

The Cult

It wasn't like I planned to join a cult; but it was tricky avoiding them when I was growing up in my hometown of Miami during the 70's. They were chanting at the airport, praying in the park, passing out leaflets in the shopping malls. There were the Moonies, Hare Krishna, Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the one I joined - The Children of God.

I was coming out of the S & H green stamp store without the blender my mother had wanted because -space cadet -I hadn't realized that one of the green stamps books was not completely filled. I was 18, barefoot, braless, my long wavy wild hair blowing in the breeze, and other than this one failed errand I really had no direction. My friends had all gone off to college but I'd stayed at my parents' home with its sparkling swimming pool and relaxing hammock strung up in the backyard. And there was also my beloved canine companion, Cinnamon Girl. She was like my baby.

I'd had vague plans about going to college but hadn't really given them too much thought. I'd seen news reports of protests and student takeovers at Berkeley University and decided that was the college for me. I'd already fallen in love with California on a family vacation a few years prior so as far as I was concerned, it was *Berkeley or bust!*

I hadn't bothered to think about the fact that with my lackluster achievement -actually *achievement* isn't the right word, I ranked right in the middle of my graduating class --there was no way Berkeley would have ever accepted me. When I announced my plans, my father yelled, "I'm not paying out of state tuition!"

He insisted that I apply to Florida State University but too many of my classmates would be going there and I did not want to see most of them ever again. So I rebelled and just refused to go to college. Period. That was fine with my dad. He didn't think girls really needed a degree anyway.

It was nice for a while. I enjoyed getting high, going for long bike rides, floating in the pool, and swaying in the hammock while everyone else was at work or at school. But after nearly a year, I was lonely, missing my friends and getting slightly panicky about my future.

I was almost to my car, an old but reliable 67 Chevy, when a cute long-haired guy approached me. He wore faded jeans, a white button-down shirt untucked and leather sandals on his tanned feet. He said his name was James and he had such a sincere, earnest look that I didn't object when he handed her a Mo letter. It was a philosophical sort of Jesus freak rant written by Moses David, the Children of God's founder. One day some cult members were outside my school at dismissal time handing them out and I'd read one titled *Mountain Maid*. It just rhapsodized about women's breasts, how great they looked, how fantastic they felt and what an incredibly important job they did feeding babies. It was a turnoff for me but might have appealed to some of the guys at my high school.

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I looked at the Mo letter, frowning. "I'm not into religion," I said, explaining that I'd quit my church when I realized that according to its teachings, my two best friends would be going to Hell just because they were Jewish.

James smiled. His brown eyes were clear and kind. "The Children of God follow the teachings of Jesus. We're not like organized religions. We live together peacefully, sharing everything." He cocked his head and smiled. "You should come over sometime."

I hesitated but he seemed so at peace and relaxed. "Maybe I will," I said.

James took a pen out of his pocket and wrote the address of their house on the margins of the Mo letter, suggesting I come by that evening after dinner "We play music and sing every night. We'd be happy to have you join us."

Then he hugged me. My boyfriend had moved away the year before. He had been my first love and I'd been heartbroken ever since. How could I refuse?

That night, I put on my favorite jeans and cutest top and drove over to the house. It was an ordinary-looking middle class home in the suburbs, but inside it was a different world. There were about a dozen young adults and a couple of little kids. A few couples but mostly singles. They were all sitting together in the living room, a couple of guys playing guitars and everyone singing some songs about Jesus and God and love. Even though I didn't believe in all the lyrics I liked the catchy melodies and the way everyone seemed so happy, clapping and singing along

The vibe was full on hippie. Natural. Down to earth. The women didn't wear makeup. Everyone had long hair and wore jeans except some of the girls who were dressed in long skirts or peasant-style dresses. Every person there welcomed me and hugged me. When it was time to go, Luke, the leader of the group, walked me back to my car, giving me especially long hug and caress. He said the Lord led him to do it. I wasn't sure his wife, who was obviously pregnant, would have liked it but it made me feel special.

I wasn't used to so much acceptance and affection. It felt amazing. Like a high without drugs. I couldn't remember the last time either of my parents had hugged me and they never told me they loved me. Mostly they just criticized me and punished me for all my failings and mistakes. The very next day I packed a few clothes and drove back to the Children of God's house and became Rachel. Everyone in the cult had to have a name from the bible and I chose the name Rachel because I liked how it sounded. Also, it wasn't already taken by anyone at the house.

