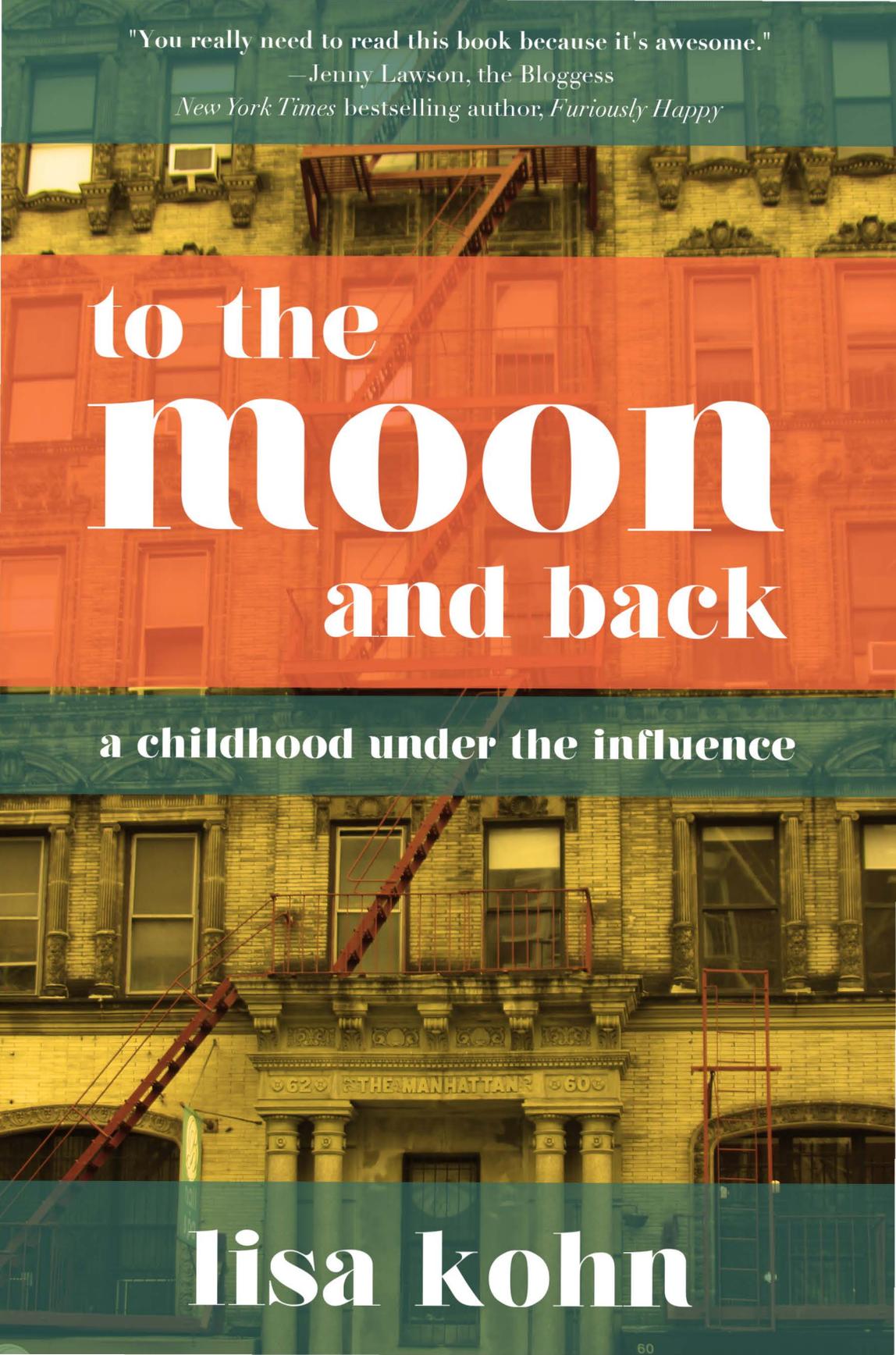


"You really need to read this book because it's awesome."

