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THE CHILDREN OF THE COUNTER-CULTURE

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and
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sie could outdo him), in Carole and Ida and their complaining, in Jerome and his dependence on tour directors to get him through the day. Other commune people had aired their problems in the open, but here were secrets and whispers. Lee, for instance, was not supposed to know that his mother was coming to visit Lama; it was all part of a messy divorce between Peer and his wife that had not yet been resolved. Peer acted the part of the typically confused father who let his son get away with outrageous temper tantrums. Not a surprising situation for a man who is left with the children—but in other communes, other adults had helped the man work through the problem. I don't think anybody talked to Peer about it.

Nizami, the nominal head of Lama, confirmed what we had observed, at least on a religious level. He said the isolation of the children was deliberate, because children don't know how to pray. "We tried it in the beginning," he said, "but they can't sit still and they interrupt the vibrations and they make it impossible to get high." The complaint is the same one that is making adults move into adults-only condominiums all over the country.

Lama provided at least one hint of why we found very few children in our review of the newer religious sects in America. At the looser communes, children abounded, but at the places with the conscious higher purpose, children are the general nuisance and bother that they have become in many American homes.

There are a few religious movements that take their children more seriously, and one of them is the Hare Krishnas. They are the people you find in every major city in America, dressed in saffron pajamas and sporting shaved heads, dancing and chanting "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Hare Krishna." The Krishna movement started in America in 1968 as a Hindu offshoot but actually has no direct counterpart in India. This perpetual chanting has caught on in America, though, to an incredible extent, and the Krishnas made enough money selling books and incense to consider buying up West Virginia as a separate Krishna nation. The coal miners probably don't have to fear a takeover by the incense empire, but there are several huge

compounds of Krishna devotees in America in what turns out to be a well-financed and well-structured religious movement.

We first visited the Hare Krishnas in their Miami compound, where a few teenage men and women were wrapped up in their chants. They didn't stop chanting to question our presence, so Susan and Bernsie could walk right over to the swing where a little girl was sitting alone. She said her name was Laurie and put up four fingers to show her age, and gave a big smile that indicated her missing two front teeth.

The property covered an acre or so, filled with palm trees and an old stucco house with several wooden shacks around it. Laurie led us to one of the shacks, full of holes and termite dribble, which is where Laurie lived. There was a stove in the corner and no furniture except a large discolored foam mattress with two sleeping bags and two blankets on top. In a wistful way, Laurie said that she had no toys, not even a doll. She played with a stuffed monkey, but she said it wasn't really hers.

Bernsie has the instinctive ability to pick out and grab the flashiest object in any room, and the only thing that caught her attention in Laurie's house was a little altar with Indian cloth draped over it and some glass beads piled on top. Berns started to touch it, and Laurie said, "No. You can't do that. It's for Krishna. My mommy made it." Perhaps because she didn't want to seem ungenerous, Laurie offered to let Bernsie see her "deities." She took a little box from the back of the altar, brought it over to Bernsie, and opened it slowly and carefully, as if it might contain a live frog. But there was no frog inside, and not even a deity, just a package of Kleenex and a red pincushion. Laurie looked surprised and disappointed. "The deities must have sneaked away," she said.

Laurie's mother came rushing into the house as if she had gotten word that strangers were alone with her daughter. "Hare Krishna." It was funny to hear it said by somebody so out of breath. "Who are you?" Her name was Bhaktirisa—twenty-one years old, skinny and pale and still in the acne stage.

Susan mentioned Laurie's missing teeth, and how curious it was that they had come out so early. Bhaktirisa told us what

happened: "When Laurie was little, she didn't like milk. She cried about it a lot, and I decided to try some other things. So I put Kool-Aid in her bottle, and she would lay there all day with the nipple between her teeth. It made her happy, but after a while, I guess the Kool-Aid just rotted them out.

"But that was before Krishna consciousness," Bhaktirisa said, "and I was very young then. Eighteen. I still didn't know what I was up to." She said that she was three months pregnant now, and very excited about having a child that was "conceived in Krishna."

Susan looked over at the large mattress on the floor and asked Bhaktirisa if it was hard to make love in the bed when her daughter slept right next to her. "Oh, we don't believe in intercourse," she said. "Except to have children. It takes two pints of blood to make semen for one man's orgasm, and it affects him so he can't give all his energy to Krishna." She admitted to "lapses" with her husband, but said having her daughter right there helped remind her. "When I hug my husband, Laurie catches me and tells me, 'Stop. You know you aren't supposed to do that.'" She gave Laurie a pat on the head.