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The couples had their own rooms and their children stayed in the rooms with them. All the single guys slept on mats on the floor in one room, and the single girls did the same in another room. I felt bad for one other new member, Sara, who was shaking and crying at bedtime when she was told she wasn't allowed to keep her silk sheets. Before she joined she'd worked in the world's oldest profession supposedly. In the Children of God house, we all shared everything except clothes, shoes, and toothbrushes. No one was allowed to have personal possessions. We also could not drink, smoke, take drugs or even eat sugar – Moses David called it poison-- which I thought was taking things a bit too far.

We had a daily routine and one of the best parts was when Silas came to our door every morning to wake us up. He'd stand in the open doorway strumming his guitar, singing *"It's a new morning, a new morning, yeah."*

I thought it sounded so pretty but then he stopped and I found out his guitar got taken away from him because he was too proud of his talent or something. That made me mad because I really liked being greeted that way in the morning. And I didn't see what was wrong with it. I didn't think he was on an ego trip.

The women prepared the meals with healthy foods mostly donated or scooped up after being tossed by Winn Dixie and the A & P. We ate peanut butter, banana and honey sandwiches, eggs, fish, yogurt, fruit and sometimes even old-fashioned dinners like liver and onions. At mealtimes, we'd watch the news but turned the volume off during commercials. We looked down on material things and avoided advertisements for them. Every morning after breakfast, the group would read Mo letters and pray about where they would go *litness* which was to pass out literature and witness. But for the most part, we were just begging.

Before we headed out we'd all get in a big circle to pray for the Lord to give us guidance for the day's mission. Most of the members really got into it, swaying, hands raised to the ceiling, loudly speaking in tongues, *"Habiddah, udehlah, shebiddah!* Weird nonsense words spewed out of everyone's mouths but mine I think. I was told that I should pray for the "gift of tongues" but I wanted no part of it and suspected most of them were faking it anyway. I just stood there squeezing my eyes shut; waiting for it to be over. The Lord never told me where he wanted me to go; I doubted he even existed, but when they'd finished praying and Luke would ask, "Rachel, where's the Lord leading you today?"

I'd always answer, "To the mall."

Most of the others said God wanted them to go to various busy intersections --which was where they could get the most money-- but I wanted to go where it was air-conditioned, I could use a decent restroom, and sneak a brownie at the bakery inside the Jordan Marsh department store.

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In the Children of God, we always went out in pairs, one guy and one girl. Very few of the members had cars so the cars were left behind for the mothers to be able to go out to get food and take the kids to doctors. The rest of us always hitchhiked everywhere and the rule was the guy got into the car first so the driver couldn't just floor it and kidnap the girl. I wondered if they'd learned that lesson the hard way.

I was shy and quiet so maybe that's why they paired me up with Gabriel Galaxy, who was the #1 litnesser in the entire organization. Or maybe he'd asked for me. I don't know. Smooth and good-looking, he brought in more money for the cult than anyone else worldwide. I was happy to just tag along while he sweet-talked everyone out of cash donations, telling them we were helping kids get off drugs. It was true. They couldn't take drugs in the cult, but they were in for something a lot worse later, I just didn't know it yet.

I loved being with Gabriel. He had long brownish-blond hair and sea green eyes. He was lean, muscular and the perfect height for me –not towering over me but tall enough to make me feel protected when he held my hand or put his arm around me.

My favorite part of the day was when we took a break for lunch. We'd always go for a walk to the same Chinese restaurant marveling along the way at how sick society was, worshipping meaningless material things like the shiny new cars we passed at the BMW dealership, especially disgusted by the display of one car elevated on a pole and spinning around.

For lunch, we always ordered pork egg foo young and drank hot tea and Gabriel would make me laugh with all his stories about his life before the Children of God. He'd been a big fan of LSD, had taken hundreds of acid trips and pulled all kinds of crazy stunts in the Army until he got kicked for insubordination. I loved the sound of his voice, the way he threw his head back when he laughed, and just being there next to him. We'd be pressed up against each other in the booth in our own little world, kissing as much as eating, holding each other's hands as much as any silverware. It drove me crazy that the cult would not allow us to sleep together. A few times at the house we tried to sneak around and get it on but always got caught before getting very far.

Months went by and I couldn't stand it anymore. No sex. No sugar. No bike rides, no roller-blading. No radio, no records. No concerts or TV. I missed having my old life and my own room. There were always so many people around. Sometimes I just wanted to be left alone with my thoughts. I tried to get Gabriel to leave with me but he wouldn't. He was hardcore.

