll leave most of it out, but drop it in anywhere you want and you’ll probably be right. Also, there’s a lot of shoplifting. Actually, there’s a whole lot of shoplifting.

The trip was originally planned as a take-no-prisoners barnstorming road show through the Midwest. The book was called *Evasion*, a shaggy, picaresque, anonymous autobiography of larceny and adventure. “Eight kids, a van of books and utter disregard for tradition,” its twenty-five-year-old author—I’ll call him Ray—wrote in the hand-lettered flyers he scammed at a copy shop before we left home. “Maybe it’s ‘promotion,’ maybe book tours just aren’t *dangerous* enough, but we—the criminals—are bringing the *Evasion* ‘Break Down the Walls’ book tour to your town, with the simple challenge: ‘Dare us to sneak into something!’ ” Ray—whose aliases have become so confusing that most people just call him “the *Evasion* kid”—was feeling pretty unstoppable after he and two friends had sneaked into Madonna’s sold-out, \$88-and-up concert in Miami the month before, using a combination of hard hats, coveralls and bravado. “The most exclusive concert



Remaining Nameless

The unknown author's aliases have become so confusing, most people just call him "the *Evasion* kid."

owner wants us to pay \$5 apiece to get in. We'd have to sell eight books just to break even, and the pierced and mohawked teenagers milling around outside don't look like a book-buying crowd. We set up on the sidewalk instead. I read an excerpt from *Evasion* and Sal and Starfish debut *Molotov Sock Tales*, but it's hard to compete with bands like Nine Shocks Terror, whose music billows out every time someone opens the door. Surprisingly, though, a few kids do dig into their pockets. "Vernon!" Emma says suddenly. "We're in Michigan! Do you know what that means?" "Oh my God," says Vernon. It's the Michigan bottle deposit return.

While Ray and Quinn watch the merchandise, the rest of us fan out to check the trash cans. Yield: thirty-seven returnable soda bottles, a box of oatmeal and a pair of galoshes. On the way out of town, we run into another bit of good fortune—the clerk at an all-night convenience store near the Michigan border buys twenty books and gives us free sodas. "We're unstoppable!" Sal shouts, pounding on the dashboard as we drive off. "We'll take over the world with a @#%\$ army!" "We'll take over the world with a @#%\$ army of sock puppets!" I say. Dead silence. "Did you hear that?" Sal says quietly. "Liz just said @#%\$. Well, welcome to punk rock!" That night we sleep under the stars. *Books sold: Ypsilanti, nine; Crazy D's Truck Stop, twenty. Returned bottles: \$3.70.*

Oberlin, Ohio: We drop Ray and Fuzzy off at the highway outside Oberlin. They are planning to hitchhike to Pittsburgh to sneak into a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert; two hours later, they call the house where we are staying from a pay phone at a Kmart, and I drive back to the highway to pick them up. They haven't found a ride, but Fuzzy has managed to slip a new pocketknife into his backpack while waiting for me to arrive. The Dumpster behind the IGA is full of apple pies and tomatoes. And bees. The show is at the house where we are staying, mostly college students. Vernon and Fuzzy take their turn with *Molotov Sock Tales*. Sal sings a song about quitting his job at Wal-

flashlight collection. We all agree that our event in Bloomington was lacking something. Back on the highway, the idea for an addition to the *Evasion* tour is born: Molotov Sock Tales. We'll make sock puppets in Chicago and act out an anarchist fairy tale called "The Rich Man and His Appetite." Everyone is hungry and cranky, but things are looking up.

