

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

An Un-American Childhood

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Flor Christine Edwards

June 2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

Flor Christine Edwards

Master of Fine Arts, Graduate Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the  
Performing Arts  
University of California, Riverside, June 2014  
Dr. Reza Aslan, Chairperson

The following are the preliminary pages of my memoir *An Un-American Childhood* about growing up unconventionally in a religious sex cult with my parents and eleven siblings until I was a teenager. We lived in Thailand because Father David, our leader, didn't want us in the west when the world ended in 1993. When Father David died suddenly, the cult broke apart, and we found ourselves alone in the world with no money, food, very little clothing, and no direction.

*An Un-American Childhood* takes the reader on a journey from the Children of God's beginnings on the shores of Huntington Beach in 1968 through my childhood in Thailand to my family's integration into American society beginning in 1996. *An Un-American Childhood* invites the reader to join Father's David's followers through a gripping first person narrative—the mind of a child—who, once controlled by a charismatic pedophile cult leader, slowly gained the freedom to think on her own.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
Part 1 – The Beginning	12
Part 2 – Thailand	51

Phuket, Thailand 1989—Amidst a sprawling yard under the beating sun a butterfly sits, stalking the tip of a bougainvillea petal, its powdery blue wings suspended like a perfectly timed clock—tick, tick, tick—knowing when to open, when to close.

A host of children play in the yard, too many to count on one hand, wearing flip-flops, cargo shorts and light t-shirts. I can see them now. They run across fields and flail their arms in the air. They laugh and sing and play jump rope. They inspect newly hatched tadpoles in a mossy pond. They poke pet quail with wooden sticks. They catch sparrows and kick a tattered soccer ball so it lands between two spokes in the muddy earth. They dodge mangoes that fall from trees and splatter to the ground, thick with juice and worms.

It's a little before five p.m. at a home in Phuket, Thailand. Inside the house a man the children know as "Uncle Josh" is frying sardine patties for dinner. I can see him from the kitchen window. He has strong, muscular arms. He wears an apron with no shirt. His bulging muscles shine with sweat. He guts fish with a knife. First he scrapes the scales from head to tail, then makes a clean slice from tail to gill. The icy scales clutter the counter like snow. He puts the clean, gutted fish in a barrel. He has headphones on. He's listening to music. I don't know what music he's listening to but I sure hope it ain't music from the devil 'else God might come straight out of heaven and knock him dead.

The guts and fish heads go in a pile near the sink. He stops to wipe his knife and hands on his apron. His white apron is stained with handprints of fresh fish blood. In between the words of a song I can see his lips form the word "Hallelujah." He says it a few times and then closes his eyes and tilts his head up to heaven. A smile spreads across

his face. A steel pot of bok choy boils on the stove while the rice cooker hisses steam from its flue. Uncle Josh has black curly hair and a cheerful demeanor. I can see him now from the kitchen window. He is smiling. He is always smiling. He is happy. When he cooks he sings and bobs his head.

Outside in the yard a girl tries to detain the four-winged creature with her homemade net made of bamboo. Whoosh! (Her efforts fail.) In a fit of instinct the butterfly flutters to a nearby hibiscus to suck the sweet nectar with its proboscis. It doesn't know it only has six weeks to live. It doesn't know today might be its last day. It doesn't know the girl in pigtails holding the bamboo basket will decide its imminent fate.

When we were kids we used to catch butterflies for fun. We didn't know that every time we rubbed the powder off their wings we played God, shortening their lifespan by days, which for a butterfly, can mean years.

When we succeeded we transferred our victims to a glass jar and thoroughly inspected the minute details—the long spidery legs, the sparkly iridescence of the wings, the waving intuitive antennae. Sometimes the butterfly escaped through the thatches of the woven bamboo. Sometimes the butterfly mysteriously disappeared, as if by magic, and we moved on to our next captive. We were predators. Most often we killed the butterfly, unknowingly rubbing the powder off their wings until they become paper thin and see-through. Six weeks of caterpillar metamorphous shattered in an instant.

Whenever a butterfly died we conducted an elaborate funeral on a nearby hill. During recess we chose our burial site atop a grassy knoll under a baby palm tree that sprouted a relief of shade from the merciless sun. After adorning the makeshift grave

with orchids and poppies, hibiscus and honeysuckles, we sent the butterfly with a sigh of relief and guilt to its unknown afterlife, a life that was as clandestine and enigmatic as the butterfly.

Like the butterflies we lived in captivity. Unlike the butterflies we had no wings. We could not escape through the thatched metal gates. We lived in compounds surrounded by walls eight feet high topped with barbed wire or broken glass. The gates were boarded with wood. No one could see in. We couldn't get out. Every afternoon during recess the sun softened its rays and we were allowed to go outside as long as we stayed within the perimeters of the cement walls. When no one was looking I pressed my nose against the metal bars. I found a tiny crack big enough for me to see a sliver of the world outside. I stared through the peephole searching for other signs of life. Sometimes I saw a slow moving rickshaw or a shimmering snake or a mother carrying a child on her back, while balancing a bucket on her head. That was all I knew of the world outside.

By the time I was born the Children of God had changed their name to the Family of Love. The children outnumbered the adults, comprising 75 percent of the group's 12,000-member population. We scattered across the four corners of the earth as instructed by our leader Father David, staying out of the western hemisphere, fleeing when he said "flee" and staying when he said "stay." We began to function like a school or an army. We were soldiers being rigorously trained for the Battle of Armageddon that would prelude the apocalypse in 1993. Our job was to forewarn the whole world of the end of the world. Father David played God. Or rather he claimed to be the mouthpiece of God. He sat on his throne, predicted our future, and decided our fate, a fate that included

possible martyrdom and certain premature death. Father David, like Moses, would lead us out of captivity and into the Promised Land, or so he said...

## INTRODUCTION

Childhood, like fire, is not a thing to tamper with, lest the damages be shown in the pages of this book.

The fire that consumed my childhood was ignited centuries before I was born with the religious fervor and persecution that pervaded Europe in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1745, at a time when droves of Europeans settled in Pennsylvania to flee religious persecution with William Penn's promise of religious freedom, three brothers set sail for New England from Stuttgart, Germany. Adam, Isaac and Jacob Brandt were the pride and joy of their mother's womb. Adam, the oldest of the three, bore the news to their mother that they had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. She collapsed and wept, aghast that her sons had betrayed their Jewish Orthodox family. They were rejected by their family, declared dead, and buried in a mock funeral, as was the Jewish custom. The three brothers packed up their things one night and fled, paddling up the Neckar Canal and westward into the Rhine River stopping only for food or rest to escape a Europe torn by the Thirty Years War, religious massacres, famine, and disease.

The three brothers settled in Pennsylvania and became Mennonite farmers, now known as the Pennsylvania Dutch. Previously, the Pennsylvania Dutch, who were really Pennsylvania German but called themselves 'Dutch' as a mispronunciation of the German word "Deutsch," established their claim from Bethlehem through Lebanon and Lancaster to York. Many were descendants of refugees from the Palatinate of the German

Rhine that migrated in large groups on ships from London to New York in 1710. Once settled in Pennsylvania, they spent their days producing tar and pitch for the Royal Navy in exchange for their citizenship and safe passage. They increased farming productivity using intensive German farming techniques and settled into a simple lifestyle, adapting numerous religious beliefs from Lutheran to Reformed to Anabaptist. The three brothers soon continued westward, through the North Branch Division, across the Susquehanna Canal, and laid stake in Ohio where they joined the German Baptist brotherhood known as the “Dunkers” or “Dunkards” for their trine immersion during baptism. The Dunkards honored the Holy Trinity, dressed plainly, practiced foot-washing, and promoted “obedience to Christ rather than obedience to creeds and cults.” These men were in the ancestral line of David Brandt Berg.

John Lincoln Brandt, the most notable of David Berg’s ancestors, was born to Isaac Brandt and Elizabeth Lufbury in Somerset, Ohio in 1860. He began lecturing and preaching as a teenager and became a minister in the Methodist Church in his early twenties. A young man with a prominent nose, thick sideburns and a square jaw, he was esteemed greatly by his grandson, David Berg, who said, “I admired him greatly; he was a real hero to me. He was a truly great man who really loved the Lord and survived many vicissitudes of life.” The Mormons shot at him in Utah and the Catholics burned down his house in Toledo. His grandfather’s opposition only swelled David Berg’s admiration. David Berg called him a fighter and claims that that’s where he got his gumption. In his same breath he alleged that his grandfather was a gambler, having a “stock market tickertape right in the office of his church so he could keep up with the stock market.”

David Berg attributes this trait to his being Jewish to the core. “Even as a preacher,” he said, “he figured out ways of making money.”

Maybe it was his own lack of money that led David Berg to start his mission. Virginia Lee Brandt, his mother was born the middle child of John and Nina Lee Marquis on May 27, 1886 in Ronceverte, West Virginia. Her father became a leader in the Alexander Campbell movement Disciples for Christ and soon gained the position as president of Virginia College. Through his writings and investments John L. Brandt eventually became a millionaire. He built 50 churches, won thousands to the Lord, and over 400 men volunteered for the ministry under his persuasion.”

Most people would say Father David was an evil man. But how can you be born and evil at the same time. He was born in Oakland, California on February 18, 1919, the youngest of three children. His mother, Virginia Lee Brandt, traveled as a young girl with her father throughout the United States, Mexico, Canada, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Pacific Islands while he grew in fame as a lecturer and a preacher. She gained sophistication from her upbringing, but during her college years became a society wild child and was engaged to Bruce Bogart, a relative of Humphry Bogart. At the engagement party she met a young Swedish immigrant, Hjalmer Emmanuel Berg, a Swedish gospel singer and student of theology in Des Moines, Iowa, who had been hired to entertain the crowd. While watching Hjalmer sing in broken English a version of “O, Promise Me,” Virginia fell in love with the Swedish immigrant, broke off her engagement with Bruce and the two eloped shortly thereafter.

In 1913 Virginia gave birth to their first child, Hjalmer Jr. While walking home from the hospital Virginia fell and slipped on an icy sidewalk and broke her back in two places. While recovering and lying on what she called her deathbed, she had a religious experience and claimed that she had been divinely healed. As devout Christian evangelists, his parents instilled in Berg a passion for religious devotion, but they were no strangers to controversy. After publicly testifying of “divine healing,” they were expelled from the Christian Church and joined the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

Berg spent his early years traveling with his parents and in 1924 they settled in Miami, Florida after his mother led a series of successful revivals at the Miami Gospel Tabernacle. In his early 20’s, Berg accompanied his mother once again on her evangelist missions, acting as her chauffeur, song leader and assistant. He was soon a minister in the Christian and Missionary Alliance, but was expelled for alleged sexual misconduct with a church member, although Berg argued later that his expulsion was due to his support for greater racial diversity amongst his congregation. Berg was best known for founding the organization known as the Children of God. For those of us who grew up in the Children of God the story was recounted to us like it was holier than Scripture.

The Children of God was founded on the shores of Huntington Beach in 1968. One day a man walked along the pier. His name was David Brandt Berg. He wore a French beret, slacks, formal shoes and a blue sweater. He tucked his hands into his pockets and held his head low. His shoes kicked up the dust as he contemplated his 49 years. As it turned to dusk this man had an epiphany. He looked around him. The streets were dark and full of despair. Hippies huddled together on the street corners sharing

experiences of their latest high and speculating about where their journeys would take them next; others wandered the streets alone, their heads bowed in solitude, staring at the dirt as if waiting for a magical genie to emerge from the dust at any moment and grant them an unforgettable wish. The sun settled into the horizon. Searchers dotted the sandy shores. Even though there were many, Berg saw that they were lonely and afraid.

A blinding light flashed before his eyes. He heard what he claimed to be the voice of God—loud, clear and articulate. For a moment all was still. From the light a question arose, “Wilt thou become ‘King of the Beggars?’” David Berg knew he had a job to do. At nearly 50 he had found his life’s mission. The hippies around him were lost and it was his job to save them from their desolation and embark them on a new path of fulfillment and hope. They were searching for a way out of ‘the system’ and he had the answers to their questions. Also, the world was about to end. In the midst of his epiphany he had an idea: they could all band together and save the world from damnation and hell. So David Berg, along with his wife, Eve, and their four young children, Aaron, Ho, Faithy and Deborah, began gathering the outcasts—the downtrodden, the drug addicts and the lost souls. They bonded together and formed a band of hippies. They took over a coffee shop called The Light Club on Main Street and hosted daily Bible studies and occasional betrothals. They called themselves “Freaks for Jesus” and traveled around the U.S. inviting others like them to join them in their quest for freedom, redemption and salvation.

As the group began to multiply and grow, they changed their name to “Hippies for Jesus.” His followers began calling David Berg “Father David.” They lived

communally and wrote happy songs about God and His love. They traveled in caravans throughout the U.S. spreading the message of God's love and His salvation that was available to anyone receptive to receive it. They began "The Coffee Shop Ministry." Every evening they gathered in local coffee houses. Father David stood up and began speaking. He spoke of a forgiving God and invited anyone to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. He adopted his own belief system that encouraged unconditional love and sexual freedom. Many desperate followers dropped everything they had right then and there and accepted Jesus into their life as their Lord and Savior, just like Berg's ancestors did before they were ostracized. At the end of the day the coffee shops gave them the free donuts and cold coffee. Then they went on to follow this eccentric, charismatic leader as if he were the genie who materialized from out of thin air.

According to Berg, the church was the most hypocritical, self-righteous and phony establishment there was and those who pretended to know God by sitting through sermons and tithing once a month would be the first ones to burn in hell. The church was naïve, Berg said, and deserved a chance to repent just like everyone else. So he ordered his members to "gird yourself in sackcloth, wallow thyself in ashes, and make thyself as mourning," as instructed by God in the book of Jeremiah. Father David spoke and the people listened and obeyed without question. Here's how it worked:

Imagine you're sitting in church. It's Sunday morning. The preacher is talking about something, but you have no idea what he's saying because you're busy daydreaming about all the better places you could be right now.

Suddenly your thoughts are interrupted by a loud “THUD!”

The back door swings open.

You turn your head to see what all the commotion is about. Finally! Something exciting is happening and it has nothing to do with the sermon.

A man enters. Clearly he’s uninvited. You can tell by his choice of clothing attire.

*Is that fabric made of straw?* you ask yourself while the fat little usher rushes over to impede this uninvited guest.

But he’s too late! Plus, he’s no match for the army of thirty hippies that are now parading down the aisle like soldiers in war wearing robes of sackcloth. The sermon is drowned out by the sound of sixty foot beats accompanied by thirty wooden rods that pound the polished floor with every step. They are wearing heavy sandals. The men have scruffy beards and the women have long flowing hair.

The whole congregation is silent. The preacher just stands there. His jaw drops. What are these hippies thinking? They must be high on some kind of drug. There has to be an explanation for this madness. Before you have time to find an answer, the silence is interrupted by an earth-shattering cry. Simultaneously they raise their wooden staves above their heads. By now they are all standing in a neat line at the pulpit.

They hold their staves above their heads and let out a heart wailing cry, “WOOOOAH!”

Then, silence.

It’s only once they drop their scrolls that you notice they are holding something besides their wooden staves. They have a message to share. You know it can’t be joyous

because the ashes smeared across their foreheads symbolize one thing: it's a time for mourning.

Usually people mourn after a loved one has died. But these radical 'Jesus Freaks' are mourning in preparation for the loss of a whole nation. They are warning of the End of the World. The scrolls contain verses. But they aren't pretty verses that spoke of "Loving thy neighbor" or "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you". These verses were selected from the Old Testament and contained the 'meat' of the Word. Verses from the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah warn of Damnation. The book of Revelation predicts the 'End of the World'.

Suddenly you are overtaken by guilt, especially when you take a second glance at a scroll that reads in large black letters, "The wicked shall be turned to Hell and all the nations that forget God" (Psalms 9:17).

It's only once you carefully examine one of the church rebels and notice how beautiful she is with her long flowing hair and dark piercing eyes that you become aware of just how serious these young people are. This isn't a joke. They aren't on drugs. The world is ending and they're here to save you. They are even wearing yokes of bondage around their necks as a symbol of slavery illustrating that you are in captivity and you would be a fool not to repent. Many of these sessions ended in arrest along with a headline story in the newspaper the next morning.

I was born on December 13, 1981 in Malmo, Sweden. Dad's mom died the year I was born so I never knew my paternal grandmother, Mary Ann, but from the stories Dad tells, she was quite a lush and liked to smoke Virginia Slims and drink heavily. She made money on the side writing greetings for Hallmark cards, but stayed in her room mostly drinking and smoking, leaving her nine children to fend for themselves in South Pasadena.

My grandpa was an artist and worked on Hollywood sets painting the faces of actors and actresses. He had a keen eye for beauty and no apprehension to call out ugliness as if it were a crime. He'd punish any ugly person who came into his view with his bluntness or some remark about ideal weight or height statistics. He once sent a woman away from the dinner table crying because he told her she looked like a horse with her buck teeth and straggly hair. Grandma Mary Ann divorced my grandpa when Dad was nine and their separation resulted in a rescue mission where she clawed her way to get the four youngest children away from my grandpa, leaving marks on my uncles that looked like they'd been attacked by vicious cats. Grandma Mary Ann died of emphysema in May 1981. Recently Dad told me that her health was always bad, probably from having to deal with his dad who would get drunk and beat her regularly.