One day at the mall, while on my usual defiant and secretive bakery visit, I found a pay phone, called my grandparents and asked them to pick me up. When I told Gabriel they were coming for me, he begged me not to go. Again, I pleaded with him to leave with me, but he just shook his head, tears streaming down his face. I wasn't used to seeing a man cry. I thought he must really love me a lot. By the time my grandparents drove up in their Buick I'd changed my mind and stepped back from the curb. They were devastated but there was nothing they could do. I was 18.

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For a few more months, I stuck it out but my frustration got to be unbearable and I convinced Luke to let me go home to visit my family. Members were supposed to forsake them; the Children of God was our family now, but Luke reluctantly agreed to it. Just for one day, not overnight.

My dad picked me up and was mostly silent for the twenty-minute ride home. That was normal. He was an airline pilot and when he was home he was so uncommunicative he might as well have been back up in the clouds. He did say he imagined Cinnamon Girl would be really glad to see me and that she'd sat by the front door every day for weeks after I left. When we got to the house, I was surprised to see that my grandparents were there too even though it wasn't a holiday or anybody's birthday. And Cinnamon Girl was ecstatic, wagging her tail and jumping high in the air.

At first, everyone mostly commented on how tanned I was and how thin I'd become. They acted non-judgmental and just curious about The Children of God, especially about the living arrangements.

I told them that there were about 16 or 18 of us usually but people moved around. There were other Children of God houses. There was one in South Miami, another one in the Gables near the Children's Hospital, and a big two-story one on Brickell Avenue near downtown. By then I'd lived in all three.

My mother, who usually called me lazy and complained that everything I did was half-assed, was being so nice. She'd prepared all my favorite foods. It wasn't even Thanksgiving, but she'd baked a turkey, made cornbread dressing and there was even chocolate pudding with whipped cream for dessert.

My parents said they'd been investigating the cult and that Moses David was an old guy from California named David Berg who'd left his wife and kids and lived like a king in the Canary Islands with a bunch of young women on the money his followers begged for in the streets.

I didn't know how much we collected but I doubted there was that much. "I'm pretty sure the money is used for food and shelter, electricity and gas for the cars." I said, adding, "And we are helping get kids off drugs,"

My parents had hated it when I smoked pot. I was always getting put on restriction for it. I thought they'd at least approve of that aspect. But they just added that the Children of God used girls for sex to recruit new members and that there were all kinds of wild orgies going on in the cult. I knew that wasn't true! It wasn't like that at all.

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“The girls sleep in one room and the guys stay in another room.” I said. I didn’t bother to mention how desperately I’d wanted to have sex. Or how I had been asked to kiss men sometimes when we were trying to get donations or invite them back to the house. It hadn’t felt sleazy or wrong. I was just showing them that Jesus loved them. And it was just a kiss on the cheek or a hug.

I didn’t think everything my parents said about the Children of God was true, but I was tired of living with the cult’s strict rules, and told my parents I wanted to come home. I’d decided to leave the Children of God for good.

My dad and brother drove back over to the Children of God’s house without me to pick up my few belongings and to bring back my car. My dad said Luke gave them a hard time about taking it saying I’d donated it when I moved in, but my father and brother were not above violence and just the threat of it enabled the car to be parked in our driveway that night.

I was relieved to be back home, but I wasn’t anything like at peace. I missed Gabriel and the feeling of belonging. And at home nothing had really changed except that I’d been ordered to enroll in community college. Things went back to how they’d been before. My mom went to her secretarial job Monday through Friday and played bridge at night. My dad flew around the world, played tennis, and went to union meetings. My parents each did their thing, I tried to do mine.

I signed up for classes but dropped out soon afterward. I’d be in my car on my way to school and just get the urge to watch the planes take off and land at the airport or climb a tree or swing on the swings at the park, and the next thing I knew that’s what I was doing. And even though I didn’t believe in all of the Children of God’s teachings, I’d felt more connected there. When I did laps in the pool or swayed in the hammock, I couldn’t shake feelings of guilt and shame. I thought the Children of God were living the right way and I was a terrible person just thinking of my own selfish pleasure.

I got over that rather suddenly though when something arrived in the mail from Gabriel. It was a copy of the cult’s weekly *New Nation News* publication. My own smiling face had graced its cover once. But this edition was one meant to be distributed only to the most devoted, longtime members of the cult. Inside it there was a photo of a young woman, topless, smiling seductively, with the caption, *Have you read your Mo letter today?*