Once in Chicago, it turns out that the anarchist collective where we are booked to do our presentation doesn't really want us there. And the tiny apartment where we are staying—mattresses on the floor, a snarl of wires hooking up the three computers—is really too small for the eight of us. Ray and Emma opt for the roof. MTV is filming *The Real World* nearby, and we've been challenged to sneak into the house, but a look at the security cameras outside the front door has given us second thoughts. *The Vagina Monologues*, our second choice, proves equally unyielding. While Ray and Emma are out trying to sneak into things, the rest of us stay back in the apartment making puppets out of socks from a charity thrift store—ethics dictate that we pay for them—and yarn liberated from a chain craft store. Sal returns one of the *Guinness* books and gets some CDs that he plans to sell later for cash, but we can't find any place to sell the CDs. Food is low. Vernon tries shoplifting using the left-hand technique, holding a bottle of juice below eye level while he pays for a package of gum, but he gets ratted out by the customer in line behind him. The returns scam at a chain health-food store yields enough for only dinner and breakfast. I offer to buy some groceries on my credit card. Vernon says, "The way I see it, paying for stuff is the same as blasphemy." We make do. *Books sold: two.*

Evasion became an underground bestseller, the must-read of the summer in punk houses and anarchist info shops as it was passed from town to town by kids on hitchhiking and train-hopping odysseys.

Ypsilanti, Michigan: We had been booked between bands at a punk show in a little club on the main drag, but now the

event in history," he says, "and we owned it." Next, Ray planned to own the world.

Author Unknown

Ray was a kind of suburban everyboy, a middle-class white kid from California I who grew up skateboarding and goofing off in school, destined for college and a white-collar job. But an epiphany I led him to veer off at a fork in the road, leading him to, well, more skateboarding and more goofing off and a considerable amount of breaking and entering. "I I had always hated the town I grew up in," he says, "and suddenly the whole world flipped on its head and the town was one big playground." Four years into his new 1 life of petty crime, Ray decided to write it all down. In May 1999, he spent a month in a Little Rock, Arkansas, coffee shop I drinking free refills, sleeping at night behind a movie screen at a local multi-plex, eating scavenged popcorn and I composing an episodic account of the preceding four years of his life: He'd spent them as a full-time hitchhiker, train hopper and scam artist. "The only two really happy people in this world are the millionaire and the bum," he wrote on the first page. Salted among the tales of sleeping in empty houseboats, digging through Dumpsters and watching the stars from rooftops were practical tips on recovering receipts from the drugstore trash and returning small items for credit. "Relieve yourself of guilt and strife over exchanging pieces of your life for money," Ray writes, "and exchange vitamins and power tools instead!" There are also tips on sleeping in library broom closets afterhours, swimming in hotel pools and grazing the bulk-food bins, not to mention an all-important "left hand" shoplifting technique. *Evasion* was a how-to and why-to rolled into one.

"I had never picked up a pen in my whole life, but I really wanted to give the drug-free perspective," says Ray, who is

not only a vegan—a vegetarian who doesn't eat eggs or dairy products—but also straight-edge, meaning he doesn't use drugs or alcohol. "Anything that covered the way I was living was kind of clenched-fist, all about being cold and hungry, getting drunk and going Dumpster diving. I really wanted all the straight-edge kids to quit their jobs and go out and have fun."

To hitchhikers and train hoppers and punk kids, self-published pamphlets called "zines"—which is what *Evasion* was before being turned into a book—are what *The Wall Street Journal* is to commuters on the Long Island Railroad: essential reading. When it was done, *Evasion* added up to 108 full-sized handwritten pages. In June 1999, Ray scammed ten copies at the local copy shop (there are a number of ways to rip off a Kinko's, often based on the idea of paying for a little but copying a lot), passed them out to a couple of friends and then caught a freight train headed west. "Over the summer I made maybe fifty more, and that was the end of it," he says. "It was part of the past."