Mom met dad in 1978 while she was prostituting for the Children of God. Father David sent the women out to gain members and gather donations using their sexuality and charm. He called it flirty-fishing. Dad wasn't one of her clients, but she met him through a phone conversation that led him back to the hotel in Majorca, Spain where she was getting ready to go prostituting. The hotel, I can imagine, was sophisticated with

fancy chandeliers that sparkled when you walked in, posh leather couches the color of licorice, and stout Spaniards wearing black tuxedos with white cuffs and gold tie clips concocting stylish cocktails for the patrons in the lobby. Mom wore black high heels that clip-clopped against the shiny floor when she walked. Father David said a little bit of nail polish and only on the toes because nothing is sexier than red nail polish on a woman's toes especially when they're peeking out from a sexy pair of black high heels. Usually Mom isn't allowed to wear high heels or nail polish or heavy make-up for that matter, but this was a special occasion so she applied a turquoise shade to her deep-set eyes and a dab of crimson to her almond shaped lips. The sea breeze polished her tan skin. She was still getting used to the mild Mediterranean weather that whispered seasons with tufts of wind that ruffled the turquoise sea rather than shouting them with blizzards the way winter announced its presence in Sweden.

When she picked up the phone she answered, "Je-es? Hah-low?" in her thick Swedish accent. Every word in Swedish sounds like a question in the form of a song and she had not yet mastered the English language.

"Yeah, hi. This is brother Bill, Dust's brother," came the voice from the other end. He spoke clearly. His voice had an air of adolescence and youth.

Mom ruffled her shirt and stroked her long brown hair, "Jea-us?" she answered in her thick Swedish accent.

"Yeah, I'm Dust's brother. I just arrived from America. Can you give me directions to the hotel?" Dad followed his five older siblings and dropped out of UC

Davis two weeks before graduating at the top of his class to join the Children of God.

This was his life now.

“Caballero Hotel,” Mom said, but it came out sounding like “Kaa ba jerra Hjo-tel.” Y’s sound like J’s and J’s become Y’s in Swedish.

“Kaba-what?” Bill asked her to reiterate, confused.

“Kaaa ba jerra,” Mom said emphatically as she applied pink rouge to her high, defined cheekbones.

“I’m sorry! I can’t understand a thing,” Bill said, frustrated. When he was ordered to leave the United States no one told him where he was going. All he had was a phone number, a backpack and a Bible.

Mom tried one more time, “Ka ba jer ah,” she said, slowly and clearly.

“Oh! Caballero! Spanish for gentleman. Caballero Hotel.”

“Jah!” was Mom’s response.

He flagged down a taxi. “Caballero Hotel,” he said as they drove off. He had with him in his backpack with a few personal items—cotton shirts, a shaver and shaving cream, a toothbrush and underwear, a few pairs of light pants and shorts and a Bible. No jeans, Father David said. The women were not allowed to wear make up. The men were not allowed to wear jeans. Too worldly, Father David said. Everyone owned a Bible.

Meanwhile mom began to ponder the conversation that took place earlier that day and she felt a sense of anticipation and apprehension. Mahayla, the German redhead with thick, luscious hair, cat eyes and an infectious smile approached Mom as they were getting ready to leave for the hotel and posed a question she would have never predicted.

“Dust and I have been praying about it,” Mahayla proposed in her thick German accent, “and the Lord revealed to us that it would be His will if you engage in a threesome with Dust and me.” Mahayla was Dust’s wife and the mother of his two sons. Dust was one of the leaders of the Children of God, appointed by Father David. It wasn’t just the kind of threesome that would involve a hot night of passion and fulfill the man’s desire of having two women on him at the same time. Mom just joined the Children of God, a group she believed was on a mission for God. Dust was one of the leaders. Mahayla was proposing a bona fide relationship approved by God himself. Father David encouraged this kind of relationship as a manifestation of God’s love and suggested a high degree of guilt for anyone who refused to participate in the expression of God’s love.

Mom was shy at first. “I vill tink about it, Jah!” she said. Every sentence in Swedish ends with a gasp of air that sounds like “Jah!” but she had other plans. She had just given up a potential fiancé to become part of the Children of God. And although she enjoyed sex, she was not yet ready to commit to a serious relationship involving three people.

Shortly after they met, Mom and Dad moved from Spain back to Mom’s hometown of Malmo in an effort to try and convert her family and also for a temporary living space. Father David advised all members to try and convert their immediate and extended family members before cutting them off entirely. They deserved a chance to be saved just like anyone else, he said. My Uncle Leif and Aunt Eva wanted nothing to do with the Children of God, but my Swedish Mormor let Mom and Dad stay with them for

a while because Mom needed the help since the time I was born she had John who was two years old and Mary Ann, my older sister with shiny golden hair, was one. They lived in a home with Gibbea and his two wives, Tamar and Flor. The three of them had 16 children.

I was born on Lucia, the second biggest holiday in Sweden besides Christmas. Mom tells us the story every year. This year we'll all sit around the fire and drink red wine or sip tea with Swedish ginger cookies, thinking about what to do for Christmas when you have an immediate family of fourteen! Mom will interrupt any conversation no matter how important with, "thirty years ago today..." Then she'll continue to tell us how on the night of our birth young girls walked through the streets singing Christmas Carols. They dressed in white Grecian-style gowns that cascade down to the floor. Their hair is adorned with halos of wild flowers. The leader of the group wears a crown of candles that glow on her head and the rest of the carolers hold lit candles in their hands to illuminate their path. Their long white garments are decorated with blue satin sashes. They knock on people's doors offering to serenade them with a Christmas song. The smell of warm freshly baked cinnamon rolls wafted through the doorway as the carolers gently cooed the tune of a traditional song that echoed through the cobblestone streets, settling on blankets of soft fresh snow. Lucia means "Festival of Light." From the way she tells it, it seemed like an angelic procession. She had a way of making me believe that I was born on a heavenly day.

Mom was busy pounding dough for cinnamon roles with Tamar when her water bag broke. Water gushed out of her while outside the soft voice of angels sang, *Silent*

*Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is Bright, Round young virgin Mother and child.* It was early evening. We weren't due for another two weeks but the doctor warned her that early birthing is not uncommon for twins.

Before going to the hospital, Mom, Dad, Gibbea, Tamar and Flor, gathered together in the living room for prayer. I know what these prayer sessions were like. I used to open my eyes during prayer, glance around the room and search for some sign of God or Jesus or even just a Spirit Helper or an Angel. I would close my eyes and plead for the chance to one day see His face just so I could be absolutely certain that he did exist. One of my earliest memories I'm two years old and I'm sneaking out of the living room while all the adults are gathered together in the living room for desperate prayer. These guys were serious. They wouldn't just close their eyes speak to God. They would get down on their hands and knees and bow their heads and pound the floor and cry and speak in those funny things called 'tongues' and let various spirits speak through them. Afterwards they looked elated. Their eyes were dried of tears and it looked like they had just taken a very long nap. It was as if they had been transported into another world and it would take them a while to come back down to earth. Meanwhile Tamar, my twin sister, and I find our way into the kitchen, climb onto the kitchen counter and find the hidden jar of honey. We eat heaping spoons of thick, golden honey. Not little spoons. Big spoons. The kind of spoons with wide edges that you would use at a Chinese restaurant to eat wonton or noodle soup. Then Mom would come and find us with the honey bear dripping and our face and hands sticky we wouldn't try to deny that we were doing anything wrong.

Sometimes the adults were so desperate that they would pray and receive prophecies from the Spirit world for the future. On the night of our birth a prophecy was received that I was to be a bearer of light just like the Lucia girls who sing Christmas songs on my birthday. Gibbea closed his eyes and had a vision. He saw, with his inner eye, two girls each holding a candle bright enough to illuminate the whole world. The world is cold and dark and in desperate need of light. The final words of his prophecy predict that “the two shall bear the light” and that we would be the ones to carry the torch along with Davidito and the other children of the Children of God after Father David passed.

The morning after our birth the Malmo newspaper thought that we were worthy of a tiny slot since twins are uncommon and Sweden has such a small population. Mom still has the newspaper clipping of her holding us looking tired and beautiful in her white hospital gown. She has one twin in each arm and the only difference is that Tamar has a full head of hair and I came out bald as an egg. Mom named us after Gibbea’s two wives, Tamar and Flor. We had big brown, inquisitive eyes. Mom spotted a birthmark on my cheek. She said “Flor” suited me best since Flor means flower in Spanish and God put a flower on my face so they could distinguish between the two of us. When I was old enough to draw conclusions on my own, I settled for a smudge of dirt or a smushed cornflake. When we were six months old we flew to Mexico City. After we turned one we drove to California.

I never knew what Father David looked like. In the pictures from the early days of Father David preaching at The Light Club in Huntington Beach and gathering followers at his Texas ranch—crowds of topless women and bearded men holding Bibles and singing praises—they'd white-out his face and draw the face of a lion. He started calling himself MO Lion or King David or whatever name separated him from the rest of his flock and made him closer to God. We kids learned to call him Grandpa with a capital G even though there was no blood relation whatsoever.

Father David would sit on the toilet and call it his 'throne' (we know this because later on he reveals his face to us through a book of photos called "Now it Can Be Told"). The Texas ranch had closed down and apparently some people were after him because ever since flirty-fishing hit the airwaves and the media coined the term, Prostitution for Jesus, he'd been hiding out in a location unbeknownst to his 12,000 followers.

After a few weeks of not hearing anything significant from God he'd get antsy and anxious. He closes his eyes and strokes his long beard that looks like bleached cotton candy and stops just below his chest. He takes off his rectangular-shaped glasses with silver frames and sets them on the ceramic sink bowl nearby. He rubs his eyes and starts the channeling process, "Hallelujah. Thank You Jesus! Praise the Lord!" he says before rambling out sounds of a different tongue, "Habla shleebadesh. Shondo Borondo." All the adults learned to speak in "tongues" after they were appointed as one of God's children. Mama Maria whips out a tape recorder, presses the red Record button, and bows on her knees at his feet. She has long black hair parted down the middle that flows below her waist. She is wearing a flimsy silk nightgown with lace trim. The door to the

bathroom is always open. Father David doesn't believe in privacy. Sometimes he holds Mama Maria's daughter, Techy, on his lap while he takes a shit and he reads to her from the Bible (we know this from the pictures). He treats Techy like his own child along with Davidito who is Mama Maria's firstborn son. Davidito is also a Jesus baby. His father was from Tenerife. He also looks exotic, like my brother John, with the dark eyes, thick lips and olive skin. Mama Maria takes a picture of Father David with her daughter on his knee while he's taking a shit because she thinks it's a precious sight. Meanwhile Davidito's babysitter, Sarah, is stroking Davidito's peewee to make him calm down. Father David tells her to suck it so he doesn't get jealous of all the adults that are allowed to have sex whenever they want and that he was sucked by his Mexican babysitter when he was wee high and started having orgasms when he was three. Everything Father David does is holy and we are to regard it as such so years later when they release the photos of Father David on the toilet in a black robe with a toddler on his knee dressed in baby blue overalls with pigtails and pink bows, we can't say it's wrong or funny even if we think so; nor can we object to Father David's calming techniques for children.

Everything Father David says is recorded because apparently the words he speaks are not his own, but come straight out of the mouth of God. He says they are golden, "like bread crumbs that fall from the table of God." Mama Maria is ninety-five percent blind and wears thick glasses. Father David met her at a night club. He sort of flirty-fished his way into her panties and then decided that she was God's chosen prophetess. We know this story because every action, every word and every dream is recorded and transcribed for us to read. He calls Mama Maria his little birdie, among a host of other

nicknames—Queen Maria, the Humble Prophetess and God’s Flirty Little Fishy. He claims that she has healing powers and will be the one to carry the torch after he dies.

Sometimes when Father David closes his eyes he sees a vision. Sometimes the visions come to him in his sleep and he wakes up in a cold sweat. His little beady eyes stay closed, his penis hardens and he starts recalling and interpreting the dream while Mama Maria grabs the recording device on the nearby nightstand and begins recording. Everything has meaning and as one of God’s children I’m always supposed to look for the deeper meaning in life. A dream is not a dream. It’s a warning or a premonition of things to come. A thought has a million different interpretations and I must be aware of the origin of my thoughts even though I’m not allowed to speak them. Some thoughts come from God and those ones are good, but some come from the Devil and I should be aware of those ones as the voice of the enemy.

Father David wipes his bum, which is as wide and inflated as his ego (from the pictures we know he had a saggy belly, drooped shoulders, skinny limbs and an ample behind). He only uses three squares of toilet paper and teaches his followers Benjamin Franklin’s advice, “Waste not; want not. Everything that is willfully wasted will be willfully wanted.” Years later I learned that he stole some of his sayings from literary greats or political leaders, but he didn’t think it necessary to attribute the source of his wisdom, nor did he see the need to abide by the rules of plagiarism since he was God’s chosen prophet. Besides, since we were just visiting earth, and not planning to stay too long, rules like plagiarism didn’t apply.

Members are only allowed to use three squares of toilet paper and usually it's the toilet paper that's not double-sheeted for comfort. It's thin and cardboardy, not Angel Soft and safe for babies' bottoms. I cheat and use five because I don't want to walk around with Hershey's Kisses squished between my ass. If that doesn't work I squat down and splash cold water in between my legs, but never EVER would I dare use six pieces of toilet paper because disobeying the words of Father David is worse than blasphemy—punishable by eternal damnation and condemnation in the afterlife.

Father David lets his long black robe drape down to his feet. He usually wears only a robe. It's easier for him to whip out his man stick and have a loving God session with Mama Maria or any of the other eager ladies who live with him in his top secret hideout. He also has a collection of videos of little girls dancing to a Hawaiian number with only a see-through scarf. We know this because he sends out letters talking about his active sex life *and* we've seen the videos. By the time I'm seven I already know in detail what it takes to please a woman and the best way to get a man off, but I'm more schooled in the pleasing the woman part since that was Father David's forte. The most beautiful thing in creation, he believes, is a woman with her lovely curves and mountainous abodes. A tree comes in close second with its strong roots and heavenly branches that reach up like arms outstretched to the sky. Father David always carries a Bible and he wears a delicate chain necklace with a silver cross around his neck.

Today he wants to hear something good. "Lord, show me whence thou leadeth thy children. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord! Thank you Jesus!" he says and then he starts speaking those funny words he calls tongues, "Habla Shlebadesh. Shondo Borondo" Out

of the ether he receives a prophecy that the world is going to end soon and it's the job of him and his followers to alert the entire world of the Endtime that is fast approaching.

"What Lord?" Father David speaks to God as if he's having an ordinary conversation with the next guy.

"1993!" Father David prophesies. "Hallelujah! Thank you Jesus. Praise the Lord!"

"I am Moses. I will lead the children of David into the Promised Land." He says, referring to heaven. He compares himself to a host of Biblical leaders, Moses, King David, the Prophet Jeremiah and Job.

"Mama Maria," he ushers his faithful scribe to his feet.

"Yes, my king?" she bows humbly at his feet.

"Send out a MO letter. Tell my children to be fruitful and multiply for the end is near."

He then proceeds to ramble on about the fascism of America and how the capitalistic financiers of Europe are a bunch of pimps investing in the American dollar he calls the "Green Paper Pig" that will one day explode. Davidito stares at his father with his big brown eyes, his father who is also Father to tens of thousands of others.

"Yes, my King!" Mama Maria says and then gets busy typing up a letter for his followers.

I was four years old when I heard the news that it was time to flee this country. Mom had waited a year before getting pregnant again and Heidi was born in a hospital in San Luis Obispo two years after she had us twins. Heidi was a stubborn child with fire-red hair who refused to participate in family photos and always threw a fit when she wanted her pacifier.

William was born a year later. Defiant and willful, his first word was “NO!” but it came out sounding like “NAWT!” William Frederick Edwards Jr. was named after Dad and born in the same hospital in West Los Angeles off the 101 Freeway. As William’s due date was approaching, I asked mom if we could throw Heidi in the trash can in order to make room for the new baby. William was born on New Year’s Eve, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1984. He was adorable but mean with soft brown curls, pudgy cheeks, a dimpled chin and inquisitive light brown eyes. He used to form his fingers into the shape of a gun and pretend to shoot people for no apparent reason at all.

We were living in my grandpa’s house in Eagle Rock with cousins and family members—Eliza with the thick Italian hair, Michael who we called Talkee because he talked too much with the red hair and freckles—and immediate family I knew were chosen by blood.