"Why not?" Bernsie asked.

"Because Krishna doesn't like it," Laurie said.

There were no visible children besides Laurie and a few infants, and we asked Bhaktirisa about it. She said that because of all the time spent in chanting and praying and preparing the food, there was hardly any time left for raising children. "Well then, where are they?" Susan asked. Bhaktirisa said all the children in the Krishna movement from the age of five are removed from their parents and sent to a school in Dallas, called Guracula, where they can have the full attention of twenty teachers. They stay in Dallas until they are twelve to fifteen years old, depending on how long it takes them to learn Sanskrit and become Brahmin priests. During those seven to ten years away from home, they will see their parents maybe two or three days out of the year.

It was surprising that those pajamaed chanters you see on the

streets had enough money and organization to establish a central school, but they did.

Bhaktirisa said she was happy to serve the movement, and that her daughter Laurie was going to Guracula later that year. "You mean that you would give up seeing your daughter for ten years?"

"It hurt me at first," she said, "to think of my daughter not being here with me. But it's not good to be possessive of our children. And we are not here for ourselves, we are here to serve Krishna. Our children are gifts to him."

Laurie told us she would be glad to go to Guracula because she missed her brother, who was already there. Bhaktirisa took Susan aside to tell her that actually the brother had been sent up for adoption during a period when Bhaktirisa and her husband weren't getting along. Apparently, Bhaktirisa wasn't ready to dash Laurie's hopes about meeting her brother at Guracula.

Guracula has taken over what used to be a Catholic school in the middle of Dallas, a big brick building with classrooms on one side and a church on the other. Some of the Krishna people must have gone to Sunday schools in churches like this, or at least they could identify the cross and the altar as religious objects. They had converted the church almost as abruptly and strangely as they had converted themselves, ripping out the cross and the pews and the songbooks and replacing them with sacred trees and bejeweled mannequins, incense burners and Sanskrit objects they had only recently come to recognize, much less glorify. What you expect to happen when invaders take over your culture.

The four of us took off our shoes, as demanded by the sign, put them in a pile by the door, and went inside. Down the hall were two chubby little boys with shaven heads and pink pajamas, adorable replicas of the people who chant on the streets. They looked Chauncey's age. We were about to walk over to them when a lady dressed in regular clothes intercepted us. "You'll have to see Mohananda," she said.

Mohananda, who occupies the old principal's office, is a red-

headed boy-man sitting cross-legged in front of the intercom system. There was a deity chain of pictures behind him, from Krishna on down—all imposing religious figures—but for some reason I wanted to ask him if he had gone to Florida State. He smiled a lot at Chauncey and Bernsie and said we could visit the school if we wanted, but warned us against talking to students. "We do not want them to be distracted by the outside world," he said. He also said there would be nothing for Chauncey and Bernsie to do at Guracula, except maybe catch the chicken pox that had already infected almost every child in the school. Susan didn't want Chauncey and Bernsie contaminated by the devotees, so she took them to museums in Dallas for a few days while I hung around Guracula as much as I could.

The Krishna children were all in classes with the doors closed for most of the morning. Mohananda said they were learning Sanskrit and math. It is not an accredited school, he said, because to be certified in Texas they would have to teach the Alamo along with the Sanskrit, which to him was an unpalatable combination. He was not interested in accreditation anyway, and spoke with open contempt for public schools, calling them "slaughterhouses for children." The twenty-five children now enrolled in Guracula, he said, were kept as isolated as possible from the streets, the parks, and any other places they might run into regular Texas children. There was a big sign on the bulletin board warning young devotees not to associate with other kids in the neighborhood.

At about noon, the doors opened and about twenty children, from the ages of five to ten, all wearing the chiffon costumes, left their various classrooms and headed for lunch. There was a little bit of giggling and jostling, and I approached a group of three boys to ask them if they liked the food around here, but they simply didn't answer. One of the Sanskrit teachers was bearing down on us from behind; he stopped to nudge a boy who was leaning against the wall, apparently trying to get some rest. "You must not tire in the devotion of Krishna," he said, and shoved the boy in the direction of the lunchroom.

The Krishna children eat their meals, which they call "taking

prasadam," while sitting cross-legged on a bare linoleum floor with a piece of wax paper for a plate and their fingers for a fork. The boys and girls are segregated into separate dining rooms, just as they sleep in separate dormitories, in accordance with the Hare Krishna belief that men are superior to women. I sat with the boys, who were carefully arranged in a row that followed the contour of the wall around the room. The teachers positioned themselves in the middle of the room and kept an eye on the boys. Something about the scene was reminiscent of a boarding school with all the chairs and tables taken away, but the rigid straight-back postures and the monitored military discipline were still there.