In fact, the *Evasion* zine would have quite a future. One of Ray's copies made its way to a stack of zines in the bathroom of a punk house, one of the many stops on the underground railroad of rundown houses and crowded apartments where visiting bands and traveling kids crash on couches and floors on their way through town. A guitarist took it with him and began scamming his own copies for friends, who in turn scammed their own—one legendary copy-shop employee was responsible for making some 2,000 under-the-table copies—and passed them along. Within months *Evasion* had become the underground equivalent of a bestseller, the must-read of the summer in punk houses and anarchist info shops, passed from town to town by kids on their own hitchhiking and train-hopping odysseys. By the end of that year, conservative estimates put the number of circulating copies at more than 5,000. For many middle-class kids raised on Nintendo and shopping malls and

adamant about; He wouldn't sign books and he wouldn't do readings. Also, if possible, he would prefer not to be at any of the author's appearances. And he didn't want to make a profit: If we started making more than gas money, we would give away free books until we brought our budget back in balance. That understood, we were off.

Louisville: The tour starts at a weekend-long diy conference with a full calendar of workshops on subjects like how to squat a building, how to settle disputes in a collective and one called "Sew Yer Own Damn Clothes." Books sell for \$5, of which \$3.50 has to go back to CrimethInc. Ray hones his marketing skills. A young woman with magenta dreadlocks: "Why should I buy this book?" Ray: "I have no idea." *Books sold: forty-five.*

Bloomington, Indiana: We head north, stopping only once to get gas (paid for) and soda and chips (not). Our first real stop: an evening at Secret Sailor books, a cozy anarchist info shop near Indiana University. We get our first dare, and Ray and Sal, dressed most unconvincingly as fraternity boys—Ray in a striped shirt and his usual baggy khakis, Sal in a blue oxford cloth shirt but toned over his wrists to cover his tattoos—sneak into the Lambda Chi house and report on what they find: not much. The Dumpster behind Marsh's yields cabbage, potatoes, onions, pineapples, tomatoes and asparagus, enough for dinner that night and some left over for the next day. Vernon and Fuzzy dine and dash at a local restaurant and just barely outrun the angry proprietor. Vernon goes into Papa John's at closing and talks the counter clerk out of an unsold cheese pizza. *Books sold: six.*

Chicago: Somewhere southeast of Chicago we stop at a shopping center to stretch our legs. Dozens of major chain stores. Sal: "Maybe we died and went to heaven and didn't even know it." Quinn: "We'll be stealing the @#%\$ angel's halos next." I get everyone into the van fast. Vernon comes back with two copies of the *Guinness Book of World Records* and one copy of *The Satanic Bible*; Fuzzy adds to his growing



The gang's all here

Eight kids, a van of books and “utter disregard for tradition” make for an atypical book tour.

genuine cheerleaders who have turned their talents to cheering on the revolution (One of their cheers: “R is for Revolution! E is for Everybody! S is for Subvert the system! I is for Ignite debate! S, Smash the state! T, Tear it down! Resist, resist! Raise up your fist! Resist, resist...”). Starfish, eighteen, was a high school dropout and ardent train hopper; Fuzzy, seventeen, was a tall, quiet suburban kid who had discovered anarchism on the Internet; Sal, twenty-one, was a Kentucky coal miner’s son and a genius at the returns scam; Vernon, twenty, was a former boy preacher from Virginia; and Quinn, twenty, was a straight-edge vegan from Australia. I was on the tour to do research for my own book about the DIY community’. Also, I owned the van.

Book tours have become an important marketing tool in the publishing world, but of course, our tour was going to be a little different. To begin with, there were two things Ray was

MTV, *Evasion*’s simple message—that it’s possible to get up and get out, to live beyond the edge and enjoy it, to make your own extreme sports out of the suburban materials at hand— was as powerful a call as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* had been to a generation nearly fifty years before.

The first intimation Ray had that something was going on came early in the spring of 2000. Although he has no fixed address in the real world, Ray maintains several e-mail addresses in the virtual one, which he checks regularly on free library computers wherever he happens to be. One day, he discovered a fat batch of fan mail. “It was like someone had flipped a switch,” he says. The first message was from Israel, the second from North Carolina. They started coming in from all over, a dozen or more a day: Louisville, Philadelphia, San Diego, Pensacola, Albany, Seattle, Germany, England, Sweden. People started posting messages on punk message boards and online diaries. (“More inspiration for when I finally give up on this silly made-for-TV life and jump a train to eternal spiritual liberation” read one. Another simply said, “The guy who does this zine should be a role model to all of America.”) “Doing the *Evasion* thing” entered the punk lexicon as ranks of worried and puzzled parents watched their children quit their jobs, drop out of school and start writing travel zines of their own.