—Jenny Lawson, the Bloggess

*New York Times* bestselling author, *Furiously Happy*



to the  
**moon**  
and back

a childhood under the influence

**lisa kohn**

## Advance Praise for *to the moon and back*

“*to the moon and back* is a wild and honest ride that makes sense of complex and sometimes painful experiences with heart, grit, and courage. Lisa’s energy, infectious positivity, and transparency about her own life journey and all its twists and turns will inspire any woman who’s looking for the light at the end of the tunnel.”

—Kelly McNelis, founder of Women For One,  
author of *Your Messy Brilliance*

“Lisa Kohn writes with an honesty that will grip you immediately and take you on her harrowing, expansive journey. You won’t be able to help yourself. You’ll be compelled to read her fascinating story—which will entertain, discomfort, and broaden you—and you’ll be better for it. She is a fierce, true spirit, who finds her way past anything childhood threw at her—including fanatical cults, confusing love, and life in the dangerous East Village—and makes us see that healing and finding your own ground is always possible.”

—Tama Kieves, *USA Today* featured visionary career catalyst  
and best-selling author of *Thriving through Uncertainty*

“Lisa Kohn shows us in her powerful memoir that it is possible to find peace and contentment despite having a rocky, unstable, and often confusing childhood.”

—Madeleine Black, author of *Unbroken*

“One person’s crazy cult is another one’s sanctuary. When you are a child from a broken home and that person is your mother (and you’re so deep into being a Moonie that you are best friends with the leader’s kids), and your father is a party-hearty hippie bartender, a lifetime of confusion, and more, is sure to follow. Kohn’s long and twisted journey to make sense of it all will have you quickly thinking, ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ and marveling at the resilience of the human spirit.”

—Jo Maeder, author of the bestselling memoir  
*When I Married My Mother*

“Moving and inspiring! Lisa courageously details how she collected mere threads of childhood normalcy to weave a life strengthened by resiliency and love.”

—Cara Bradley, author of *On The Verge*

“A teacher and leadership consultant takes readers into the crevices of a cult...The austere tone of the introductory passage doesn’t quite represent the vivacity with which Kohn writes about her struggle breaking out of the mold in which her parents trapped her...But this is not just an inside-the-cult book; this is the story of a woman who attempted everything in her power to get out of it...If writing is an evacuation tool to process and understand abuse, Kohn has done an excellent job of producing a text that oozes with honesty and truth.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Lisa Kohn offers a personal perspective about life and love within the Unification Church. It’s a heartfelt examination of what it’s like to be kid growing up in a ‘cult.’ And about difficulties with family, friends, and adolescence that are often complicated and exacerbated by groups called cults due to their dramas and dynamics. Often when former members from such groups write about their personal journey and recovery it can potentially enlighten everyone who reads it. Accounts like Lisa Kohn’s are a necessary ingredient for our collective education because they give us an inside view that only an ex-member can provide.”

—**Rick Ross**, Executive Director  
Cult Education Institute

**to the moon and back**



# **to the moon and back**

a childhood under  
the influence

**lisa kohn**



Heliotrope Books  
New York

Copyright © 2018 Lisa Kohn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by an information storage or retrieval system now known or heretofore invented — except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine or newspaper — without permission in writing from the publisher: [heliotropebooks@gmail.com](mailto:heliotropebooks@gmail.com)

ISBN: 978-1-942762-44-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018932967

Cover Design by Jayme Johnson/Worthy Marketing Group

Cover Photographs by Lisa Kohn

Designed and typeset by Naomi Rosenblatt with AJ&J Design

For those who have been in, are in, and are out.  
For those whose suffering has felt un-survivable.

And for my kids—being your mom healed my soul  
and heals me every day.

I love you most.

## **a note from the author**

Memory is a weird thing. My brother—and only constant in my childhood—often jokingly says I got this completely wrong. (He also says I was too easy on everyone.) That being said, this is a work of nonfiction, and all of the events and experiences described in this book are true and faithfully rendered to the best of my ability. I have recreated all dialogue from memory, and many names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of others.

## foreword

When I was a kid in the 1970s, Moonies were the scariest thing I knew. Sure, earthquakes were scary, and tidal waves, and nuclear war. But we lived in Connecticut, so earthquakes and tidal waves felt pretty intangible, and nuclear war was abstract too—the bombs and politicians so far away, and unaware of my existence.