We had been saving up money since I was one year old and living in Mexico City. I know this because Mom still has the picture of dad squatting on the sidewalk with a guitar on his knee, an empty guitar case on the ground with a few coins and dollar bills tossed inside and a large cardboard sign with handwritten block letters in Spanish that says something in Spanish, “...missionaries,” “...a Thailandia.” John, my oldest brother,

is standing next to him wearing a flannel checkered shirt, suspenders and corduroy pants. He is belting his heart out. Mary Ann, my older sister, is asleep in the back of the navy blue buggy with white pin stripes spacious enough to fit all four of us kids at one time. Her blond hair is combed back into pigtails and her skin is creamy white. Mom is pregnant and handing someone a colorful poster of Heaven with white borders. A man walks by and doesn't notice. Someone else is tossing a coin into the collection device. Tamar, my twin sister, and I are perched in the front of the buggy wearing matching baby blue dresses dotted with white daisies holding onto the cold metal bars looking angry and serious and identical. We drove up to California from Mexico City after Tamar and I turned one.

The house in Eagle Rock is the only house in California that I remember with white stucco walls and a red brick-tiled roof. At dusk, a massive boulder on the city's northern edge casts a shadow the shape of an eagle over the valley of ash trees, which gives the city its name. The city is surrounded by sedimentary rock and low-lying hills. During the day the sun beat down hard and at night the Santa Monica Mountains play backdrop to a display of dazzling lights and magnificent swirls of smoggy sunset pastels.

There was a large peach tree in the front yard and two avocado trees in the back. During my first summer there I learned what peach fuzz was. Every summer the peaches ripened into ornaments the color of Saturn. We picked the peaches, rubbed the peach fuzz across our cheeks and examined the minute hairs. I didn't care about eating the peaches. I was just fascinated with the fuzz that stood up like the hairs on my arm.

Mom was working out to a Jane Fonda exercise video. She wore a pink and red striped leotard, grey leggings and white tights—Jane Fonda, not Mom. Mom would never wear such revealing clothing. Aunty Mary was busy in the kitchen boiling chicken for dinner. Tamar and I were copying Mom, lying on our backs and lifting and squeezing our buttocks in time with the big-haired enthusiast on screen. Our dollies lay next to us. They never left our sides.

“News Flash!” Aunty Mary came running into the living room wearing her white-and-black-checkered apron. Her thin hair was tied back into little bun. Her pants were rolled up to reveal her thick calves. She was holding a magazine in her hand that smelt of fresh ink. She flipped through the pages and landed on a picture of a masculine woman, selfish and egocentric, wearing the same spiky crown that rests atop the head of the Statue of Liberty. The woman’s legs are spread open wide and she is holding a globe of the world in one hand. In her other hand rests the fate of the world symbolized by a handful of poverty-stricken, third-world folk at the mercy of her wrath. In between her legs and covering her vagina, which would be exposed due to her draping robe, are various prestigious buildings such as the Pentagon and The White House representing lust, sloth and greed.

“This is so exciting!” Aunty Mary said with a lisp. Her eyes widened. She pursed her lips and began reading the words of her beloved prophet.

I won’t go into much detail here about exactly what Father David said. His letters didn’t have much literary value since he spoke rather than wrote, mostly him just praising the Lord, speaking to God and damning evil. According to his predictions the world was

ending soon and the U.S. would be a less than optimal place to live during the end time. The woman in the picture represented “America the Whore.” Father David was ordering all of his followers to move out of western civilization and into the Third World where the people there were destitute and hungry for salvation. We were destined for the Southeast Asia where we would be safe and sound.

Happily, I could bring my dolly. She was hard and hollow. The lines carved in her head meant she had real hair. Her hands had intricate details of fingers and toes with the actual outline of fingernails. On her thumb was a black dot the size of the period at the end of this sentence from the time a bee landed on her hand and stung her, I swore.

“This is so exciting!” Mom stopped her exercise routine and agreed with her sister-in-law. “Like one of God’s adventures.”

Tamar and I snuck into a room to combine the shavings of crayons to form a colorful dish of curly wax petals. We didn’t want anyone to know our secret so we kept quiet. We had a way of communicating with each other the way twins do without uttering a single word. We knew that pregnant women ate unusual things because Mom was usually pregnant and she was always craving strange food at odd hours. We sharpened the crayons with a standard sharpener until the crayons were diminished to a sliver and the protective paper that indicates the particular color was ripped into shreds. Then we combined the concoction of wax shavings into a vibrant salad and ate the petals, one color at a time, hoping and praying that if we ate food that was weird enough then maybe one day we too could become pregnant. Afterward we would pretend to birth our dollies. I laid flat on my back and Tamar played nurse. I spread open my legs and pushed the

baby out from under my back and Tamar would catch it and slap it hard on its back to get it breathing.

If the crayon salad didn't work then we'd set aside the chicken fat at dinner. In our world 'fat' was synonymous with 'pregnant.' If we ate the right combination of crayon shavings and chicken fat then we would be able to produce an immaculate conception, we believed. I was obsessed with babies and so badly wanted one of my own.

I knew we had three options—Thailand, India, or the Philippines. My parents chose Thailand. It's one thing to grow up poor. It's another thing to grow up white and poor. For that there is no excuse. My father gave up a degree at one of America's finest universities to be a missionary. My mother never liked money, nor did she see herself fit to have any which is probably why she adapted so well to the life of a missionary.

There is nothing as humbling as having to beg for money. Worse yet is begging for money in a country where you're supposed to be rich because you are white. When we would come back to this country eight years later everything changed. We would be foreigners in our own land. But for now Thailand would be our new home and we would have to beg for money to get there. I was almost as thrilled as my Aunt Mary.

We traveled along California's coastlines of Pacific Blue Ocean and stayed in tents and trailers in campgrounds in Malibu, San Luis Obispo or Pismo Beach for the maximum amount of time that we were allowed. We stopped to beg people for money whenever we neared a shopping center. When I say 'beg' here, I don't want you to picture a family dressed in rags looking cold and dirty holding out cans and asking for money. There was

a certain lightness to our begging. We dressed neatly. Mom's smile was electric. Her eyes were always sparkling. She wore the perfect shade of lipstick that made her smile look brighter and a turquoise eye shadow that brought out her eyes that I thought were always shining.

The Children of God had a way of fitting God into their begging and it turned the act of imploring into a practice they called 'witnessing.' During Christmas we dressed up—the girls like angels and the boys as shepherds—and sang Christmas carols in the center court of the mall in front of JC Penny. Santa Claus was there with his cotton-white hair and overstuffed belly. I was suspicious of Santa Claus. I refused to request any gifts but reluctantly sat on his lap outside of the JC Penny Department Store just so I could have a Christmas cookie treat. I loved cookies. I loved the taste of ginger and cinnamon and sugar and the way the plastic crinkled every time I opened the package to find the surprise of plump raisins scattered throughout. The crumbs would disintegrate and soil the collar of my angelic costume, but being a heavenly angel wasn't as important as appreciating every bite and morsel.

We had an open guitar case in front of our singing group and we would literally 'turn people on' the way a street musician serenades passers-by until after a while it didn't seem like begging at all. Whenever we begged on the streets in parking lots, I hid behind Mom's skirt, tucked my chin to my shoulder, made my face glum, tilted my weight to the outer edges of my feet, and twirled a dance embarrassment and shame. Even when they gave us money I couldn't bring myself to smile and God probably

judged me for it. But, after all, since the world was ending soon, they needed to hear the message and giving a donation was their way of saying “Thanks.”

When it was time to move we would pack up our things and find another temporary living space.

One of my earliest memories in California I’m walking on a cement driveway and the grains of gravel seem to jump up at me as if they are alive. For a moment I’m transported to another world as I feel myself merge with the pulsating ground as the granules metamorphose into a bubbly arrangement. I regain my focus and shake myself back into consciousness and find myself thinking again. I’m only three years old and already I’m questioning my own existence on earth and wondering why I’m here and why I’m me.

There were other kids there too, but this time I feel alone and contemplative thinking deeply about the meaning of life. Nobody informed me of what was going on inside. The yellow and orange curtains to my left are closed shut and there is no way for anyone to see inside. I know that mommy and daddy are inside and some young teens are put on duty to watch over us. Immediately I am fully aware that all the adults are inside engaging in a sexual congregation. There is no doubt in my mind that an orgy is taking place inside while I walk around outside questioning deeply my existence on earth. I feel alone and betrayed but not cheated or abused. I feel neglected and hurt that they left me outside while they gathered inside to fulfill their sexual desires. In my eyes it was self-serving, but I was never taught to honor my own thoughts or feelings.

We took long walks to my Grandpa's house. As we walked through the neighborhood we would stop and talk to purple Morning Glories and Tamar and I would ask in sync, "What's the story Morning Glory." The flowers were boring. They never answered back even though I swore they were capable of communicating with their vibrant purple petals that looked like mouths hanging open with no tongue.

Mom was pregnant again. Six months later I was awakened in the middle of the night to an uneasy commotion in the hallway.

"Maria's bleeding." I heard my Aunty Mary's voice amongst sounds of muffled whispers.

"It's serious and she won't stop."

"Make her lie down," Dad urged. He knew that Mom was one to never let anything get her down. Blood was gushing out of her and I remember seeing Aunty Mary putting plastic lining on the bed so she wouldn't stain the sheets. Mom was lying down with her legs up in a pool of her blood. Us kids were rounded up and told to stay still and be quiet.

"It looks like she's going to lose the baby," Aunty Mary whispered frantically. "Don't let the children know." But we all knew very well what was happening.

She was rushed to the hospital and we kids were told to go back to bed. We learned the next day that she had lost the baby in the middle of the night and it was a boy. She was long overdue what would be considered a miscarriage. That night she delivered what would have been number seven and her first stillborn.

Days later we boarded a plane heading for Thailand and as I stood pressing my face against the large glass windows I watched the planes as they taxied and landed still in shock over the incident that occurred a few nights earlier. The commotion that night was just a premonition of things to come. After we left the United States there was a constant sense of tension and unease, like we were continually on the run, and we were. When we arrived in Thailand it was like we were dumped in Nomad's Land—two parents and six children dressed in matching outfits looking like a modern-day replica of the Von Trapp Family from *The Sound of Music*, fleeing from the monster that Father David created in our minds.

Back when Mom met Dad in Majorca, she became pregnant right away. She was one month short of her due date when she married Dad during a simple church ceremony on a pleasant summer day in August. She didn't have money to buy a traditional wedding gown, so instead she wore a brown flower print dress that gave way for her bulging belly. Dad wore a pale blue collared shirt under a dark brown corduroy suit. Someone threw white rice on them after the ceremony as a gesture of good luck and prosperity and they stayed married for a long time after. John Christian was born a month later on September 22, 1979 in a tiny hospital in Malmo. He had a head full of black hair and large dark eyes with thick lashes.

Being a new mother and unsure of her capabilities, Mom pinched John when he slept to make sure he was still breathing. John was the most cantankerous of all her babies. Mom said sometimes they had to strap him in her lap and drive him slowly around the quaint neighborhoods during Christmas time with the blinking lights and light snowfall to get him to fall asleep.

The Children of God did not believe in birth control. Thirteen months later on October 17 during a brusque fall of changing leaves, Mary Ann Elizabeth was born. When Mom held her daughter in her arms for the first time she noticed something was different. Mary Ann's hair was smooth and blond, not coarse and dark like John's. Her eyes were blue and clear, not dark and deep. She wondered if Mary Ann had a different father. Or maybe John's unique look was derived from a genetic code other than her husband's.

“Honey, look! Isn’t she beautiful?” Mother adored her firstborn daughter as she sat in the blank hospital room with crisp white sheets. She had all the unmistakable Swedish features—shiny blond hair, sparkling blue eyes and soft white skin.

“Yes, Maria. She’s a gift from God,” Dad confirmed. Mary Ann was indeed an angel with delicate features—bright pink lips and fragile limbs.

The nurse came in and offered Mom lunch, which included a wiggly mound of green Jell-O. Mom took the plate of white turkey breast, creamy mashed potatoes and peas, but left the Jell-O on the tray for the nurse to take back.

“Doesn’t the little boy want it?” the nurse said.

“It’s Ok,” Mom said. “He doesn’t eat sugar.” The Children of God did not believe in sugar.

One-year-old John sat in the corner with his piercing brown eyes and oversized lips. His thick hair spiked out in all directions and his skin was the color of milk chocolate—not one vein of Irish blood, not one splotch of freckles.

Mom and Dad looked at each other knowingly. No words were necessary. Each knew what the other was thinking. Their firstborn child had not one Irish bone in his body, not a streak of red in his hair, not one single freckle on his skin.

John’s eyes were as black as black could be. His irises blended in perfectly with his sharp pupils. His lips were bulging out of his face. His eyes were wide and housed by thick lashes and his eyebrows were prominent and broad.

Usually a father would be outraged. There would be questions and anger leading to separation and revenge. But the realization that the original sperm that swam to

mother's egg did not come directly from Dad's bank was no shock at all. There was no lying, no cheating, and absolutely no reason for Dad to disregard John as his eldest son just because his skin was slightly darker than his.

Mom reminisced back on the day when she met Dad and gave him directions to the Cabarello Hotel in Majorca. As she was getting ready to go prostituting she made sure not to make herself too beautiful. "Remember," Mahayla said, "Father David said we're only supposed to go after the 'ugly fish.' Outward beauty is not that important. They will see God's light shine through and that will be enough to hook them."

Mom met a little Moroccan man that night whose father had thirteen wives and seventy-two children. He was dark-skinned and came from money. Mom could tell because Father David told the women how to look for men with money by observing their choice of clothing. He was wearing a thick gold watch and fancy designer shoes.

Father David called the women "hookers for Jesus." He took the freedom to interpret the Bible as he saw fit for modern-day Christians. He believed that the most uncomfortable place for a Christian was a comfortable place and he liked to keep things interesting. He didn't want his followers become old and stagnant like the church had become, he said. So he kept them on their toes. They never knew what to expect. No one knew what sort of interpretation, revelation, dream or epiphany he would conjure up next.

Mom was one of the searchers whom David Berg sought to save. She was not as scholastically inclined as Dad. She never went to college. She dropped out of grade school to become a professional babysitter. Soon she went traveling to Tunisia, searching for some purpose and meaning in life. She found it one day as she was sitting on a street

corner. A man approached her. To this day she claims in the most ecstatic way that, “his eyes were full of light,” and he was glowing with an aura that she had never seen before. She was certain that this man had the answers to the questions she had. She was sick and tired of living a life that valued escape from reality and she knew that there was more to life than cheap thrills and exhilarating highs. This young man invited her to his house for dinner and she dropped everything right then and there, including a potential fiancé, to become a Child of God.

In order to become a member of the Children of God, one must forsake everything he or she owned, cut off all ties with their family and commit to living their lives in service to God. They willingly accepted Father David as God’s Endtime Prophet and the ultimate interpreter of His Word as spoken in the Bible. They claimed to live by faith, most times not knowing where their next meal was coming from, and abode by the verse in the book of Acts: “All that believed were together and had all things common and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need” (Acts 2: 44,45).

Nobody owned anything except for the clothes on their backs, a few essential personal items and a Bible. They began passing out literature on the street and received free coffee and donuts from local donut houses. Everyone lived communally in centers called homes and helped out according to their talents and need. As the band of hippies grew to hundreds and then thousands Father David began forming layers of leadership. God was the director. Jesus was the messenger. Father David was the interpreter. Mama Maria was his right-hand woman who stood by his side and recorded everything that he

said. Layers of leadership were appointed from National Area Shepherds (NAS) to General Area Shepherds (GAS) to Home Shepherds and then there's me, a soldier in training, somewhere at the bottom.

One of the fundamental beliefs of the group was that sex and love were one and the same. And since God is love (1 John 4:8), sex was an act of God's love. According to Father David, there was nothing vile or shameful about nature's urge to procreate. He taught that there should be no guilt, no shame, and absolutely no 'holding back' on God's infinite source of love. Birth control of any kind was highly discouraged. Consenting adults eagerly became useful channels of God's loving energy. And God's love was flowing, especially in the early days. Children became adults at the ripe age of twelve. Rumors began to surface. And then Father David conjured up one of the most radical practices in cult history to date.

"Follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mat. 4:19). One day Father David, assuming his role as interpreter, decided that this verse could use a little bit of modernization, if you will. When Father David closed his eyes he had a vision of an ocean. Inside the sea were lonely, ugly fish. The fishermen were never interested in these fish because they were too ugly and unworthy for any purpose. According to Father David, the ugly fish represented lonely, lost souls in the world who were in desperate need of God's love. The ocean was the world and he and his followers were like Jesus and His disciples. Father David believed that God was not a discriminating God and His love was available to all those willing to receive it.

“I know,” the light bulb went on. “We’ll use the women as bait (by now the group was cutting themselves off from the rest of society). We’ll send them out to the scary ocean of the world as a symbol of God’s love and they can receive a generous donation in return for their services,” was Father David’s solution.

The practice was coined “flirty-fishing” since the women went out to the dark ocean of the world, like bait. Father David considered flirty-fishing to be an act of martyrdom—they sacrificed their bodies for the sake of God’s love. The men targeted for flirty-fishing were labeled ‘beasts’—lonely, unattractive and sexually incompetent. The practice was banned in 1987 soon after the AIDS epidemic became rampant.