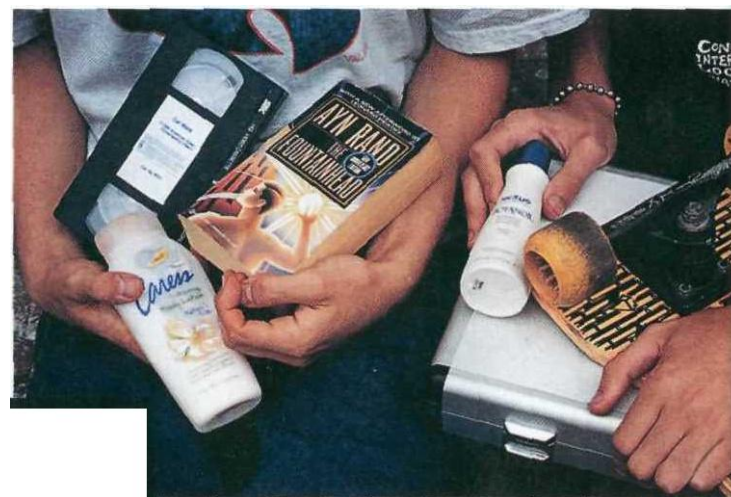
That kind of reaction was gratifying to Ray, who owed his own career to a photocopied zine called *Scam* that had come into his hands in June 1995, the last weeks of his senior year in his northern California high school. “It basically detailed this kid’s life living in an abandoned hotel in Miami, reading books, riding bikes around, playing guitar on public transportation,” says Ray. Before *Scam*, he says, “It had never occurred to me that you didn’t have to work. It was one of those defining moments where you close the book and say, ‘This is what I want to do.’ ” It was a blinding personal insight, but as it turned out, it was not a unique one: Beginning in the early 1990s, and accelerating since the anti-globalization protests in Seattle in Novem-

ber 1999, a radical anticorporate, anti-consumer, anti-capitalist movement has been gathering force, largely under the radar but numbering in the hundreds of thousands. One of the central tenets of this new movement is diy—Do It Yourself: Take responsibility for taking or making what you need in life, including your own fun.

Among the e-mails that crowded Ray's in-box after the *Evasion* zine began its global wanderings was one from Paul F. Maul, a member of something called the CrimethInc Ex-Workers Collective, a loose organization of punk kids and anarchists that puts out newspapers, CDs, zines and books. The CrimethInc imprint was already widely familiar in the train-hopping/Dumpster-diving/ protest-going DIY community for its first book, *Days of War, Nights of Love*, a compilation of romantically radical artwork and essays with titles like "Eight Reasons Why Capitalists Want to Sell You Deodorant" and "Tricks of the Tradeless." CrimethInc claims that *Days of War* sold more than 10,000 copies in its first year without any advertising, marketed at punk shows and on Web sites like anti-everything.com ("just like Amazon but with more swearing"). Maul asked Ray if he would be interested in expanding his zine into a book; many e-mails and sticky notes and free coffee refills later, *Evasion* the book was ready for its first printing of 3,500 copies. "We Dumpstered, squatted, and shoplifted our lives back," says a blurb on the back cover. "Everything fell into place when we decided our lives were to be lived. Life serves the risk taker.."

Road Scholars

So there I was, at the wheel of the *Evasion* book tour. The members of our ragged little collective included Ray (and his three cartons of books) and six others. Emma, from Florida, was one of the original radical cheerleaders, an organized group of



Another man's treasure

A midtour Dumpster dive yielded a variety of intriguing discards.