Moonies, though...Moonies were real. They were human beings not much older than I, humans who dressed in regular clothes (unlike those baldies in saffron), and who acted nice enough, but were tasked to brainwash young people. They'd approach someone and begin chatting, and next thing you knew that kid had abandoned all family and friends, and was completely resistant to reason. Parents had to hire kidnappers—*kidnappers*, and deprogrammers!—to rescue their children who, even after deprogramming, were never the same again.

Describing Moonies, people used words like *terrifying* and *cult*. “Watch out for Moonies,” parents warned. Don’t talk to strangers, especially friendly strangers. Be careful in crowds, and cities...We walked through New York (home of the Moonies) like Roman legions crossing Gaul. I need to spell this out, loudly, because many people reading *to the moon and back* might not remember how insidious—how vicious—the Moonies were. Everyone was scared. Not just me.

And so when Lisa Kohn told me eight years ago, at a cocktail party, that she'd been raised as a Moonie, it was all I could do not to shriek. *What about the brainwashing?* I wanted to ask, and *Was the deprogramming as painful as they say?* I longed to poke her so I could see what a Moonie felt like. Because she looked so...normal. Which in Wayne, Pennsylvania, is normal squared.

Then I got to read her book. I read of her parents and their

repeated, exceptional failures at parenting. I read of her life in the East Village, in rotting neighborhoods that stank of chickens and urine. I read of her efforts to find, or build, or join a family. Any family, because family she definitely lacked. And you know what? It turns out that much of what I knew about the Moonies was wrong. They weren't that bad—at least when compared to Lisa's alternatives.

I love *to the moon and back*, and I stand in awe at Lisa's strength and courage. She made it back. She survived—not only survived, but built a pretty damn great life. We should all be blessed with such resilience. Read this book. Enjoy it. Learn something.

—Catherine Murdock, 2018

Author of *Dairy Queen* and *The Book of Boy*

## prologue

My brother says that we were raised by wolves. I don't always agree with him, but I don't have a more accurate description of our upbringing. A friend of my dad's pointed out that wolves raise their young with more structure than our parents gave us.

At first I had no idea that anything was wrong with my childhood. Yeah, my dad was a hippie bartender who convinced my brother to smoke pot at the age of ten and who offered to sell me to his friends for drugs. (He was kidding.) Yeah, I was running the household when I was eleven—shopping, cooking, cleaning—because at that point both my parents were gone. Yeah, my brother and I were left to fend for ourselves way more than you might say is optimal. And yeah, I grew up in a cult. My mom was a Moonie and therefore so were my brother and I. For those who don't know what that means, the Moonies were members of the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity—simply known as the Unification Church—the cult of all cults in the American age of cults. Church members gave their faith, lives, and worldly possessions to a self-proclaimed messiah from South Korea. Some call it brainwashing. It was my life.

I knew it was weird, but I didn't know it was bad. When it's all you know, it's all you know. You have no grasp that it could, or should, be different. I knew I could tell stories about my parents and people would laugh in disbelief, but I was oblivious to the fact that my stories covered up pain and emotional scars, and that much of what happened to me shouldn't have happened at all.

I didn't realize I was harmed or that I was on a path of harming myself as I got older. I ended up in abusive relationships, anorexia, and “mild” drug addiction (to name a few things), but it didn't

register that these were because I ached so much inside. I didn't know that my psyche was bruised. Or that I despised myself.

As a kid you misinterpret the nasty things that happen to and around you, and you somehow believe you're to blame. As a young adult I internalized this more and more. As an older adult, I still can. I can get lost in darkness and desperation. I can feel unworthy or damaged or hopeless. I have my scars and insecurities, my fears that feel like they'll engulf me. I can be washed over with shame.

But they're moments. As I said to my older child once when they struggled against their own demons, the waves of despair become less powerful and hit you less often.

I've learned to face my terrors and to allow myself joy. It wasn't always an easy thing to do. I've learned that it's up to each of us to create the life we desire. We have the ability to lessen the influences around us that we don't want or don't agree with. When we can't lessen them, we have the ability to keep going despite them. Even when we think we don't.

# **the past**

“Someday we’ll look back on this  
and it will all seem funny.”  
—Bruce Springsteen



## 1 • the vigil begins

Mimi, Robbie, and I were curled up in the big flowered wing chair in my grandparents' living room. We were so tiny—Mimi being four feet ten inches at the most, and Robbie and I being eleven and ten and small for our ages—that we easily fit.