Many children were conceived through the practice of flirty-fishing. So, to sum things up, my oldest brother, John, was sown in my mother’s garden by a lonely beast. A donation was requested in return and then mother carried the child to full term, just like Mary was the carrier of God’s Son, Jesus. Babies conceived through the process of flirty-fishing were given the title ‘Jesus Babies’. This also explains why John’s skin was slightly darker than Mary Ann’s, his eyes more fierce and his hair definitely from a part of the world other than Ireland. John’s father was Moroccan and Mom doesn’t remember his name.

Mom waited a year before getting pregnant again and Heidi was born in a hospital in San Luis Obispo two years after she had us twins. Heidi was a stubborn child with fire-red hair. She refused to participate in family photos and always threw a fit when she wanted her pacifier.

William was born a year later. Defiant and willful, his first word was “NO!” but it came out sounding like “NAWT!” William Frederick Edwards Jr. was named after Dad and born in the same hospital in West Los Angeles off the 101 Freeway. As William’s due date was approaching, I asked mom if we could throw Heidi in the trash can in order to make room for the new baby. William was born on New Year’s Eve, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1984. He was adorable but mean with soft brown curls, pudgy cheeks, a dimpled chin and inquisitive light brown eyes. He used to form his fingers into the shape of a gun and pretend to shoot people for no apparent reason at all.

I felt safe living in California. I was surrounded by just my immediate family and a few close relatives—aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors who were also part of the Children of God. Dad’s dad, who I knew was my blood grandpa, would invite us over to his house for Christmas and one year he gave us girls matching dresses dotted with red and orange flowers and we all stood there and stared at him with our jaws dropped and mouths wide open like he was an alien from another planet. One time he sent a woman home from the dinner table crying because he told her she looked like a horse with her buck teeth and obnoxious nose. Everyone said he was mean and had an inappropriate sense of humor called sarcasm, but I thought he had the sweetest face with eyes that always smiled and puffy white hair that matched his perfectly shaped mustache.

My early years in California have always felt like lost years. There was no excitement, no fear and no sudden sense of urgency. We were just an American family growing rapidly, living our own version of The American Dream. We had the freedom to travel as we wished. We spoke openly about God to anyone who would listen and then asked them for money. We had plenty of food to eat. We lived each day in suspension between the luxury of a comfortable life and the awareness of a predestined certainty that predicted the end of the world.

Life was good back then. Things were simple.

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When Father David said, “Pray!” the Children of God prayed. When Father David said, “Fuck!” the Children of God fucked (he liked to use swear words even though he was holy). When Father David said, “Be fruitful and multiply!” they were fruitful and they multiplied. And when Father David said, “Get out of Western civilization and into the third world!” well, that’s what we did.

I was four years old when I heard the news that it was time to flee this country. We were living in my grandpa’s house in Eagle Rock with cousins and family members—Eliza with the thick Italian hair, Michael who we called Talkee because he talked too much with the red hair and freckles—and immediate family I knew were chosen by blood, not by God.

We had been saving up money to move to the East since I was one year old and living in Mexico City. I only know this because Mom still has the picture of dad squatting on the sidewalk with a guitar on his knee, an empty guitar case on the ground

with a few coins and dollar bills tossed inside and a large cardboard sign with handwritten block letters in Spanish that says something in Spanish, "...missionaries," "...a Thailandia." John, my oldest brother, is standing next to him wearing a flannel checkered shirt, suspenders and corduroy pants. He is belting his heart out. Mary Ann, my older sister, is asleep in the back of the navy blue buggy with white pin stripes spacious enough to fit all four of us kids at one time. Her blond hair is combed back into pigtails and her skin is creamy white. Mom is pregnant and handing someone a colorful poster of Heaven with white borders. A man walks by and doesn't notice. Someone else is tossing a coin into the collection device. Tamar, my twin sister, and I are perched in the front of the buggy wearing matching baby blue dresses dotted with white daisies holding onto the cold metal bars looking angry and serious and identical. We drove up to California from Mexico City after Tamar and I turned one.

The house in Eagle Rock is the only house in California that I remember with white stucco walls and a red brick-tiled roof. At dusk, a massive boulder on the city's northern edge casts a shadow the shape of an eagle over the valley of ash trees, which gives the city its name. The city is surrounded by sedimentary rock and low-lying hills. During the day the sun beat down hard and at night the Santa Monica Mountains play backdrop to a display of dazzling lights and magnificent swirls of smoggy sunset pastels.

There was a large peach tree in the front yard and two avocado trees in the back. During my first summer there I learned what peach fuzz was. Every summer the peaches ripened into ornaments the color of Saturn. We picked the peaches, rubbed the peach fuzz

across our cheeks and examined the minute hairs. I didn't care about eating the peaches. I was just fascinated with the fuzz that stood up like the hairs on my arm.

Mom was working out to a Jane Fonda exercise video. She wore a pink and red striped leotard, grey leggings and white tights—Jane Fonda, not Mom. Mom would never wear such revealing clothing. Aunty Mary was busy in the kitchen boiling chicken for dinner. Tamar and I were copying Mom, lying on our backs and lifting and squeezing our buttocks in time with the big-haired enthusiast on screen. Our nameless dollies lay next to us. They never left our sides.

“News Flash!” Aunty Mary came running into the living room wearing her white-and-black-checkered apron. Her thin hair was tied back into little bun. Her pants were rolled up to reveal her thick calves. She was holding a magazine in her hand that smelt of fresh ink. She flipped through the pages and landed on a picture of a masculine woman, selfish and egocentric, wearing the same spiky crown that rests atop the head of the Statue of Liberty. The woman's legs are spread open wide and she is holding a globe of the world in one hand. In her other hand rests the fate of the world symbolized by a handful of poverty-stricken, third-world folk at the mercy of her wrath. In between her legs and covering her vagina, which would be exposed due to her draping robe, are various prestigious buildings such as the Pentagon and The White House representing lust, sloth and greed.

“This is so exciting!” Aunty Mary said with a lisp. Her eyes widened. She pursed her lips and began reading the words of her beloved prophet.

I won't go into much detail here about exactly what Father David said. His letters didn't have much literary value since he spoke rather than wrote, mostly him just praising the Lord, speaking to God and damning evil. According to his predictions the world was ending soon and the U.S. would be a less than optimal place to live during the end time. The woman in the picture represented "America the Whore." Father David ordered all of his followers to move out of western civilization and into the Third World where the people there were destitute and hungry for salvation. We were destined for the Southeast Asia where we would be safe and sound.

Happily, I could bring my dolly. She was hard and hollow. The lines carved in her head meant she had real hair. Her hands had intricate details of fingers and toes with the actual outline of fingernails. On her thumb was a black dot the size of the period at the end of this sentence from the time a bee landed on her hand and stung her, I swore.

"This is so exciting!" Mom stopped her exercise routine and agreed with her sister-in-law. "Like one of God's adventures."

Tamar and I snuck into a room to combine the shavings of crayons to form a colorful dish of curly wax petals. We didn't want anyone to know our secret so we kept quiet. We had a way of communicating with each other the way twins do without uttering a single word. We knew that pregnant women ate unusual things because Mom was usually pregnant and she was always craving strange food at odd hours. We sharpened the crayons with a standard sharpener until the crayons were diminished to a sliver and the protective paper that indicates the particular color was ripped into shreds. Then we combined the concoction of wax shavings into a vibrant salad and ate the petals, one

color at a time, hoping and praying that if we ate food that was weird enough then maybe one day we too could become pregnant. Afterward we would pretend to birth our dollies. I laid flat on my back and Tamar played nurse. I spread open my legs and pushed the baby out from under my back and Tamar would catch it and slap it hard on its back to get it breathing.

If the crayon salad didn't work then we'd set aside the chicken fat at dinner. In our world 'fat' was synonymous with 'pregnant.' If we ate the right combination of crayon shavings and chicken fat then we would be able to produce an immaculate conception, we believed. I was obsessed with babies and so badly wanted one of my own.

I knew we had three options—Thailand, India, or the Philippines. My parents chose Thailand. It's one thing to grow up poor. It's another thing to grow up white and poor. For that there is no excuse. My father gave up a degree at one of America's finest universities to be a missionary. My mother never liked money, nor did she see herself fit to have any which is probably why she adapted so well to the life of a missionary.

There is nothing as humbling as having to beg for money. Worse yet is begging for money in a country where you're supposed to be rich because you are white. When we would come back to this country eight years later everything changed. We would be foreigners in our own land. But for now Thailand would be our new home and we would have to beg for money to get there. I was almost as thrilled as my Aunt Mary.

We traveled along California's coastlines of Pacific Blue Ocean and stayed in tents and trailers in campgrounds in Malibu, San Luis Obispo or Pismo Beach for the maximum

amount of time that we were allowed. We stopped to beg people for money whenever we neared a shopping center. When I say ‘beg’ here, I don’t want you to picture a family dressed in rags looking cold and dirty holding out cans and asking for money. There was a certain lightness to our begging. We dressed neatly. Mom’s smile was electric. Her eyes were always sparkling. She wore the perfect shade of lipstick that made her smile look brighter and a turquoise eye shadow that brought out her eyes that I thought were always shining.

The Children of God had a way of fitting God into their begging and it turned the act of imploring into a practice they called ‘witnessing.’ During Christmas we dressed up—the girls like angels and the boys as shepherds—and sang Christmas carols in the center court of the mall in front of JC Penny. Santa Claus was there with his cotton-white hair and overstuffed belly. I was suspicious of Santa Claus. I refused to request any gifts but reluctantly sat on his lap outside of the JC Penny Department Store just so I could have a Christmas cookie treat. I loved cookies. I loved the taste of ginger and cinnamon and sugar and the way the plastic crinkled every time I opened the package to find the surprise of plump raisins scattered throughout. The crumbs would disintegrate and soil the collar of my angelic costume, but being a heavenly angel wasn’t as important as appreciating every bite and morsel.

We had an open guitar case in front of our singing group and we would ‘turn people on’ the way a street musician serenades passers-by until after a while it didn’t seem like begging at all. Whenever we begged on the streets in parking lots, I hid behind Mom’s skirt, tucked my chin to my shoulder, made my face glum, tilted my weight to the

outer edges of my feet, and twirled a dance embarrassment and shame. Even when they gave us money I couldn't bring myself to smile and God probably judged me for it. But, after all, since the world was ending soon, they needed to hear the message and giving a donation was their way of saying "Thanks." Nobody needed my smile in return for my service to God.

When it was time to move we would pack up our things and find another temporary living space.

One of my earliest memories in California I'm walking on a cement driveway and the grains of gravel seem to jump up at me as if they are alive. For a moment I'm transported to another world as I feel myself merge with the pulsating ground as the granules metamorphose into a bubbly arrangement. I regain my focus and shake myself back into consciousness and find myself thinking again. I'm only three years old and already I'm questioning my own existence on earth and wondering why I'm here and why I'm me.

There were other kids there too, but this time I feel alone and contemplative thinking deeply about the meaning of life. Nobody informed me of what was going on inside. The yellow and orange curtains to my left are closed shut and there is no way for anyone to see inside. I know that mommy and daddy are inside and some young teens are put on duty to watch over us. Immediately I am fully aware that all the adults are inside engaging in a sexual congregation. There is no doubt in my mind that an orgy is taking place inside while I walk around outside questioning deeply my existence on earth. I feel alone and betrayed but not cheated or abused. I feel neglected and hurt that they left me

outside while they gathered inside to fulfill their sexual desires. In my eyes it was self-serving, but I was never taught to honor my own thoughts or feelings.

We took long walks to my Grandpa's house. As we walked through the neighborhood we would stop and talk to purple Morning Glories and Tamar and I would ask in sync, "What's the story Morning Glory." The flowers were boring. They never answered back even though I swore they were capable of communicating with their vibrant purple petals that looked like mouths hanging open with no tongue.

Mom was pregnant again. Six months later I was awakened in the middle of the night to an uneasy commotion in the hallway.

"Maria's bleeding." I heard my Aunty Mary's voice amongst sounds of muffled whispers.

"It's serious and she won't stop."

"Make her lie down," Dad urged. He knew that Mom was one to never let anything get her down. Blood was gushing out of her and I remember seeing Aunty Mary putting plastic lining on the bed so she wouldn't stain the sheets. Mom was lying down with her legs up in a pool of her blood. Us kids were rounded up and told to stay still and be quiet.

"It looks like she's going to lose the baby," Aunty Mary whispered frantically. "Don't let the children know." But we all knew very well what was happening.

She was rushed to the hospital and we kids were told to go back to bed. We learned the next day that she had lost the baby in the middle of the night and it was a boy.

She was long overdue what would be considered a miscarriage. That night she delivered what would have been number seven and her first stillborn.

Days later we boarded a plane heading for Thailand and as I stood pressing my face against the large glass windows I watched the planes as they taxied and landed still in shock over the incident that occurred a few nights earlier. The commotion that night was just a premonition of things to come. After we left the United States there was a constant sense of tension and unease, like we were continually on the run, and we were. When we arrived in Thailand it was like we were dumped in Nomad's Land—two parents and six children dressed in matching outfits looking like a modern-day replica of the Von Trapp Family from *The Sound of Music*, fleeing from the monster that Father David created in our minds.

Part II.  
Thailand

Any existence deprived of freedom

is a kind of death.

-Gen Michel Aoun

In September of 1986, right around the fall equinox and just in time for John's seventh birthday, we arrived at Bangkok International Airport. I was four going on five. Eight years later we would return to the United States, our family nearly doubled in size. But for now, this was to be our new home—Thailand, the land of unforgettable smiles, scrumptious fruit and rampant prostitution.

Mom made us girls matching outfits—turquoise dresses that stopped just above our knees dotted with orange and yellow flowers with straps that tied over our shoulders. Her dress was made from the same material but had short sleeves and a higher waistline because even when she wasn't pregnant she still always looked pregnant. She braided our hair so we would look unmistakably like identical Swiss farm girls and we all wore similar sandals with thick rubber soles and strong metal buckles. Mom pushed the same blue buggy we used when we sang on the streets of Mexico City, but this time Heidi and William share the front and Tamar and I walk on the side holding on to the metal bars still wearing identical frowns above our dimpled chins.

All around me I heard the muffled sounds of a language I couldn't understand. People walked slow and stared at us as if we were aliens from another planet. "Fa-fat falang," they'd say, pointing to Tamar and I—"foreigner twins." Women wore flower-print sarongs and plain-colored shirts, their hair tied back in a taut bun, their half-naked children playing near the sewer. The smell of steamed white rice and fish bone soup with lemon grass filled the air. Street vendors clanged their thin metal pots getting ready to start their task of feeding a hungry nation. I held on tight to the stroller's cold metal bar. Somewhere in the background a radio blasted the lyrics,

*Someone told me long ago*

*There's a calm before the storm*

*I know*

*It's been coming for some time...*

*I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain*

*Comin down on a sunny day.*

Dark, nebulous clouds hung low in the sky. The air was hot and thick, like you could slice your hand through it and make a dent.

We arrived at a home in Bangkok with grey cement walls and a large metal gate. The gate was boarded with plywood. There was a dining hall and kitchen, many bedrooms and a grassy yard. We slept for what seemed like days. We would all wake up together on thin foam mattresses sprawled across the floor and start crying simultaneously, unfamiliar with the humidity of the dark thick air. Then we would fall back to sleep and slept for hours, adjusting to jet lag and pollution that stung our eyes and made it difficult to breathe. We slept sporadically and intuitively, giving no thought to time or schedule. When we were finally ready to wake up we were greeted by foreign faces that made me feel suspicious and uneasy.

An adult man walked in to greet. He was wearing light beige shorts and a Hawaiian print shirt with red flower designs. His blue flip-flops clacked against his heels every time he took a step. He wore thick glasses and he had wispy hair that was brown and thin. Like all the other adults, he smiled constantly for no reason at all. Mom welcomed him with a hug and I felt myself become irritated and annoyed with her

affection for him. The women in the home had long hair and wore thin sarongs that flapped open if they walked fast. Everyone dressed minimally. The men were always happy. Everyone was always praising the Lord about something. I could tell right away that I was not going to like living here.

We slept again and woke at dusk. At the breakfast table was rice cereal. I ate spoonfuls of the rice porridge thickened with water, powdered milk and dark brown cane sugar. The rice was lumpy and the milk was sweet from the sugar and it tasted good. I did not want to leave mother's side. We were given a few days to adjust to the change and stayed with our immediate family before being dispersed into separate groups. I abhorred the idea of being sent off to live with members my age and supervised by an adult I didn't know while my parents were assigned to various duties, but I felt a sense of relief knowing that I had two sisters who were close enough in age to be by my side always.

We found a small playhouse outside that was made of wood and painted a bright blue the color of the sky on a clear day. We played in it for hours while the sky transformed from cloudy with iridescent lining to grey and ominous threatening rain or monsoon. We took turns playing housekeeper and managed to squeeze all six of us together alone in that house for some time. Whenever it was Heidi's turn, she would push open the rectangular window-door, peek her head out and announce that the hut had been transformed into a restaurant. We paid her with large hollow seeds and she served us hearty portions of muddy clay wrapped in banana leave plates.