These children seemed so young for boarding schools; a few of them looked to be nine or ten but most of them were no older than Chauncey. One of the smallest boys, who was wearing a cardigan sweater over his Krishna outfit, kept coming over to the teacher and trying to sit on his lap. The teacher, with dispassionate authority, patted the boy on the head and sent him back to his place. Then the boy returned and said he wanted to go to the bathroom. "You know where the bathroom is," the teacher said, and he pointed to the door. Finally, with all his excuses taken away, the boy broke down and started to cry. He said he wanted his mommy, and with the mention of that word "mommy" he was immediately led out of the room by the teacher. Later, the teacher explained that it was only the boy's third day here and his mother was still in town, which aggravated his adjustment problem. "We'll pay a little extra attention to him until he gets over it."

The other boys didn't have much time to react to this scene, because another teacher jumped in front of them and began reciting the blessing. The boys were repeating after him. I only caught part of it, they were talking so fast: "The tongue is the most voracious of the senses, food is false matter." It was the reverse of thanking God for the bounty; the Krishna children were apologizing to God for having to eat the food. A little unsettling for someone who grew up believing that it is responsible, and somehow more reverent, to have that second helping.

The prayer was over, and two adult devotees passed through and put food on our napkins—chick-peas, for the first course; a peppery vegetarian enchilada for the second; a few orange sections for dessert. The drink, ladled into paper cups from a big metal pot, tasted like Kool-Aid cut with tabasco sauce.

After lunch, the room was emptied of children and a hulking character was sweeping the orange peels off the floor. He was Bhaktibob, nineteen years old and working his way into higher consciousness. I asked him about the prayer, and he said that in Krishna life you must deprive yourself of more and more "false sensual matter" until you can live without sex, sleeping, or eating. "Then you would be dead," I said. "No," he corrected me, "then you would be in a blissful state." He said he was down to five hours a night of sleep and one meal a day, which left him more time for chanting and devotion. "The children will go far beyond us," he said. "Already they get up at three-thirty, they spend the day in sweet nectar, chanting and learning the truth of Lord Krishna. They won't have twenty years of false life to get over like I do." Bhaktibob said his father had wanted him to be a football player, because of his size, but he had never liked hitting people. He floundered around in schools before he found Krishna. He asked if I would accept the absolute truth. "It's like an insurance policy," he said. "I never know the moment when I will die, and I want to live in the truth at all times."

The children were on their free period, mostly outside in the yard. But even during the free period there was a certain fear in the air, a lot of glances back over shoulders. The discipline was tight and there was always a teacher lurking around, no trees to climb and no hiding places, no chance to see the children alone. I finally approached a boy in glasses who looked to be the oldest; he was sweeping off a stoop. "Do you have any fun here?" I said.

"Fun," he answered in a slightly cynical tone, "oh yes. We jump around in *artique* [*arati,* the prayer meeting] every day."

"Anything else?"

"Well," he said, "this *is* a free period."

"Yeah," said another boy standing nearby, "free to clean up."

Both these boys knew, to the exact day, how many days they

had lived at the Guracula School. For one of them, it was 362, and for the other it was 243. Both of them had mothers living in the Los Angeles compound, and they both told me the date they had been "brought here." It reminded me of the scratch marks you see on the walls of prisons.

These two boys never said their names, and they were very careful not to come right out and say they didn't like Guracula. But something about the way they talked, a gesture or a movement, made it apparent that they weren't buying this place. We didn't have too long together, just a few phrases back and forth, and then a teacher came over and told me I wasn't allowed to talk to the students. "And if you can't talk about Krishna," he said to them, "then there is no point in talking."

There is a problem as to when you can accept the Krishna consciousness. The Guracula School was aware of it; they had experimented with a few of these eight- and nine-year-olds, kids who had already seen a lot of television and gotten allowances. These few older children were being phased out of the school; their resistance to "submission" was too strong, there was too much goofing off, too much talk about the old world. The older kids were more brazen about talking to me, and their classes, from what I could observe through the windows, were rowdier. I was told by a teacher that they repeatedly got into trouble for trading off their deities, which are kept by each person in a little box under the desk, as if they were baseball cards. They also competed for who had the nicest *dhoti* (the chiffon pants) and who had the best white mark on his forehead. Such games were disturbing to the leaders, and they had brought in an ex-Marine to teach the advanced Sanskrit class and restore the reverence.