“He was phenomenal,” Mimi said. She had a smile on her face and a faraway look in her bright blue eyes. “Just amazing.”

“Why?” Robbie asked. I'm guessing he was as curious as I was about this wild change in our mother.

“Well, it just makes so much sense. It's like I finally figured out the answers. I never could understand why Jesus had to die. I never could. And Reverend Moon explained that he wasn't supposed to. It just makes so much sense.”

“Wow,” I said. I didn't understand but longed to agree with her. I wanted to always agree with her. And besides, she vibrated with warmth and elation, and I wanted to keep that Mimi around.

Before that morning in January 1974, Mimi had tried on religions and movements like some women try on clothes. At one time or another she'd embraced Buddhism, Hinduism, born-again Christianity, sensitivity group training, commune living, primal screaming, meditating, chanting “om,” and a vow of silence. The night before, Mimi had gone to hear Reverend Sun Myung Moon—the founder of the Unification Church—speak. If she had found her something in the Unification Church, I was determined to be on board.

“It's like I've been trying to fit a square peg in a round hole for so long, trying to understand this...and now someone finally explained it to me,” she continued breathlessly, a smile stretched across her face. “I sat there and listened and kept thinking, *I knew it. I knew*

*it. I knew it.*”

I looked at my mother. I hardly recognized her. She was a new woman, or at least a woman with a vision of becoming a new woman, her heart and mind captured by the Church’s teachings—a mixture of Judeo-Christian and Eastern philosophies that proclaimed it time to unite all world religions and bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth. She bounced with excitement in a way I’d never seen before.

“I’m going back,” she said. “And maybe soon we can all see Father.”

Father, of course, was Reverend Moon, not Danny.

My parents had split seven years earlier. Danny had moved to New York City, while Mimi, Robbie, and I had settled into an apartment in a run-down section of East Orange, New Jersey.

Mimi and Danny got married the summer they were out of high school because they “had to.” My mom was pregnant. She was the straight-A-student daughter of the Millburn, New Jersey town judge and editor of the yearbook. Danny was the beatnik son of socialist intellectuals in the next town over. The type of kid who, in eighth grade when his class studied democracy, brought toy machine guns to school and staged a coup d’état, establishing himself as dictator. My parents had been introduced by a mutual friend and, like positive and negative charges, were immediately attached to each other. Barely eighteen, with a baby on the way and not many options they were willing or able to consider, they ran off to South Carolina to marry without parental permission.

Robbie was their first “mistake.” Their second one—me—arrived about a year and a half later, on September 16, 1963. At the time, my parents lived in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where Danny was studying English at Rutgers University. Mimi had withdrawn from Clark University to raise our family. They were supported by all four of my grandparents and had not intended to have another child. I’ve been told that one night of forgotten intentions (and birth control) was my beginning.

My parents were free spirits. Even in the culture of the early ’60s, even among their friends, they stuck out. We lived in the married-

student housing on the edge of Rutgers's campus, a large circle of small houses with a communal backyard in the middle. Robbie remembers this backyard vividly, especially the time he and I wanted to play outside but Danny said no because it was raining—only it wasn't. Danny was tripping on LSD.

Danny was fervently antiestablishment and wore the uniform of the times: long, shaggy brown hair; a bushy mustache or beard or both; ragged bell-bottom jeans with a brown leather belt and a huge brass buckle; and a psychedelic shirt. With his stocky, muscular build—he was five feet four inches tall—and dark hair, eyes, and complexion, I've been told he was quite handsome.

We never called them Mommy and Daddy. "I'm not a label," Danny would say when I was old enough to question. "If you call me Father, I'll call you Daughter. If you call me Daddy, I'll call you Daudy. I am a person. Call me by my name." I would talk about my parents, Mimi and Danny, and people would pause. "You said Mommy and Daddy, right?" they'd ask. "No," I'd reply, avoiding their eyes. "Mimi and Danny."

My parents may have been hippies, but I was straightlaced. I didn't curse, even though cursing was all around me. I dressed as primly as I could in pleated skirts, knee-highs, and buckled shoes instead of flowing dresses, bandanas, and beads. I refused to cross the street if the light was red. Following rules gave me a sense of control.