Not long after we adjusted in Bangkok, the leaders relocated us to Udon Thani, a rural city in the northern province of Thailand. We were to live with another couple,

Simon and Ecclesia, and their two children, Adam and Anaik. Mom was pregnant with number seven which would've been number eight if the incident didn't happen in the middle of the night.

I turned five and a friend of The Family we called Uncle Virgil gave Tamar and I a fancy wrist watch that had purple bands, a goofy Mickey Mouse that pointed to the appropriate numbers depending on the time and shiny silver rims with delicate, gleaming buckles. Tamar and I were ordered to walk on a straight line balancing books on our heads as an exercise in balance. We were inherently clumsy and figured it must have been part of our genetic composition since we both shared the same trait and we had identical genes, we now understood. We vigilantly kept watch over Danny and Karrissa, fraternal twins who were younger than us. I learned to differentiate between fraternal and identical and identify myself as one of the special kind of twin that occurs only once in every 90,000 births. The sky seemed eternally grey and the rain was thick and unforgiving, slicing through the sky like arrows in love.

In the corner of the dining room was a fish tank that could hardly be called an aquarium because the fish inside were so ugly. It wasn't bright and cheery like an aquarium you might see in a fancy restaurant or a five-star hotel. This one was grey and dark like something you would find at the bottom of the sea or underneath the rocks off the coast of the Philippines. Two suckerfish that looked like miniature sharks latched onto the glass and sucked up anything that got in their way. Supposedly they kept the tank clean and even ate their own poop after devouring the feces of every other creature in the tank. There was a crawfish that looked like a pink lobster and a couple of grey

guppies. Sometimes the guppies would disappear for no reason at all and we would clean out the tank and dump in a fresh batch.

Every morning during breakfast Aunty Ecclesia would come downstairs to the breakfast table and throw her arms around Uncle Simon and give him the biggest hug, the kind that was reserved for adults only. With one leg she would wrap herself around his waist and with her free leg she would pull herself closer so that their pelvises were tightly meshed together. Then they would start praising the Lord and thanking Jesus for his love and we all knew that that meant they spent most of the night doing something other than sleeping. We knew what kind of activities they engaged in because one time Adam pulled aside the curtains that shielded the window to their room and we saw, in clear view, what it looks like from underneath when two adults go at it vigorously.

Uncle Simon had no shame about his hard-ons. Sometimes we would be sleeping on the floor since we mostly slept on the floor and Uncle Simon would get up to close the blinds or to shower or something. He thought we were sleeping so he would step over us and his thing would be sticking out for miles, big and hard and pulsating, like it had a mind of its own. With one eye closed and pretending to be half asleep, I would take a peek. Somewhere between the thoughts of death and the sound of sex I learned what a man looks like when he's ready to go and if I wasn't so scared of the death I probably could have been excited about the sex.

We lived in a room upstairs that seemed to go on forever. In the center stood a bright blue pillar. We called it the 'booger pillar' and began smearing our findings on it whenever the dust from outside made our noses stuffy. That gave us materiel to laugh at

for days. A divider separated Mom and Dad's bed from the rest of us. On one side of the divider was a mirror that Dad covered up indefinitely once because Tamar and I were becoming too vain, he told us. "Every time you looked in the mirror you become uglier and uglier," he said. Dad never raised his voice so even when he reprimanded us for things like looking in the mirror I didn't mind a bit. Since he was my father he had a duty to correct me. The other adults had no such right and I always felt safe even whenever Dad spanked me. Sometimes when no one was looking I would pull aside the wrinkled, pastel green sheet and take a peek just to make sure that I was still cute, but never, EVER, did I wish upon myself to be beautiful because beauty meant desire and desire meant sex and since I was one of God's children, sex meant God's love and I didn't want a big thing like Uncle Simon's pounding into me.

One night on the night of a full moon Mom gathered us together because she had something important to tell us.

"Today I'm turning thirty-three," she said, "the same age that Jesus was when he was crucified."

We were beside ourselves and could not contain the tears. They started rolling in streams. Mary Ann was the first one and she had a way of bursting into a fit of hysteria that made all the rest of us follow suit. All of us started crying in a chorus, begging and pleading for God to not take Mom away. Mom told us not to worry.

"It doesn't mean that I am going to die," she said. "Jesus was a special person. He finished His life on earth early so He could be crucified on the cross and die for our sins." I figured that meant that she didn't have the same cross to bear. As soon as we

understood the superior role that Jesus took by coming to earth and dying for our sins we all stopped crying and took comfort in knowing that Mom would be sticking around for a little while longer.

When the afternoon came we took long walks through fields of eucalyptus trees. Sharp grass climbed all the way up to my thighs and high enough to tickle the skin on my tummy. Not the kind of grass you see here that spikes out of the ground like porcupine fur. Lemongrass with slick slender blades that grew in tall bunches and smelt like sweet fragrant spice.

The fields led to forests where the eucalyptus trees stood, their trunks pale and bare, and their leaves dancing like ruffles in the wind. The sky was endless and vast. Dark clouds hung low performing an unstoppable dance between hope and rain. I felt small and insignificant and always curious. Mom warned us to be careful. “Don’t wander off alone,” she would say and grab a hold of my hand, tightening her grasp around my knuckles. “Some people in these parts had never seen white people before,” she said, so if we didn’t stay close then they might want to take us away. I always wondered what they would want with me and if they actually had a purpose for wanting to kidnap plain old me with my ugly brown hair and splotchy freckles and awkward knees.

“Some people like to steal white kids and sell them for money,” she told us. I didn’t know what they would want to do with me and why they thought I was so valuable just because my skin was soft and pale. “The men will try to make love to you,” she said. The way she said “make love” made me want to kill her. Why couldn’t she use a more

honest word like fuck or rape? I knew what those words meant. I never knew what it meant to make love.

After we first arrived in Northern Thailand, we walked through the slums where families huddled together in shacks, the old men hunched over, squatting in the same position for hours on end. The women were always beating something, either an old rug or pounding a concoction of spices and herbs for dinner. Chickens ran freely and tackled for food, the vibrantly colored roosters declared their manhood by pecking the heads of the less colorful hens until they were bald and unattractive and submissive. Children ran around bare-bummed and naked feet, their dimpled bottoms resting on the dirt road where car tires tread. John fit in perfectly. He was dark-skinned with coarse hair and a nose broader than the rest of ours.

During the day we played carelessly under the threat of dark storm clouds that seemed to rumble even when they weren't making any noise. During the night a storm began brewing in my mind that threatened inescapable death, a reality that I could never prepare for.

One night I had a dream. I was run over by a motorcycle. I felt the tires as they treaded through my organs leaving me lifeless and wrangled, lying on the gravel and unable to move. My spirit left my body and I hovered over the pile of flesh and bones watching my physical body completely aware that I was dead. Then I watched as the woman mounted onto the back seat. Wrapping her arms around her man, she tipped her helmet into a protective position ready for take-off. She tilted her head back allowing the breeze to tease her short black hair. She was definitely Asian. I could not distinguish

where she was from. Her skin was light and marked with blemishes. She didn't seem to notice that she had just been the cause of a tragic accident. I wasn't mad. I was happy to be liberated. She was happy too. Her face broke into a smile as her body was pulled with the acceleration of the bike. They raced off leaving me in my pile of mess and I just watched. I felt nothing. No fear. No release. No pain. I was dead and that's all that I remember.

I jolted from my sleep and awoke realizing that it was just a dream. My heart was racing. My palms were sweating. I patted my hands over parts of my body I knew were real and for reasons I still can't comprehend I felt relieved that I was alive and still in this body.

When I was five years old and we moved from the hubbub of Bangkok to the boonies of Northern Thailand, everything changed. First—a dream. And then, a series of sleepless nights, where I lay awake in my bed pondering deeply how I was going to die. I would lie in my bed and pray for the souls of those who were to lay me to my death because I knew they weren't evil; they were just doing their job.

We were put on the map as one of the most dangerous cults and most likely to commit massive suicide, I was later told, once second-generation members dropped out and suicide, like an epidemic, became their escape. We grew up never knowing that we had a future. I only realized later that I was destined to be a martyr when I was twelve years old so I never gave so much as a thought to my future. That was my future. That was my reality.

Mom loved the adventure of living in the country. In the middle of the afternoon when the sun turned hazy and low clouds loomed on the horizon she would tell us to put on our walking shoes and a long sleeved shirt to protect our white skin from the sun that seemed to beat down even beyond the layer of thick clouds. “We’re going for a long walk” she would announce and then she’d give us our three options—the ditch, the bridge or the manger—each one more grueling than the next.

The ditch was a giant Grand Canyon-looking thing with walls of swirling red clay. When you walked inside you felt like you were inside a giant scoop of brilliant-red Rocky Road ice cream. From the bridge you had a perfect view of the ditch. It was a rusty color of red and had a similar structure to one of the bridges that tower over the bay of San Francisco. But our absolute favorite destination was the manger. It took us the longest to get there, but once we arrived we were in the middle of the wilderness with nothing around but dirt and the occasional tree stripped of its branches. Mom managed to convince us that it was the actual manger of Baby Jesus. The stump of a tree sat sideways perched among a giant log. It had a perfectly hollowed cradle, the exact life-size of Baby Jesus.

We walked for hours until our feet ached, blisters bubbled up on our heels and our skin nearly seared from the beating sun. For mom a walk isn’t a walk unless your feet ache, blisters bubble up on your heels and your skin is one degree from being completely scorched. Mom loved to exercise. She said that’s what kept her healthy and able to deliver so many robust babies: walking and eating shredded green papaya.

Mom returned from the hospital early one morning. I was awakened to the sound of an ambulance outside the walls. None of us knew she had left. Her water bag broke late in the night and she was rushed to the local hospital. We ran to look outside. The sky was turning grey. Dad helped mom out of the ambulance and onto the dirt road. She still wore her hospital gown with baby blue speckles and an open back. We hurried downstairs to meet our new baby sister. Dad told us to be careful and cautious.

“Usually new mothers stay in the hospital,” Dad said. “But this time the doctor told mom to come home early because she could rest better here.”

When Mom was pregnant and we took the long walks until our feet ached, we passed by the hospital and she would cry silently. Outside on the lawn we saw families huddled together waiting to hear news from their disabled loved one. We knew that twenty-some women shared the same room with only a thin curtain separating one new mother from the next. Patients with open wounds lay close to babies freshly covered in powdery serum. With no other hospital within miles, mom knew she had no choice but to deliver there. We didn't have money for a first-class hospital so the doctors delivered the baby for free as a donation and we learned to say that we were missionaries. Mom would cry because she knew she had no choice but to give birth in such a wretched place.

We climbed onto the couch and organized ourselves into a neat row so we could take turns holding our new baby sister. Dad went back outside to fetch mother and the newborn. We sat in anticipation.

The front door opened. We waited patiently. Dad led mother in. Her legs were sturdy and strong as they always were, but the flesh on her knees sagged. Her eyes looked like she had just taken a very long nap and her hair was a tussled mess. Dad was tired too.

In her arms she carried a tiny white bundle. I could tell that she didn't have to hold the baby but she chose to, maybe as a gesture of gratefulness because the last one didn't survive. I felt my body sink back into the soft cushions as she created a safe distance between herself and the front door. Her strides were cautious and slow. Her plump feet penetrated the polished wood floor with every step. She walked vigilantly. Her feet were bare. I felt my ribcage sink back into my spine. My breath deepened as I watched red fluid trickle slowly down the insides of her thighs like a stream of cool water refreshing the face of a hot, thirsty rock after a long, dry summer. The wood panes were no longer shiny and smooth. Her footprints left tiny pools of fresh blood that imitated the shape of her feet.

On that day she made an entrance, unforgettable and brave. Looking back, I now know that she didn't have to but she chose to. With my breath suspended in my own temporary state of shock and the realization of what it means to give birth, I acknowledged that one day I too would have to grow up and I wanted to stay a child forever. My obsession with impregnating myself diminished not long after.

Outside the walls, dirt was everywhere.

Whenever we left the compound, it crept into shoes and gathered in noses. It stuck to your skin and tangled in your hair. It billowed up in clouds on the side of earthen roads and turned car metal into rust-powdered rods. It settled into dust behind clanging rickshaws and covered the fruits and vegetables of the vendors wearing sedge hats with flat tops and long-sleeved frog-button white cotton shirts standing at their fruit stands or rowing their boats along the water markets in the murky Mekong River canals.

Dirt morphed water into mud. It spanned the horizon and stretched as far as the eye could see. It kicked up an afternoon haze that shaded the sun when it dipped into dusk and when monsoon came, thick raindrops plunged into the soil turning the dusty roads into muddy swirls of sludge that mixed with car oil. We only left the compound to win lost souls or gather donations for our cause.

Inside the walls it was clean, almost hospital-clean, with bright white walls and spotless wood floors. The kitchen was orderly with washing basins and sparkling dish racks that smelt of disinfectant or Pine-Sol. The plastic dishes in the kitchen were always stacked neatly. The food cupboards and bulk food barrels were labeled with block letters in black marker on white masking tape. Even though we didn't own a lot of clothes and mostly wore hand-me-downs or donated garments, the clothes we had always smelled like fresh laundry powder and sun from being hand- or stomp-washed and then laid out to dry.

Since the tap water wasn't safe to drink, we had to bleach or boil it. I didn't know there was any other way to clean drinking water like using Brita filters or fancy faucet

extensions. We didn't have money to buy clean bottled drinking water so we ordered heavy plastic barrels of water for fifteen baht apiece and refilled them weekly. (Later on the adults found the water barrels handy for punishing kids and sometimes during lunch time you'd see some skinny kid from India with bulging knees and bony arms holding one water barrel in each hand with arms outstretched and knees bent in a half-squat position until they nearly passed out from exhaustion or fainted altogether. Then they'd be brought back to the table with a pale face and thankful attitude and they weren't hungry anymore). The water in the barrels was cleaner than tap water, but still not quite clean enough to drink. We refilled them weekly with tap water that we bleached in order to make it drinkable. Next to the water cooler was a little bottle of bleach with a screw-on top. John was in charge of adding bleach to the tap water, and for every barrel he added ten drops. When one barrel was finished I watched as he carefully counted out the bleach droplets and they disappeared into the barrel's mouth and dissolved into the water below. When John wasn't around, someone who wasn't used to dropping the bleach in the water would do it. Sometimes they accidentally let too much in and the water burned with the bitter taste of bleach for the rest of the day. Sometimes we had to waste a whole barrel of water, but when we did drink it I figured the extra bleach kept my insides clean and in top-notch condition.

As for unwanted indoor pests, we had a few. But aside from the occasional cockroach scurrying along the wooden floors at night—with their long waving antennae and crispy wings that made a crunchy sound if you killed them—and the baby geckos

darting along the walls catching mosquitoes and flies and any other insects that got in their way, insects and rodents were generally kept to a minimum inside the walls.

Outside the walls it wasn't just the dirt. Father David said there were evil spirits that would latch on to us like leaches if we weren't careful. He had his cartoonists draw up the evil spirits so we'd know what these invisible creatures looked like—imps with spiny limbs and long fingers with sharp curved fingernails, hunched backs and devious smiles. Sometimes the evil spirits hide in humans, he said—"Like wolves in sheep's clothing." We had to be on guard at all times, not just for dirt and dangerous men that may like young girls with soft white skin, but for evil spirits that were invisible and stealth and sometimes hiding under the mask of a human face or a fake smile. That's why we stayed inside the walls where it was clean and pure from evil and safe from the wolves. We were sheep, Father David said, being herded by God's good shepherd—him—and into His heavenly Kingdom. And we were safe as long as we stayed within the walls of the compound.

Every time someone came home from being out in the dirt amongst hosts of evil spirits and ignorant humans who may or may not be evil depending on whether or not they wanted to hear our message, they would change and put their dirty system clothes in the laundry hamper. They'd wash thoroughly from head to toe and scrub their skin with Avery soap that we had gotten for free as a donation. The soap was dyed an artificial forest green and, according to the English description of the Thai ingredients, was "rich with aloe vera" and "safe for all skin types." After scrubbing from head to toe, they'd change into clean clothes and indoor shoes and come inside to tell us testimonies of how

many souls they saved today for God's Heavenly Kingdom and how many miracles God performed by leading them to the right people who gave them donations and free food. Hallelujah. According to Thai custom, and because of the dirt and evil spirits, we never wore our street shoes in the house. Inside every compound was a shoe rack filled with stacks and rows of rubber flip-flops that had been marked with first and last name initials so mine usually said FE or had the symbol of the star accompanied by the number four.

Father David had a method for how we would convert the entire world to Jesus's love and save them from the Endtime come the rapture in 1993. He used the true tale of Indian Christian social reformer, Pandita Ramabai, to illustrate his technique. He told stories of how she traveled the rural countryside of India and changed the world "one heart at a time." He said she traveled on foot through green rolling hills and had a 'grassroots' method for social change, touching one person at a time instead of appealing to the masses. He said that the way to change the world is not by speaking to large crowds in sold out stadiums, but by touching the heart of one lost lonely soul. That person will touch another and so on and so forth until eventually the entire world will be converted to God and His love.