The ideal age for a potential devotee, Mohananda told me, was five years old, and the school had cut off further admissions to any older children. About fifteen of their students were five-year-olds; these children were put in separate classes and slept in a separate dormitory so they wouldn't be contaminated by the eight-year-olds.

I could sense the difference between these two groups of children even in their response to me. The older ones were trying to

tell me something; the younger ones acted as if I were from another planet. Around the primary school, the younger children were learning the names of Hindu deities through the use of Montessori flash cards. One of the boys, Bhaktibret, had a habit of standing right in front of me and staring with a puzzled look on his face. After one of the classes, when we all walked to the showers, he finally got up the courage to ask me some questions. He wanted to know about Jack and the Beanstalk. "Is it true," he asked, "that a man can climb to the sky on a big plant, and meet giants there?" Rag-nav, the primary teacher, overheard our conversation and rushed over to explain that it was an earlier teacher who told the class about Jack; Rag-nav didn't want me to think he was responsible. "We don't teach them those fantasies anymore," he said. "They don't need fantasies, except for playing father and mother to prepare them for marriage." Rag-nav asked Bhaktibret to tell me a real story about Krishna. And he did. It was about a crow who bragged that he was faster than Krishna. And how Krishna turned himself into an arrow and followed the crow in the air until the crow was exhausted and fell to the ground, fully expecting to be pierced by the arrow. But the arrow landed right beside him instead. And the crow submitted to Krishna.

Bhaktibret, waddling along on chubby legs, kept trying to place me. "You are a devotee, aren't you?"

"No."

He looked disappointed, and asked what I ate. I told him meat and he looked more disappointed.

"Do you eat lollipops?" he asked.

"Sometimes. Do you?"

"No . . . Do you take prasadam?"

"Sometimes," I said, even though today was the first time.

He thought for a minute and then gave me a broad smile like he had solved the problem. "Then you are half *karmee* [heathen] and half devotee." He was delighted to find a way to include me in his Krishna world.

I asked about his mother, and he said, "My karmee mother, or my spiritual mother?" None of the older kids had made that

distinction. It turned out that the two mothers he was talking about were actually one and the same lady. Bhaktibret had learned to divide his mother into entirely different people, the one who existed before Krishna consciousness and the one who found Krishna.

He was fascinated by my tie-dyed shirt, and asked me to make one for him. "I didn't make it," I said, "I bought it." He looked confused. "Why didn't you make it?"

"Because I don't know how."

"Well, then why didn't you tell your wife to make it?"

Walking with these kids through the Hare Krishna corridors, it felt like a Charles Dickens fantasy. I couldn't get over the spareness and cruelty of the place, the straw mats on the floor where the children slept in the room together; the boy who still had chicken pox, lying with his head on the linoleum and orange peels scattered about him like the garbage around a zoo animal; the way the teacher made the sick boy get up and come to class because "his spirit will get sick from missing the lessons, and a spiritual sickness is greater than a physical one."

It was cruel and repressive, the way Rag-nav made them take cold showers and wouldn't let them horse around in the communal shower stall—they could see bodies but not touch them, they referred to their parts as "anus" and "genitals" and their shit as "stool"; no mirth in witnessing their body functions. They hardly laughed at all, which was unusual for a group of five-year-olds, and they looked constantly tired.

It is hard to take a religion seriously when the teachers and priests are all nineteen-year-olds who can't quite hide their own confusion about things. Rag-nav the teacher was somebody I got past the absolute truth with; he wanted to provide the little children with a progressive education and a lot of plastic learning toys that he called "attachments." But there weren't many attachments in the classroom, and he was forced by his superiors into a lot of spanking and knuckle-rapping that made him uncomfortable.

I asked where he came from to be teaching all these children, and he said a middle-class family.

"Well, did you get along with your parents?"

"No, I resented them, because they never stopped to wonder where my head was at."

"Do you wonder where these kids' heads are at? What if there is a child here who could make a good doctor or lawyer or has a curiosity about machines or butterflies. What chance does he have to find out for himself?"

"We don't want lawyers. We want philosophers. This school is to produce the priests of tomorrow."

"Can a philosopher be produced?"

"With love," Rag-nav said. "Love is the difference. I'm trying to teach these children something, something I care about."

"But do they have a choice? They are forced to chant Krishna."

"We have discipline, it is true. But it is discipline given with love."