"Shit," Mimi said early one morning as she stumbled over me. "Lisa, what are you doing?" She had been in the bathroom with the door shut, putting on makeup. I had been sitting, as always, right outside, cross-legged on the cold, hard linoleum floor, leaning against the bathroom door, waiting. Not playing or coloring or looking through my picture books. Just waiting.

I wanted the door open, full access, Mimi within view. I wanted her, and if I couldn't have that, I would make sure I knew where she was at all times. When she went down the hall to the laundry room, I stood in our doorway sobbing. Down the hall was too far away.

When Danny moved out, it carved an aching hole in my world.

My four-year-old self was terrified of losing Mimi as well. Our modest basement apartment had two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a windowless bathroom, all off one main hallway. The windows we did have were up high, level with the ground outside. In this setup, it was hard to lose anything. Nevertheless, I refused to let my mother out of my sight.

Many times she'd go out and come back late to take the babysitter home, leaving us alone for half an hour or so. I'd jump up in the middle of the night, unconsciously aware she wasn't there and, no matter how late it was, drag myself to the phone hanging on the wall in the kitchen and dial the babysitter's house, often waking her parents.

"Is Mimi there?" I'd ask, my voice quivering. "Is she on her way home yet? Do you know where she is? Do you know when she'll be here?"

Robbie used to tease me: "Mimi is going to go away too. Just like Danny, she's going to leave."

My life was a continuous vigil—I was always attuned to her whereabouts and worked hard to keep her nearby and happy. Like many children whose parents split up, I was convinced that Danny no longer lived with us because of something I had done. I didn't know what or how, but I knew this was my fault. I had to make sure I didn't give Mimi a reason to leave too. When she wasn't home I wandered through our small apartment, waiting for her to come back, repeating the singsong mantra I'd made up to calm myself when I was afraid. "Everything's all right tonight," I sang over and over. "Everything's okay today."

The bedroom I shared with Robbie reflected our different ways of dealing with our fractured family. While I was frightened and clung to Mimi, he was filled with anger and fury and took it out on everything we owned. He got a new Matchbox car-racing set and would break it. I got a new doll or game, and he would bash it against the wall. He smashed every toy into little pieces, which he then scattered around our room. He tore every scrap of paper to shreds just to add to the mess. There was not a bare spot on the floor

between our two beds and dressers.

“Mimi, would you put us to bed?” was our nightly request, when she was around.

The answer depended on her frustration level. Sometimes she’d say, “Clear a way for me, and I’ll come in and give you a kiss.” But other nights, the path through the debris was too disturbing, and all we’d hear was “No, I’m not going in your room. Come out here and say good night.”

It was Robbie’s mess, but the two of us had to clean it three times a year—for our birthdays and before Christmas. Mom and Pop, our maternal grandparents, would bring us stacks of presents, but we weren’t allowed to open them if our room wasn’t neat. “Please, will you help us?” we’d ask Mimi, and at first, she would. She’d put *Hair* on the record player in the living room, blasting the music so we could hear it while we cleaned the bedroom. I didn’t understand all the words—especially to “Sodomy”—but I sang along. The three of us would start in the middle of the floor and work outward, throwing most of the junk away. Eventually Mimi would get sick of our chaos and practically run from the room, leaving us to finish the endless task. Robbie and I would sit and sing and sort through the garbage until very late, but we would get tucked in and kissed good night.

Despite his anger and teasing, Robbie and I gave each other a sense of constancy and permanence. He was my big brother—although only by one year, five months, and fourteen days. Even now I say that he figured that out, and he says that I did. He had thick brown hair that he wore below his ears, hazel-green eyes, and a slight build. Being close in age and a buffer for each other against the craziness, we were inseparable.

Mimi was the poster girl for the alternative lifestyle that I abhorred. Her hair was cropped so short that it looked shaved, and she made many of her own clothes—out of bandanas, tablecloths, and curtains, using leather cords as shoulder straps and embroidering little flowers along the edges. She had three earring holes: two on one side and one on the other. Back then it wasn’t popular; it was weird. She threatened to pierce her nose as well.