We made it a point not to witness to our neighbors. We didn't want to raise a suspicion about our living conditions nor did we want them calling the authorities on us if they became wary. We left the house in shifts whenever we went out and never had more than eight or ten people in the yard at one time. We always made sure that we looked like we were doing something productive when we were outside like raking leaves or mowing

the lawn or painting the fence panes, sometimes for no reason other than to look busy and ‘normal.’ If we did see neighbors through the gates or busy workmen peering over the walls, we learned to duck out of view by disappearing behind bushes or hiding behind trees.

In order to carry out Father David’s method of converting the world one heart at a time, we went on road trips. After we had hit up every local business and knocked on every door in close proximity to our home asking residents and business owners if they’d like to ask Jesus into their hearts as their Lord and Savior to guarantee them a spot in heaven come the end of the world in 1993, we’d expand our radius by spending a few days in the more rural parts that were harder to get to.

We braved the dirt. Sometimes the men rode bicycles with no bicycle seats so they had to sit low on the back seat (Dad later told me the story about the missing bicycle seats and how some teen so-and-so wore a white button-down shirt trying to look professional with his hair slicked back and tan slacks and street shoes riding on the back seat of the bicycle all slouched over, but still praising the Lord and shouting Hallelujah since God had provided the wheels, and there was only a metal stump sticking straight up where the front bicycle seat was supposed to be. The image in my mind kept me laughing for days).

Or we tackled public transportation—crowded buses in Bangkok that stayed in one spot for what seemed like hours. I would take a nap and wake up an hour later and we’d still be in the same spot where we were when I fell asleep with sweaty bodies and the aroma of humid street pollution and deep fried chicken from the vendors on the side

of the road. The dirt had a way of escaping into the open-air buses and settling on plastic seat covers and resting on the rim of the driver's black steering wheel which made it difficult to breathe.

After we got to our destination in some rural region of Thailand, we found hotels to stay in for free where fluffy dirt feathered the ceiling fan blades, filmed the walls with a sticky grime and curtained the thin screen windows that were up top for ventilation. Dirt latched onto cobwebs and congregated in floor corners. Whenever we turned the fans on (there was no air conditioning in third-class hotels) they showered us with puffs of dirt curdles and I had to keep my mouth closed to keep the dirt from coating my teeth and gums.

We spent three to five days in regions where people had never heard of God or The Family (we were starting to get quite a reputation in some parts and later on some of the teen singers become bona fide pop singers in Thailand and Japan. Fans would reach their hands out of the crowd just to touch the newfound celebrities who sang of peace and God and His love). We went to places like Chiang Rai, Koh So Mui or some remote island or village where roads became bumpy dirt paths and some people had never heard of God or seen white people like Mom had pointed out on our long afternoon walks to the eucalyptus fields in Udon Thani. We kept a log of everywhere we went to keep track so we wouldn't hit up the same place twice or raise unnecessary suspicions about why young kids were out for hours a day and not in school like they were supposed to be. It was only once they pointed this out and explained that we needed an alibi if someone asked us why we weren't in school, that I started to wonder why we needed the excuse

(but my doubts about my lack of schooling would have to wait to emerge until my fear of death subsided for the mind has only place for one worry at a time). We'd witness to as many people as we could and pray with them to ask Jesus into their hearts—"win as many souls for God's Heavenly Kingdom" as Father David's commanded, just like Pandita Ramabai.

It was on one of these outings that I met a woman who could not stop hiccupping. Mom and Uncle Simon were with me. The woman was pregnant and ran a dry cleaning business along with her husband on the side of a dirt road in a city whose name I'll never remember. It's funny the things a child will remember. I will never remember the first time I boarded a plane; or when I figured out I was a twin; or the difference between an identical and fraternal twin and that I was the special kind; or that my parents were my parents; or where babies come from. But I will never forget the shirt that this woman was wearing. It was a flimsy polyester material and it had a loose collar and sleeves that went up to the middle of her arm. It had patterns of pastel pink flowers with pointed petals and green leaves all over. Her stomach was bulging and her husband would beat her, she told us. She had no protection against him because with one hand she covered her mouth to excuse the incessant hiccups and with the other she held her belly as if she were to let go, the baby would fall out right then and there without notice or warning.

This woman invited us to come into her shop. We stepped into the shop through the glass doors. The air conditioner was on and humming. It was cool inside and we were safe from the dirt. Behind her racks of clothing trudged along wrapped in crisp plastic covering. In one corner of the store a fat porcelain Buddha doll sat all goofy-grinned and

cross-legged and with his hands in his lap. Father David warned us about heathen statues and that they were like the golden cow the Israelites built after Moses was up in the mountains for days receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Along with the evil spirits and ignorant humans, dangerous men and dirt, we should also be on guard for heathen statues and insincere worship. I learned to spot a white Buddha statue or a tangerine-robed monk from a mile away.

Whenever we were inside someone else's abode, my eyes got busy observing the items of their home. Since the décor in the compounds was minimal and bland (but clean), when I looked around I felt like I was in a foreign land within a foreign land. There was always the traditional portrait of the king and queen with fruit and flowers and incense and little crumpled pieces of paper with prayers written on them underneath the altar shrine. Usually a table somewhere had a rice cooker ready with steamed rice and a pot on the stove bubbled with boiling soup that smelt of lemongrass and fish. The smell of spices and steamed vegetables combined to make a sweet fragrance. Most homes had bamboo floors (carpet was unheard of) and everyone took off their shoes and walked barefoot on the smooth wood panes.

The woman's husband wasn't there and she offered us Thai sweets that tasted of coconut and cane sugar. They were gooey and dripped of coconut oil. I always savored those sweets we knew as "ka nom" because it was the only time I could eat something with real sugar and oozing with coconut fat. In the compound we didn't have money to buy sugar or any kind of fat, which was considered a luxury. I was happy to be out of the compound exploring the streets of the city and eating real Thai food and delicious

desserts and not having to listen to God's Word or confessing my sins. When I was out on the streets I was an explorer and my eyes were a camera. I snapped shots and images I never knew would be of significance until later when I started writing them down.

Usually I didn't care much about the person we were witnessing to, but this woman was different—I couldn't keep my eyes off of her. Her hair was tied back in a half-ponytail and her arms were plump and firm. She spoke English brokenly. Her words came out in little disjointed trains that you had to piece together to get what she was saying.

“Yoo come in syde,” she said. And then she gestured us go come in with one hand leading the way to a glass table and chairs and the other hand covering her mouth as she hiccupped relentlessly and uncontrollably.

Usually Mom would get busy asking them if they wanted to hear about Jesus, but Mom also had a way of listening to people that I will always admire. And if the person who was talking had a stomach bulging with a baby, she listened more intently for it. That was her way, being a mother of seven live, and one dead baby.

In between this woman's words were gaps of hiccups. She would cover her mouth with one hand and with the other rub her belly or place her hand on a tired hip.

Her eyes were drained and her face was weary. Her hiccups were spaced about ten seconds apart as she told us about her condition. “I never stop,” she said. And then she gulped a hiccup that made her round belly jump. “Ever since I go pregnant and the doctor he no know what the matter.”

Mom put a loving hand on her shoulder and tilted her head to one side and nodded and sucked in those gasps of “Jah!” that I knew were indicative of her Swedish heritage. She did this whenever she was listening attentively. I could tell Mom wanted to get busy talking about Jesus and how he could rescue her from her suffering, but I also knew Mom was listening to this woman. Perhaps she was being heard for the first time in her life. Mom knew that and I could tell that she genuinely listened because she cared, not just because Father David said that God required compassion of all His children.

“My family they no like my husband,” she said. “He not nice to me.”

She rubbed her belly and looked down. In the course of a minute, ten hiccups gulped through her throat and made her whole body jump. I could tell she was sad and she was in pain and it wasn’t just because of the hiccups or her swollen belly. It never occurred to me that Jesus could rescue her from her suffering. For the first time in my life I was feeling for another person besides myself or my family and I wasn’t doing it for God or Jesus; I was doing it for myself. This woman was part of me and I could feel her pain. It didn’t matter that she was Buddhist and I was told I was a Christian. I could feel her suffering and that made us one. Regardless of God or religion, we were both part of the human race, and that I knew for sure.

After a while her husband came home and we left. We had learned how to discern by a person’s demeanor whether or not they were receptive to our message of Jesus and God’s love and the looming rapture, and this man wasn’t. He came in angry and he talked loud in Thai, commanding his wife to do this and do that, ordering her around like a shepherd herding sheep. His anger wouldn’t be calmed and we weren’t a people to force

our message on others if they weren't receptive. So we walked out of the store and onto the next door.

Hours later we passed by the same shop and I saw the woman sitting in her chair with her belly on her lap and her husband was shouting at her and had his hands in the air and he was ready to hit her. Her head was low. With one hand she held her mouth to excuse her hiccups and with the other she protected the baby in her belly. My shoes kicked up the dust as we continued walking past that store.

After a day of witnessing, we'd provision a meal of street food—deep fried chicken and sticky rice with papaya salad—and it was always yummy with clumps of rice, sweet vinegar dressing and real crunchy chicken dripping with oil fat and hot grease. We brought the food to our hotel room wrapped in oily paper bags. We showered in the bathroom, using a plastic dipper to splash cold water all over where the dirt hid. We ate our dinner with our hands, as was custom, using the greasy paper bags as plates and then passed out on crisp, white sheets stretched across hotel beds.

I started to miss my pillow. I asked Mom if I could call home from a telephone booth to talk to Dad. Sometimes Mom or Dad came with us. Other times I was with my Uncles and Aunties who I was told were family in the Lord so I never felt alone.

I dropped the coin in the slot and dialed the number. It had started raining in the late afternoon and now the rain was coming down hard and I was shielded by the glass booth. Dad answered.

“How's it going, babes?” he said. I could tell he knew something was wrong.

“Fine,” I whimpered. The receiver was filthy and I knew there were invisible germs so I was careful not to touch my mouth to it. Father David warned against germs like they were accomplices of the Devil and diseases were a spiritual invasion that we must be on guard against at all times lest we become contaminated with sickness or worse. I strained to hear his voice above the patter of rain drops against the glass shelter.

“How’s the pillow at the hotel?” he said. He knew to ask before I said anything. He noticed little things like that. He knew that I was particular about my pillow and its degree of firmness. He knew that I liked my hair a certain way and I would get fussy if my bangs were out of place or if my pillow wasn’t firm enough. He didn’t know that I was also worried about death and the end of the world because I kept those fears to myself.

“It’s Ok,” I admitted. My pillow at home was hard and firm.

I fiddled with the curly wire and gripped the metal holder. I started to cry.

“I miss my pillow,” I managed between sobs of tears. Sheets of warm rain were pouring against the glass.

“The hotel pillows are too soft,” I said. “They’re not firm like my pillow at home. And I miss it. I can’t sleep well without my pillow, Daddy.”

The hotel bed pillows were packed with a soft down-like filling that felt like feathers but was probably just imitation of feathers since the hotels we stayed in were third-class hotels and they were free, not expensive first-class resorts like I’d seen on the islands and on postcards. When I slept on the hotel pillows they made my neck sore. My

pillow at home gave my head support so it didn't feel heavy with all the thoughts of fear and death.

"Next time, babes, you can bring your pillow," Dad said. "Ok? I promise. I'll pack it up for you before you leave."

I wanted to tell Dad that I missed him too but I couldn't get the words out. I was whimpering into the receiver of the phone.

"Ok," I said. "Will you come too... next time?"

I knew there would be a next time and I liked it better when Dad came along for the road trips because it made me feel safe to be near him. Even though Mom was there, she was pregnant and pregnant women needed to be protected just like the woman who wouldn't stop hiccupping.

"Yes," he said. "If I can then I will."

I knew that he probably wouldn't, but I was happy that he promised anyway, even if just as a gesture of fatherliness and because I knew that he cared about my pillow.

It was only a matter of time before someone was bound to find us—30-50 foreigners crammed in houses in the boonies of Thailand, none of us speaking a word of Thai except for the traditional greetings—Sawati ka, “hello,” or Kop khun krup, “thank you.” I also knew how to pray with someone to ask Jesus into their hearts fluently.

Father David taught us to be prepared for this kind of invasion that might be spurred on by the suspicion of the meddlesome neighbors. He sent out a letter urging all members to have ‘fleebag’ ready packed with the basic necessities like shirts, socks, underwear and a few toiletries like a clean toothbrush just in case we had to get up and flee in the middle of the night.

Teenage Joy was the older sister of Danny and Karrissa. She had long, straight hair that went well below her waist. She was thirteen years old which to me meant an adult and I always wondered if she was sexually active or not but I could never tell. Joy’s mother had left the Family. Father David called the people who left ‘backsliders’—“damn backsliders looking to disrupt God’s mission,” he’d say.

One day during breakfast Joy’s dad, Uncle Josh, made an announcement.

“It looks like Joy’s mother is after us,” he said.

“She wants to take me to court to get the kids.”

I knew that this was common in the group. The parent who left would come back to try and rescue their children. Sometimes these turned into messy court battles.

Sometimes the backslider parent had to use force, any means necessary. And since we lived in third-world countries and there wasn’t a solid social services system, they would have to employ whatever techniques necessary, including barging into the compound in

the middle of the night with police officers to try and take their children back. Whenever these kinds of invasions happen in America these days it makes headline news, but back then no one ever heard about it, especially in places like Argentina or the Philippines.

I knew what this meant—that we would have to be on our toes, ready for an invasion in the middle of the night and the thought sort of thrilled me. We lived on the edge, always on the run. In the meantime, Father David encouraged the mass production of children—“more soldiers for God’s Heavenly Kingdom come the Endtime,” he’d say.

Aunty Vicky lived with us in Udon Thani. She had a bulging belly and was ready to deliver any day. Pregnant moms of the home were always allowed to eat special things like real milk and brown sugar and real eggs. Whenever a woman got pregnant she was put on a special protein rich diet that included an extra large portion of fish or some other protein if fish didn’t agree with her. I was always a little jealous of the pregnant mothers because they didn’t have to eat things like boiled dahl with whole tomatoes for breakfast or steamed hard tofu and steamed rice for lunch. Mom had arranged for a doctor to come to the house to deliver Aunty Vicky’s baby. Mom read letters to Aunty Vicky when she was pregnant, giving her faith that she had the strength and courage to deliver at home.

Early one morning Aunty Vicky’s water bag broke. Mom thought that she had peed all over herself. “I didn’t know why she just started peeing all over herself,” she later told us. Mom told Mary Ann to call the doctor since she was the closest one around. Mary Ann got busy on the phone, but in the meantime the baby slipped right out. Mom had to play doctor and caught the baby even though she wasn’t qualified to deliver babies, only have them. Tamar and I walk into the room right at the scene where mom is

holding a blue-white baby covered in serum, umbilical cord still attached, ready to take its first breath. Aunty Vicky's on the bed with her legs spread open and her hair's a mess, but she's still wearing her glasses. She didn't have time to take off her panties so those are stretched across her ankles.

I'd never seen a live birth before, but figured this was probably the closest I'd get. Later when I get older, Father David encourages us younger members to watch the beautiful creation of a live delivery since we'd probably be having babies before too long. The Thai doctor from the local hospital arrived soon after to clean the baby up and check for its vitals. Aunty Vicky named her daughter Olivia and that name has been at the top of my favorites name list (Oliver for boys) ever since.

Early one morning I awoke to the untimely flash of fluorescent lights and mother's urgent command, "Hurry and get your things together. We don't have much time." She told us to be as quiet as possible. Outside the sky was still dark. Mattresses bound with baby blue sheets were stretched across the floor. We had ten minutes to pack up our things and vacate. We called it evacuation. We are trained to evacuate and can disappear at the snap of a finger just like we did when we fled the United States of America. Sometimes we had imitation raids. The adults would dress up like soldiers, all black with batons and helmets, bang on the door and we would hide under the stairs.

"Hurry kids! Before the officials get here." Her voice was pressing but calm. Mom knew how stay tranquil and composed during emergency situations, probably because giving birth isn't the most relaxing procedure and she's already done that eight times and was still as robust and strong as ever even though one of them came out dead.

This time I wasn't dreaming.

I had heard stories like this before. Stories of the homes in Argentina thousands of miles away called Jumbos that housed up to three hundred members at a time, raided by officials during the wee hours just before dawn. After being interrupted from their sleep and snatched out of bed, the children were ordered by officials to board a bus and then taken to social services where they remained until their parents were proven innocent of child abuse and molestation charges. Often the children were placed in foster homes. We were always prepared for this kind of invasion and taught how to answer questions properly so they wouldn't think that we were abused nor too sheltered.

“Did you grow up in a sect?” they would probe us after we emerged from hiding under the stairs.

“What’s a sect?” we’d answer.

“Have you been brainwashed?” they prodded.

“There’s no such thing as brainwashing!” We answered like robots.

I always wondered why we had to pretend we were doing nothing wrong if we really weren’t and why we had to pretend to be honest if we really were. It just didn’t make sense to me. After being interrogated into exhaustion, the girls were then taken to the doctor to be examined so it could be determined whether or not they were still virgins. Although I was horrified by such a graphic procedure that involved a cold speculum and metal braces, I secretly wondered what it would be like to be my own version of Annie and live in a stable home with rich parents of my own even if for only temporarily. Guiltily, I wondered what it would be like to be an only child and have parents who could give me everything I ever wanted and live in a fancy house with high glass cupboards filled with delicate china sets.