Rag-nav directed the kids in the afternoon artique, which is where they learn to respect the deities and do the Krishna ceremonial dance. There are fifteen little kids in this line, facing an altar of little dolls they have made, and this grownup hovering behind them: "Shape up, this isn't Grand Central Station, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, give back that deity, Bhaktigeorge, it's not yours, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Bhaktibret, it's not blissful to kick Bhaktijean." It could have been the pledge of allegiance they were saying, for all the effect it had on them. Krishna consciousness was a pervasive daily occupation, but it sure didn't stop unruly behavior.

This children's artique was a warm-up for the regular worship, which takes place every day at 3 A.M. I got up from a motel and ate a candy bar and drove into town. A man dressed in white robes, who I hadn't seen before, opened the door and said how auspicious was my coming. He said the artique would begin in a few minutes and handed me the *Bhagavadgita* to read while I waited. I pretended to read, but my eye was out for the children. They started showing up about 2:45 A.M., some yawning, some with sleep still in their eyes. They had the droop of raw recruits on their first morning of boot camp. The boy with glasses had to

sweep all the floors, because, he said, he had laughed during the Sanskrit lesson.

All of them, children and grownups, congregated in the center of the church, a gigantic glistening hall made larger by the fact that the pews are gone. In front, where the cross used to be, is an icon of a black female saint, dressed in jewels and wreathed in incense. Everybody stands around in the drowsiness of 2 A.M. pinball players until Mohananda starts to play the harmonium set up on the floor. The people begin to sway and chant. Then they start throwing their hands into the air and chanting louder and walking around in an ever-widening circle. After fifteen minutes, the walk turns into a run, a stampede of circling worshipers, and I find myself right in the path of forty charging Hare Krishnas. There is nothing to do but hold up my hands and run as fast as everybody else out of self-defense. At 3 A.M. the adults are rushing around a cold floor with bare feet, repeating Hare Krishna an uncountable number of times. The children stumble along and try to keep up as best they can.

The Krishna children were certainly not ignored like the Lama children had been (although in fact their isolation in Dallas was part of a similar desire on the part of the parents—to put devotion ahead of kinship). I couldn't help feeling that the Lama children, being left alone, were better off. The Krishna children struck me as prisoners. It could have been the mere result of my rejection of their religion, for a child can always be called a prisoner of his parents' culture. If we had met these children, or children like them, in India following the same daily routine, perhaps we would not have been horrified. In Texas, we were profoundly horrified.

We had a similar reaction to the Jesus freaks. We visited several Jesus-freak communes across the country, places that had the look of the rural hangout communes except they were usually shabbier and less well kept up. Jesus-freak parents were about the same age as Hare Krishna parents, people in their early twenties with babies or very young children. In fact, while Jesus freaks and Hare Krishnas think of each other as archideological enemies, they seem alike in almost every respect—cer-

tainly in their treatment of children. Substitute the Bible for the *Bhagavadgita* and Jesus for the black icon, and the story of Guracula is the story of the Jesus communes—rigid discipline, prodigious use of the apple switch, long hours of praying and chanting, isolation from the rest of the world. And yet somehow, there is a noncompliance on the part of the children. That was part of the feeling of a prison in these places; you always got the idea that somehow the children weren't buying it. For all the beatings (and we stayed at one Jesus commune where children were routinely beaten several times a day), the children were not as well behaved as The Last Resort children had been.

None of these religious communities really captivated our attention. Something would ultimately happen to all these little Guracula children and Jesus children, but what was happening now did not interest us as much as life in the hangout communes. We saw nothing in the religious raising of children that could challenge our own notions. They were throwback cultures, really, throwbacks to a time of "spare the rod and spoil the child," and of living out words in the holy books. In contrast to the unorganized spirituality in the Taos valley, a spirituality of people working together, the spirituality here was formulistic and ultimately impersonal. It didn't matter who the children were, really, as long as they learned to follow the routine. In that sense, the Jesus freaks and Hare Krishnas failed to reach their own children.

79

Synanon

None of the preceding communes had tried to affect its children's behavior in a systematic way. The urban places were involved in psychology, but they were too close to conventional America to be very unique. The rural hangout places were creating something unique, but it was all done informally and chaotically. The religious communes had the organization that the rural communes lacked; but they either ignored the children or else they tried to fit the children into a formulistic mold. There were only two places that combined the rigorous structure of the religious communes with a programmed attempt to uplevel the children's behavior. Two places that, on the surface, seemed diametrically opposed to one another. One was Synanon, the modernistic drug-rehabilitation community with overtones of 1984; and the other was the Farm, the biggest and most influential of the hippie communes.

After months of traveling through rural communities where people were trying to recapture the simplicity of America's past, it was a science-fiction-like jolt to arrive at Synanon, a well-run chain of communities along the coast of California. Synanon is