

Big Brother | By Nicole R. Zimmerman

A few days before my 16th birthday, I returned home to find my mother's note on the kitchen counter: "M has joined the Moonies. I've gone to save him." Images of shaved heads and saffron robes danced in my mind as I mistakenly pictured my older brother chanting Hare Krishna. By 1985, the devastating effects of cults, exposed by the news media, still lingered from prior decades, but I knew nothing of the Unification Church, founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon in South Korea.

My divorced parents and I soon learned how M had been recruited into the "movement" just six months after he dropped out of high school. A conversation about working for world peace led to an invitation to dinner at a communal house in Berkeley, followed by a weeklong seminar. With everyone so ecstatic, M later told me, he hadn't felt such a sense of belonging since the Shabbat celebrations at our Jewish summer camp, where he'd first felt the presence of God. By the time he was whisked away to a woodsy camp for the three-week series of workshops, M said he was crazy about Moon, a self-proclaimed Messiah he called True Father.

It was there, in the redwoods north of San Francisco, that we attempted—and failed—to bring my brother back. Even after we agreed to a lecture on original sin and the spiritual fall of mankind, as outlined in Moon's seminal text, the *Divine Principle*, M was denied permission to leave with us—the first obstacle in our well-rehearsed plan.

"Since when can't a dad take his son to lunch?" our father asked M's Central Figure, or team leader. His eyes bulged with outrage until the man relented. We'd been warned that, like many insular groups with a charismatic leader who commanded unquestioning devotion, the Unification Church discouraged contact with family and friends. As a new recruit, isolated from outside input and severed from former relational bonds, M was steeped in the indoctrination process. Getting him out, we'd been told, would be like coaxing a wounded animal from a cage.

At the restaurant, the waiter who brought us lunch delivered dinner, while every argument we presented fell on deaf ears. "You think I'm brainwashed?" my brother said when it was clear we'd exhausted all avenues. "Why can't you just believe that I can be happy?" At 18, he had a Robert Redford face, his eyes liquid amber instead of blue. He swept his fingers through natural blond highlights in his auburn hair, and I noticed his hands were chafed, weatherworn from time spent outside.

"M, I'm going to kill myself!" our mother cried. It was the first time I heard her threaten suicide, so I took it seriously. Years later I understood it as a desperate plea to hold onto the son she'd already kicked out of her life when she demanded he live with our father in the city. M's far-off stare sharpened into focus, but his face was pained.

"Mom and Dad are really overreacting. You've got to trust me. I know what I'm doing," he told me as I clung to him in the back seat of our car. "I'll see you in a few weeks. I promise." Then he said goodbye and walked back across the footbridge into the woods. A sense of foreboding spread from my belly into my limbs—a visceral knowledge that the brother I loved would never be restored.

M traveled across America with the Mobile Fundraising Team, a van-load of young church members from all over the world. They worked seven days a week, selling flowers on street corners. Sometimes months went by before a letter came from Minnesota or Tennessee. M said being on MFT was like a vision quest, his time with God.

"When I stand in the cold rain selling roses," he wrote, "I feel how God's heart weeps. I believe He is crying because He never intended to create such a world of suffering where He is completely disconnected to His children."

I spent many solitary evenings sitting on the metal slats of the fire escape at our father's apartment, my back pressed against the stucco wall. My brother's old comforter wrapped me in its warmth while the mist moved past in vertical sheets and the foghorns blew their long laments. Although he had all but vanished in his wanderings, I felt like the one in exile—uprooted and displaced. The weight of his absence waxed like the moon, illuminating my unspoken sorrow.

M wouldn't make it to my college graduation. He couldn't come to the hospital when I had surgery. He'd miss the first time I fell in love. Over the years, I slowly let go of any hope of his return. But I kept his letters, along with a newspaper clipping he sent from the *San Antonio Light*—a large, color photo of my brother seated on an upturned pail in his parka and jeans, a single red rose held in his gloveless hand on a quiet Christmas morning.