I opened my tired eyes, excited and confused. Usually I looked forward to the days when we had to wake up before dawn because it meant that ninety long days had passed and it was finally time to renew our visas. On the nights when I didn’t stay up crying, dreading the thought of my own predetermined death, or laughing, straining to hear the adults having sex, I would spend the hours in anticipation counting the days until I could be alone with my immediate family for legal purposes. We called them ‘visa

trips.’ We kept our Swedish citizenship because Sweden had a harmonious relationship with Thailand which granted us certain privileges.

It was time to say good-bye and we had little time. I was bidding farewell to so much more than just that house. I was saying good-bye to my family even though they came with me. I was saying good-bye to my childhood even though I was only five years old. I was saying good-bye to just one of many houses we would vacate over the years but only the first that ever felt like a home.

We were always fleeing from something—First America—Now the officials. This time they were coming to take away Teenage Joy who was sleeping on the floor on a mattress next to my bed, just like her dad had warned at breakfast. Her mother had recounted to the officials stories of child abuse and convinced them that all child members were in grave danger of abuse and molestation. I knew that they were coming, not just to take away Joy, but to protect all potential underage victims, myself included.

I wanted Joy to stay. She was pretty. She had dark mysterious eyes and everyone said she was exotic with her jet-black hair and round shapely hips. When we woke up early that morning she was wearing only thin cotton panties and a white see-through shirt that faintly exposed her small dark nipples.

Nothing much was said. Whenever we were ordered to do something we simply listen and obeyed. That was the way. There were no questions. We lived every day on the verge of martyrdom and thankful for every day as another privilege, another chance to save the world.

We packed up our things and loaded into a Song-Taow that was waiting for us outside the gates. We positioned ourselves to fit into the open-air vehicle, all our most important possessions bound in large black trash bags. The sky was lifting from dark to grey and if Dad was worried he never showed it.

Mom was holding Becky, still a newborn, in her arms. She looked at Dad who was loading the last of our belongings.

“Are they all here?” She began to count us the way she did when she didn’t have a free hand, using her head to nod off the numbers one-by-one.

“One. Two... Where’s William?”

William is sitting behind Heidi with her fire-red hair sucking on her transparent pacifier.

“Three... four... ” us twins always stuck together.

“Five... six... seven...” Becky was cradled in her arms.

John followed suit in his worried and anxious way as he always did whenever we were out in public; just to double-check; just to be the big brother that he was.

“One..,” he counts himself, “two... three...four... five... six... seven.”

We are all present and quiet, never uttering a word.

I didn’t ask where we were going but I know we had no destination. We were fleeing and I was thrilled and anxious by the idea of it. I lived my life prepared to flee. I had my fleebag close by, packed with the basic necessities for survival—a toothbrush, first aid supplies, a few toiletries, clean underwear, and socks. In case a natural disaster

hit or the Antichrist rose to power unexpectedly I was prepared and ready to escape at the snap of a finger just like we had to on that morning.

We drove off into the early morning hours leaving behind a trail of dust and memories of the house on the banks of the Mekong River.

We stopped to switch vehicles. Driving through the northern countryside of Thailand can be exhausting. The dirt roads wrap around fields of fluorescent green meadows with spades of grass that grow taller than the top of Dad's head. The sides of the roads fall into swamps of marsh that make you feel if you're not careful you could drive straight into the overgrowth. Piles of garbage give off a sour stench that lasts in your nose for days. Dogs emerge from the piles of distorted bottles piled on top of rotting bags of trash. The dogs are so sickly and scrawny they stop looking like dogs at all and instead look like oversized rats with patches of fur and open bloody wounds, sometimes with just two or three legs.

Dad got out of the song-toaw to make a call at a pay phone booth and was able to track down some leaders who directed us to a home in Karat in the central region of Thailand. They had room for us there.

We arrived at our new home just as the sky was fading to grey. From the upstairs bathroom window I heard the sound of Timmy's screams as he is being beaten—incessantly, slowly and rhythmically. The haunting noise went on for hours. Sounds like that always made me want to be a good little soldier. Blood drops trailed from the curved driveway into the house from the night before when Timmy's sister, Eleanor, split a nail through her foot and had to be rushed to the hospital. I knew it had to be a serious because wound because of the blood stains and because we never went to the hospital except for cases of severe emergency like the time Becky split open her lip, or later on when my youngest sister, Suzy, nearly sliced off her finger with a thin bamboo leaf blade.

Dinner is held in a dining hall that fits 30-40 people easily. We sit on wooden benches that connect to the adjoining tables. We are allowed to spend our first meal together as a family whenever we move to a new place and I am thankful for that. Moving is always an exhilarating time because I am allowed to be with just my family until we adjust. Adjusting usually takes the better part of a day. After that we are thrown into the same schedule with smiling, new faces I am told are my family in the Lord because we are all God's children—a routine I was never quite comfortable with.

My whole life I was having an unrequited love affair with my family. I so badly wanted us to be together, alone, my desire left unfulfilled, my heart unsatisfied. And even when we were able to be together for those few short days on visa trips or when we moved to a new home, it felt forbidden, short-lived and wrong. I always knew I had to go back to my group of peers and every time we moved, I cried. It didn't seem fair since life was so short anyways so why couldn't I spend my childhood being just my parents' child and not a soldier for God?

After we moved from Udon Thani, Mom and Dad seemed distant. We weren't a family anymore. They were always being herded away for some kind of guidance and training or desperate prayer meetings and no doubt some exciting sexual experimentation. Mom was always pregnant. By now, the children outnumbered the adults two-to-one. Father David said we needed as many soldiers as possible for the Endtime. Mom's stomach was bulging with number eight.

The Children of God started out as a band of hippies traveling along California's coast during the seventies, gathering other lost souls who were searching for a way out of

‘the system.’ Over time they produced a number of children and gathered a sting of controversy. By the time I came into the picture, The Children of God had had dropped the –of Love part and changed their name to just “The Family.” We began to function more like a school living in an illusory utopia, a bubble of love, with both the adults and children being trained rigorously for the Endtime. We didn’t have much time, but somehow for the adults, making love was a crucial part of our ‘save the world’ mission. They always made time for that. As we marched down the stairs in single file to the tables for breakfast or to do our chores, we’d hear them reaching the gates of ecstasy through thin screen windows up top of the walls that allowed for ventilation and kept out flies and mosquitoes. Women moaning. Beds creaking. Men breathing heavily. They called us ‘soldiers’ and we chanted as we marched, *I’m a soldier in the Lord’s army, the sword of the spirit is in my hand.*

At night I would cry. I began to think about the reality of my situation. Even though I was five, 1993 was just around the corner. I was going to be twelve when the world ended. I only had seven more years to live. I started to think of all the possible ways I could die. I knew for sure that I was going to heaven since I was one of God’s children, but the threshold to get there seemed insurmountable.

People always want to know, “Flor, did you believe it? Did you think it was true?” That question is always hard for me to answer because I never really had the option to question what Father David said so when I think back my mind becomes a blur of memories, faces, images and stories, but I can’t really pinpoint exactly what I was thinking or if I was thinking. I think mostly I was just acting like a robot. I was immune

to my own thoughts and feelings even though I had them and even though I knew they were real. When a child's feelings are not validated by a grown-up, they have no reason to express them. Speaking against Father David was akin to speaking against God—blasphemous and intolerable. Whenever I had questions I kept them all inside. They began to grow and fester like a monster in my mind.

Soon I became a reluctant follower, an obedient disciple. Whenever they probed us with questions like, “Are you here because you want to be here or because your parents joined?” we were programmed to answer, “I’m here because I want to be here!” Sometimes my voice was a timid whisper, sometimes we replied in unison, a rumbling thunder of disingenuous affirmation. Inside I was thinking, “I’m not sure if I’m here because I want to be because I never remember making that decision on my own and I don’t even know what the world outside the walls is like.”

The world outside the high walls was so forbidden, so scary, like a mountain I was forced to climb in the middle of the night on my own without a flashlight or any means of guidance, that in reality I had no choice. The world outside the walls of the compound was cold and unfathomable. Father David called it “the system.” Everyone who wasn’t a ‘child of God’ was a ‘systemite.’ I was free to leave, I was told, but if I left I would be giving up my birthright as one of God’s children and cut off from eternal salvation—“a damn systemite!” I would be doomed to eternal condemnation in the afterlife, a moment that was fast approaching. I was trapped and I was safe as long as I stayed within the confines of the walls that were eight feet high usually topped with barbed wire or pierced with sharp pieces broken glass bottles.

Guilt and fear, combined with questions and doubt, began to take over my mind. Every night as I prepared for bed I was ready to awake at any moment to the surprise of men cloaked in black with machine guns and rifles. I felt sorry for these men because I knew that they were human too. I thought that maybe I could convert them to our side. I convinced myself that if I could look into their eyes I could persuade them that I wasn't guilty of anything and that I didn't think that they were bad either. They were just doing their job. They were soldiers like me. They didn't have a choice either.

Life became a series of long dark days followed by hot restless nights. During the day I was terrified of the leaders and what would happen if I stepped out of line. Stepping out of line, here, meaning something as insignificant as wearing my outside street shoes in the house or speaking out of turn or laughing during naptime. During the night I imagined strong manly angels posted by my bedside to protect me, perhaps to make me invisible, or if nothing else to help me cope with the pain of the torture. I liked sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Partly because my name was "Flor" and the two words were homophones, but also because if I needed to, I could position myself to slide under the bed at a moment's notice. For this reason I slept close to the foot of Mom and Dad's bed whenever at all possible. I imagined strong, manly angels with broad hefty wings posted by my bedside and even though no one else could see them I knew they were there to protect me from evil.

I was terrified of dying, but also, I was terrified of living. I didn't want to be a soldier. I didn't want to be a martyr. I was always prepared to be jolted out of bed and led to a cruel and torturous death, not the kind that happens naturally. Most nights I prayed

that I would just get shot. It seemed a quick and painless way to die. I wanted to be shot with a machine gun making certain that I would die quickly and I wanted to be shot in the heart. I was terrified of pistols and the idea of a wound that might leave me bleeding to death for hours. I had two wishes as a child: a quick, painless death, preferably a shot in the chest and to wake up short with curly hair because of the French boy, Thibault, who was shorter than me and whom I had developed a powerful crush on.

At night when I cried, Mom would come to my bed at night and post a verse by my bed: Romans 8:28, “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose.” She also told me that God would never give me any temptation greater than I could bear. I reckoned that in my final hour God would give me the strength to deal with the pain, no matter how great or torturous.

I began to think about all the possible ways that I could die—primitive ways that you hear about only from stories of the Middle Ages—being burned at the stake, crucified upside down, beheaded or stoned to death. We were always prepared for an invasion, the enemy, an army of men dressed in heavy black jumpsuits with helmets and batons and guns. The guns were my salvation. I figured that death by a gunshot wound was probably the most painless way to die. I started to pray. I prayed, “Dear God, when they come to get me make sure they aim right. I don’t want to be shot in a place that will make me bleed to death. That would take too long. When they come to get me can You please make sure they shoot me right in the heart?” I located my heart in the left side of my chest. It was beating at an accelerated rate—thump, thump, thump—the kind that accompanies fear. I knew that if they got me in my chest it would be instant and certain.

Then I closed my eyes, a puddle of salty tears on my pillow, calm my exhausted heart,  
think about heaven and fall to sleep.

“One more thing, God... If you want you can take me in my sleep. I won’t mind.  
Just help my mother cope with my death. Amen.” Every night after the lights went out I  
prayed for God to take me in my sleep. On the nights when I was brave I had my own  
rendition of “Now I lay me down to sleep.” For the best that my memory will allow me to  
remember, it went something like,

*Now I lay me down to sleep,*

*I pray thee Lord my soul to take.*

*Please let me die before I wake,*

*I promise I won’t make a peep.*

Reville is at seven a.m. and by seven-thirty sharp our room is immaculate and spotless, the bed sheets unwrinkled and firm. I was happy when the daylight came and my fears diminished with the dark of night. It was easier to be a soldier when you have a host of colleagues. It's easier to be part of an army rather than a lonely soldier. At night all you have are the angels, Jesus and the sound of moaning, heavy breathing and beds creaking.

We gather ourselves into neat rows and stand at attention, each line containing eight to twelve soldiers determined by age. We stand shortest to tallest so I am usually somewhere in the back with Tamar close behind and I like that. I feel safe with Tamar behind me. We march in single file, hup-two-three-four, quoting a verse or shouting a quote in sync with our steps, like soldiers. *Hup-two-three-four. God is not a fan of war.* We march like soldiers. We sleep like soldiers. We stand like soldiers. On command we file down the stairs and through the hall. We arrive at our designated table for breakfast. We sit at our assigned seats and eat thick rice porridge or curdled powdered eggs and steamed rice sopped with soy sauce. Even if the food is bland and tasteless we can't grumble or whine. No complaints. No criticisms. No one is allowed to talk. Don't speak unless spoken to. Children must be seen, not heard. Fight the good fight. Sometimes during lunch we slap the slabs of boiled tofu under the table or John tells me I can pass it to him since he wants to gain muscle weight. Sometimes the tofu sticks to the rafters under the table like gum. Or else it splatters to the floor sometime during lunch and we pretend like we have no idea why it's there or how it got there. The rice we ball up in pretend snowballs and have a food fight when the adults aren't looking until someone gets hauled off to the bathroom for a spanking and we all laugh.

Our food is rationed and usually we are allowed seconds if we were still hungry, but the food is so unappetizing that I don't usually want seconds anyway. We didn't have sugar or oil. I knew times were getting rough when they announced that seconds were no longer an option for that particular day, but I never went hungry or skipped a single meal. Father David said it was very important that we stay in tip-top shape so we could have energy and be healthy for our task at hand. Only healthy soldiers could fight the good fight and save the world.

We didn't have money to buy food so everything we ate was donated to us from the local market or from the back stock of neighborhood stores. We had three meals every day and one snack in the afternoon. Sometimes we had cookies and milk for snack, or stale army crackers. The pasty texture settled in the pits of our stomachs like cement bricks and created a feeling of full that lasted for hours. We had powdered eggs for breakfast scrambled into a curdled consistency to stretch the protein further. Powdered milk was a real treat compared to powdered eggs and sometimes we would sneak out of our beds in the middle of the night and into the kitchen and into the great big barrels to stuff our faces with spoonfuls of chalky dehydrated milk. The powder mixed with our saliva and stuck to the gums of our mouths and our mouths made clomping sounds as we worked the powder into a smooth consistency.

The food we collected was leftover from the local market so oftentimes it was stale or rotten making it fermented and therefore even sweeter. Sometimes we were blessed with an overabundance of rotten bananas and they would call us out to the garage

to peel and bag as many as we could as fast as possible so we could freeze them for banana bread later in the week when the fresh fruit had run out.

Molasses was counted as a sweet, but we had to boil it thoroughly first because it wasn't the kind that was intended for humans; it was thick and dark and bitter and meant to be fed to race horses. One time the molasses boiled over and exploded onto the kitchen floor. We spent hours cleaning up the pool of tar-like horse feed. The molasses that spilt on the counter we scooped up and put back in the pot to be boiled again. We were taught to never waste anything. Father David abhorred wastefulness and stuck hard to Benjamin Franklin's waste not, want not theory.

I can't say we weren't poor. I've seen poverty. I've seen the people who live on the streets or in shacks and wash their clothes in the gutter and eat food out of the trash and we weren't poor. We just had alternative goals and enjoying life simply was not one of them. Thankfulness was required. Criticism is synonymous with blasphemy. Beggars can't be choosers.

We had ways of making money. Once the children began to dominate the population that had now grown to 20,000, they established an official school in Japan called The Heavenly City School (HCS) that housed up to three hundred members. It was a registered school and the sample home. I was always jealous of the lucky kids who ended up at the HCS. The HCS consisted of multiple houses, spanned a whole block, and was fully equipped with a studio where they produced tapes, posters and videos for distribution. Once the women stopped having sex for money the children began giving away the media they called 'tools' for a suggested donation. We never liked to say that

we sold things. Selling things for money meant you were playing with the Devil. We just politely suggested a donation. It sounded a lot better. We also had sponsors who donated money and supplies and we were always blessed with affordable rent in beautiful houses with large yards and very high walls. There were two requirements whenever members went ‘house-hunting’—high walls and large yards. We lived by faith, never knowing how long an opportunity such as a home would be available before neighbors or landlords became suspicious of our unusual living arrangements and then we would pack up and find a new place.

We kids weren’t responsible for making money but sometimes we participated anyways. I always liked those days because I didn’t have to sit and listen to God’s word for hours on end. We called it ‘witnessing’ and usually the adults who were assigned to go witnessing were fun and adventurous, not strict and vigilant like our shepherds. For every soul we won we would receive an extra star on our crown in Heaven. Every soul brought us one step closer to saving the world because come Armageddon day, only those who received Jesus into their hearts from a chosen child of God would graduate to Heaven.

We learned to hide on command, having imitation raids where members would dress in black and pretend to be raiding the home to take us away and we’d have to evacuate. Sometimes they’d pretend to kill us and we’d respond by falling to the floor simultaneously, dying, laying still in silence and then rising in ecstasy to Heaven, a place of ‘no more tears.’ Never a fun skit for me to play, but I participated anyways. It was my escape.

I had various means of escape. I never imagined the outside world as an option. No matter how scary, how doomed, or how lonely I felt, the world outside the walls was scarier, more doomed and just as lonely. Mostly I dreamt of heaven. Sometimes I fantasized about sex and what the moaning women must feel when they moan and what makes the men pant so heavily. But the one thing that kept me from drowning in my tears was the anticipation that always, in less than ninety days, I would be alone with my family traveling the country for at least one day to renew our visas.

Every ninety days dad strapped a money belt around his waist. It was old, used and dark beige with small metal buckles. Inside he kept nine passports and a small ration of money that would get us across the border and back. Of all the money that we made through witnessing, most was spent on visa trips and rent, leaving little and oftentimes none for food and other necessities. But that's Ok because the world was ending and God was going to provide for His children even though we didn't always know how. It was part of the contract of being God's children: He would take care of us... no matter what!

On the day that our visas were due for renewal Mom would wake us up early before the crack of dawn so we could have something yummy for breakfast like real fried eggs and rice or peanut butter sandwiches with bright-colored jam on fluffy white bread. Mom would tell us to make sure to pee even if we didn't have to so that way we wouldn't have to use the public restrooms on the train or at the station because they were unsanitary and polluted. Dad was always busy doing paper work and mom would tell us to be well-behaved and act normal so we wouldn't look suspicious. The train would only take us so far, usually stopping just short of the Malaysian border. Then we would pass through customs. "I'm a teacher," Dad would tell them in Thai, "I teach English to the military." We tried for all sorts of façades; Dad was a teacher; John was adopted; we were here on vacation. But never, ever could we make it known who we really were; that we were missionaries on a quest to save the world. Mom would shush us even if we weren't making any noise and I would feel guilty even if I'd done nothing wrong. Never were we allowed to witness to any person in uniform. We knew how to recognize an undercover officer by their choice of shoes that were always polished and black no matter

how grungy they dressed. I was always prepared to run. We stuck close together. John had his way of counting and we would laugh and imitate him with his worried face typical of a firstborn of twelve, his unease characteristic of his anxious personality.

We wore matching clothes. The night before our visa trip a Filipino Aunt braided our hair into the tightest French braids that turned our eyes Chinese and our scalps bright red. We left the braids in for days, taking them out only once the fuzzy fly-away escapees became unmanageable. And on that one day, one of my wishes was granted: my hair was curly. But I was still tall and I still didn't know how I was going to die.

People loved to touch us. We walked through the markets and hands reached out from the dark and grabbed our arms and touched our skin like we were celebrities. People stopped us in the middle of the street and peeled oranges and carefully stripped away the white vein fibers and fed us the juicy slices. They made a big deal about it and kissed us and took pictures and counted us and would "O" and "Ah" over such a rare sighting, comparing us to the Von Trapp family from *The Sound of Music*. Mom held Becky close. She didn't want her to be contaminated by the filth of the streets. After people touched us Mom passed around the bottle of disinfectant she carried in her purse and spilt it all over our hands, telling us to rub our faces and arms thoroughly. She told us to watch our things.

"Sometimes people like to smuggle drugs over with innocent white kids," Mom said. I looked into the distance. Beyond the train tracks and dirt road, I saw a picture of a rope looped into a circle the size of a hefty neck. I knew what that meant: smuggling drugs was punishable to death by hanging. I was scared of being hanged in the Endtime. I

didn't know what made me eligible for such a primitive death, except for being God's grandchild. Father David made sure we knew stories about Hoarse Alderman and other saints who were martyred like Peter, Jesus's disciple who was hung upside down on the cross. He told us these stories to prepare us for our future fate. I knew only about primitive ways of dying. I didn't know about things like lethal injection of nuclear bombs that could kill people in an instant with little to no pain.

On the trains we traveled through the countryside and whizzed by fields of rice patties and through slums where nothing else existed but miles and miles of shacks that zoomed by so fast they looked like one long fuzzy wooden house.

Mom gave us one carton of chocolate milk for every train ride. We savored the thick sweet thickness and attempted to stretch our indulgent allowance for as long as we possibly could. We never ate or drank anything with sugar except for on visa trips so we could look as normal as possible, Mom said. Also, we didn't have sugar aside from the rotten bananas, boiled molasses, and huge blocks of raw cane sugar that we kept for special occasions. Besides, it probably would have been a big production to whip up powdered eggs and powdered milk at the train station or stash deep fried sardine patties and boiled bok choy with the hot, humid air. We invented a game that forced us to make our indulgent drink last for as long as we possibly could. We would insert the straw through the aluminum barrier and sip our drink only while we were zooming across a bridge. We waited in anticipation, our mouths watering for more and gulped cautiously only as we crossed through the zig-zag bars that prevented the train from tipping into the milky brown water below. We traveled down the strip of land that resembles an

elephant's trunk, usually sleeping overnight tossing and swaying with the rumble of a third class comfort.

Tamar and I shared a bunk and always whined for the top. We had a way of getting our way since we were twins and had a majority vote. We invented a game called tickle-scratch that helped us relax and fall right to sleep. We were the perfect match for each other, our bodies fitting perfectly together as we positioned ourselves to lay with our heads on opposite ends; our identical, white, curvy feet resting near the other's head. One was assigned to be 'tickle' the other was 'scratch'. We alternated assignments appropriately. Tickle first. And we would start teasing the skin of each other's feet with soft, circular motions using our nails and the tips of our fingers. Once we couldn't bear the tingly sensation anymore it made us want to jolt our legs away, scratch would call out Scratch! and we would start scratching vigorously until the padding at the bottom of our feet turned red. Then the other would command Tickle! And this process would go on until we passed out from exhaustion and we would fall asleep resting near each others arched, angular feet, hers always one size bigger than mine since she was nineteen minutes older than me.

I felt safe on the train because I knew that there was absolutely no way possible that the Antichrist could arise to power in such short notice and make it on to the train to capture me there. There was a predicted sequence of events that must occur first as told in the book of Revelation: The Antichrist would rise to power and then we would all hear about it on the news even though we never watched the news and had no idea of what was going on outside the walls. The Antichrist would declare peace for seven years and

announce a one-world order. In the middle of his seven-year reign he would break the contract and force everyone to receive The Mark of the Beast in their right hands or on their foreheads. Father David was always predicting which world leader or public figure was going to be the Antichrist from Yeltsin to Michael Jackson to Bill Clinton. Stalin and Hitler were old news and therefore not much of a threat, especially since they were dead. We didn't care much about history; we were overwhelmingly worried about the future. Since we were forewarned, we would refuse to receive the Mark of the Beast and have to flee for our lives. It was our job to alert the whole world that The Mark of the Beast was a trap and if they succumbed to the evil forces then they were selling their souls to the Devil and would burn in hell for eternity. Only those who received Jesus into their hearts as their personal Lord and Savior could go to Heaven. We were 'born-again' Christians. We lived each day knowing that one day we would have to flee. And only once we had fled to every place possible and there was nowhere else to run we would hide out in the mountains. Then the soldiers would raid our camp in the middle of the wilderness and send us to our death. That was my reality. That was my future. But as long as I was in the train I felt safe. No one could capture me there.

After getting off the train Dad hailed down a taxi. It took him an extra long time since he had to find something big enough to fit him, Mom and us seven kids in the back. Usually he'd settle for a Chevrolet.

"Chev-vee tao alli?" he would ask—"How much for the Chevy?" And then he'd manage a conversation in Thai about how much it would cost for them to take us to the ferry bargaining with them to find the best deal possible. He sat in the front on the left-

hand side passenger's seat since the steering wheel was on the right side. We all squished in the back, usually dressed in matching uniforms chewing gum with earnest intention, savoring every burst of sugary, minty sweetness since we weren't allowed to eat sugar regularly, only on visa trips.

It seemed that all the taxi drivers had extra dark skin and all their nails were short and lined with dirt except for their pinky nail which they kept super long to pick their nose or snort cocaine, we later gathered. When we reached the Malaysia border Dad would go do extensive paper work while mom watched us kids play house in the flower beds and snack on peanuts and raisins or some exotic fruit like longons or rambuthans. We had to pay ten baht to use the bathroom which was a real rip-off since the toilet was just a hole in the floor that you had to flush with pitchers of water if you went number two. I always wondered who the guy was accepting the coins and if he was even hired in the first place or if he was just taking our money because we were foreigners and if you're white you're supposed to have money, but we were just as poor as the guy taking the money at the squat-toilet. The only difference was we had a reason to be poor. We were broke with a cause: we were saving the world.

Father David painted a pretty clear picture of what our future was going to be like through his MO Letters. For us kids, along with his dreams and visions, he created a fictional character he called “Heaven’s Girl.”

Heaven’s Girl didn’t have a proper name, but Father David had some of his artists sketch up some realistic pictures and compiled them in a book for us kids called “Heaven’s Girl.”

He also had his artists sketch up pictures of heaven. That way we’d have a pretty good idea of where we were going after we died. Father David’s heaven was chock-full of women wearing minimal clothing. Their nipples protruded sharply from their see-through white garments that draped delicately over their shaded pubic areas. Their legs peeked out from the slits in their heavenly garb that went clear up to their hipbones. He predicted there’d be plenty of sex in heaven and in his top-secret hiding place he had some musicians write up a song titled “Sex in Heaven.” Father David claimed Heavenly City was in the moon and wrote another song about that. The lyrics went something like,

*The Heavenly City is in the moon,*

*In the moon, in the moon,*

*Heavenly city in the moon,*

*Hallelujah!*

Father David then had the posters professionally colored, duplicated and printed in mass quantities. The songs were recorded on tapes. We began passing out the posters and tapes in exchange for donations. It was crucial that we forewarn the entire world of the end that was fast approaching, plus we needed the money.

One night before bedtime Uncle Josh read stories from Heaven's Girl comic book (the pictures made it look like an apocalyptic comic sex book with pictures of Heaven's Girl parting the Red Sea like Moses and flirting with young soldiers like a prostitute). Beds crowded the room so Uncle Josh had to sit on one of the beds with no top bunk so he wouldn't bonk his head since he was tall. I sat on a top bunk with my back pressed against the wall. I was wearing my one-piece nightie with elastic red ruffles on the bottom hem, neck collar and short arm sleeves. I loved that nightie because it almost resembled a dress and it was the only almost dress I owned. It tickled my arms and legs where the ruffles were and it had pictures of dancing hearts and happy stick figures that kept me entertained during Word Time. Baby geckos scurried along the shiny white walls, stopping to zap out their tongues and gobble up whatever insects got in their way.

From the pictures I knew that Heaven's Girl wore a small white flimsy dress that clung tight to her teenage body. A braided belt held the costume together. Her nipples were always visible just like the girls in heaven. Her hair was tied back in a long tress that whipped across her bottom whenever she fought. She was a warrior. Her long legs were accentuated by sandals with straps that criss-cross up the legs, making them appear longer and sexier. I always fantasized about having a pair of those sandals for my own even if I had to become Heaven's Girl to get them.

Supposedly Heaven's Girl could perform miraculous feats and she had superpowers like Super Girl or Wonder Woman (even though Father David detested Wonder Woman because she wore red, white and blue and represented the United States of America or "the Whore").

Father David called his narratives “futuristic, prophetic fiction” and wrote up a whole storyline about how Heaven’s Girl survived the Tribulation as told in the Bible. She didn’t need armor or weapons. She had love, the Bible and young plump breasts. She never wore much and was responsible for leading all of God’s children into the Endtime. Heaven’s Girl was our role model along with Davidito and Tech. The stories didn’t calm me much especially since in one of them Heaven’s Girl gets cornered by an army of men and in order to escape she shares God’s Love with all of them, one-by-one while the other soldiers watch on. Father David said that we should all strive to be more like Heaven’s Girl and although I didn’t mind the idea of dressing like her and wearing the sexy sandals, the picture of her being playfully gang raped scared the bejesus out of me and has stuck in my mind forever like a tattoo. I spent hours praying that the rapture would come sooner than predicted so I wouldn’t ever have to make the decision to either die or get raped.

Uncle Josh sat reading stories to us about the Tribulation and the “seven signs of the times” that we should always be on the lookout for like *earthquakes, violence and pestilence in diverse places*.

He read an excerpt from Matthew 24 in a calm voice: “There shall be wars and rumors of war.” We had the whole chapter of Matthew 24 memorized.

As Uncle Josh read I felt a tug at my back. I looked down. Karen was on the bottom bunk and she thought it’d be fun to get my attention by pulling on my nightie. Word time was holy and we weren’t allowed to make so much as a peep or else we’d be spanked or worse so I tried to ignore her. She tugged again so I looked down. I brushed at

her hand to make her stop. I didn't to be punished for disturbing God's word time. No sooner had I looked up, I saw Uncle Josh coming my way. He was a big man with bulging arms and a muscular chest with short, stubby hair. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt and he towered over me. I didn't have time to think before he had me in the air. He held me by my arms and my shoulders froze. My legs dangled in the air. He slammed me down on the bed. I landed on my tailbone with such a force that I'll never forget.

Shock waves went shooting up my spine. My brain went numb and tingly. I felt my throat dry up. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. For a moment my whole world stopped with that slam to my tailbone.

I took a painful swallow to try and regain my composure and realize what had just happened. I looked around the room and saw bright shooting stars flying across the white walls where the geckos were. Then everything turned pallid. I blinked a few times and between the black, I saw Uncle Josh sitting on the bed. I heard him continue his reading of an excerpt from Matthew 24:

*And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.*

*And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.*

*But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.*

*And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.*

I prayed a quick prayer that he would keep on reading so the lights wouldn't go out and leave me alone in the darkness with my thoughts.

Mom's dad died that year. I was six years old. The sun came streaming through the kitchen windows well before breakfast, kicking up speckles of dust that illuminated through the skirting rays. The smell of steamed white rice and brown cane sugar coiled up the stairway while the gentle strum of a guitar penetrated my ears along with lyrics reminding me that the day belonged to God. I wondered if there would ever come a day that belonged to me.

I didn't know much about my Danish grandfather except that he was a drunk and he used to beat my Mom when she was little. I knew that Denmark was just a ferry ride away from the lowest tip of Sweden and whenever Mom wanted to get away she paid the ferry conductor a shiny coin. My grandfather, Hans Jensen, liked to sunbathe until his skin turned the color of copper. That morning he died of skin cancer.

We learned not to cry about things like death in The Family and it was easy since I didn't know my grandfather anyway. There was a part of me that wanted to grieve when I realized that my mom was also someone's daughter. In The Family blood relations were hardly acknowledged or honored. We were one big happy family. We were all Children of God.

After a hearty breakfast of rice cereal with powdered milk and cane sugar we marched in line to our designated groups. The adults were assigned to their duties while some children were hustled away for special disciplinary action. I always shivered

whenever I heard the sound of my peers being beaten. And I don't think it was always to punish the child as much as to scare the rest of us into submission and obedience.

During recess I paced along the balcony that overlooked the sprawling yard. To my right a white drained bathtub where a baby once played sat under the shade of a ripe mango tree. The sun beat down, ricocheting off the fat blades of grass that snaked through the lawn. We weren't allowed to leave the house during the day. Too dangerous! Someone might see us. Too hot! Someone might catch us. Someone might take us away.

Plump fluorescent green flies with purple iridescent wings buzzed outside the screen doors. Timmy was being beaten again and with each swash of the belt he let out a cry that sounded like a war whoop. I felt my insides tighten up. There was nothing I could do, but be as quiet and still as possible so I wouldn't have to endure the same punishment.

Beads of sweat formed on my forehead and pasted my bangs to the side of my head. My heart was racing. I peered off into the distance and saw the figure of my mother. From my vantage point I was God. I could see everything. No one could see me.

It only recently occurred to me how often I was forced to think about death as a child. When a child is forced to think about death they don't think about what will happen in the afterlife. No. When a child thinks about death they think about the exact moment of death what must happen in order for a person to die. Will it hurt? Will I be able to handle the pain? How will it happen? How will I die?

Mom was given the day off to grieve. She chose her spot outside on a lawn chair, alone. She rocked her body backwards and forwards stopping to wipe the tears from her

face as she cried. On a table next to her was some Family literature—Daily Might's, Daily Breads and MO Letters—transcribed by Father David. Those kinds of things comforted her in times of grief. She sat isolated, in quarantine, no one to talk to and no one to share her grief. I knew she wasn't going to make the trip back home for her dad's funeral. She had a new family now, this one with a capital F. She sat with her legs crossed. Her olive skin reflected the rays of the sun. As I watched her grieve I knew that she wasn't thinking about God or heaven or the words of Father David. She was crying for herself. She was grieving her own flesh and blood. She was crying because she was someone else's daughter besides God's.

A few days later during breakfast it was announced between bites of powdered egg purée and homemade bread that the Karat home would be closing down. It was time to move... again.