Such fashion statements didn’t work for me. “Lisa, hurry up,”

Mimi urged one evening as we were on our way to a party. I stood in front of the full-length mirror on the closet door in her bedroom, staring at myself. “Bungalow Bill” played in the background. “Getting ready music,” Mimi called it. I wanted to sing along with The Beatles but couldn’t focus.

“I can’t go,” I whined. “I can’t wear this!” I had put on the best dress clothes I had: a fancy white lace nightgown and a shiny, light green silk bathrobe. *How can I wear these in public?*

“But honey, you look pretty.”

I gazed at myself in the mirror. My wavy brown hair fell just below my shoulders. It matched my dark brown eyes. I was eight and, as always, small for my age, my parents being who they were. I looked even younger than I was. *I suppose I look okay—but these are pajamas!*

In the end, Mimi forced me to go. I felt weird and naked.

Naked didn’t bother Mimi. As a single mom, she was just able to support us with food stamps and waitressing money. To supplement her income, she modeled in the nude for art classes. (She won the prize for “most unusual profession” for her ten-year high school reunion.)

“Your mother does what?” my friends would ask. I never wanted to answer. Once she took us with her when she went to model, and Robbie stripped down and posed with her. No clothes on, in front of twenty-plus strangers, sitting there as if everything was okay. They asked me to join them, but I hid in the back of the room, not wanting to look at Mimi and Robbie, much less be related to them. For years I kept a portrait of Mimi from one of these sessions in my closet. Why I never got rid of it, I don’t know. I was mortified when my friend found it one day.

When I was six, Mimi decided we should follow a macrobiotic diet, which she considered a cleansing and healing way to eat. Part of that healing was a drink made from the kuzu root. Kuzu has no flavor, a musty smell, and a repulsive consistency, like mucous—thick, globby mucous. Kuzu was Mimi’s cure for our colds.

“It’s gross,” Robbie and I would say when one of us had to drink

it. “It’s disgusting!” When it was forced on both of us, we came up with a plan.

“I won’t tell if you won’t tell,” Robbie whispered as we huddled at the kitchen sink, trying not to breathe in the kuzu odor rising from the rough pottery mugs cupped in our hands. I nodded in agreement, and we dumped the kuzu and watched it ooze down the drain.

For over two years we rarely ate meat and had little if any processed food. Instead our breakfasts, lunches, and dinners consisted of brown rice, beans, and seaweed. By the age of seven I was well versed in the many types of edible seaweed. There was hijiki, which looks like little black worms, as Robbie pointed out. Wakame that typically floats in miso soup, which Mimi made badly. (She later admitted she cooked everything macrobiotic badly.) Nori that comes in thin, dry sheets like green paper. Arame and ogonori, which are served cold, like a salad.

We ate sitting cross-legged on the brown vinyl tablecloth laid out on the tan living room rug. Our apartment had an eat-in kitchen *and* an eat-in living room, decorated with empty Coke cans on every shelf and windowsill and an American flag draped over the couch along the wall—an American flag that we put away when my conservative grandfather came to visit.

“Remember to chew,” Mimi would say to us, as we aimed for chewing each mouthful one hundred times. One hundred was the magic number that resulted in the best digestion and also the highest level of spirituality.

At school we suffered through bag lunches. No one would trade their PB&J for my macrobiotic treats. I cringe when I flash back to second grade. Hiding in the corner of the lunchroom at one of the long, sticky, metal tables, the smell of institutional food—food I longed to eat instead of what I had—around me, the sounds of too many kids with too much energy in one small room, doing my best to avoid the stares I got when I pulled out whatever Mimi had packed. Saddled with sprouted grain bread, seaweed, brown rice, and more and different kinds of beans than anyone could imagine, I longed for white bread and baloney. On nights with Lucy, our babysitter, we could escape our dietary hell and enter refined-sugar heaven. She

would smuggle in bags of Tootsie Rolls and Hershey's Kisses. We played hide-and-seek, with candy as our prize.

Robbie built up his store of sweets and processed food whenever we spent the weekend with Danny. Danny would buy Robbie two bags of Chips Ahoy chocolate chip cookies and a bottle of root beer for breakfast and hide in his bed until Robbie's food orgy was over. I, on the other hand, wrote so many stories about food that the school guidance counselor called to speak to Mimi. She was worried I was malnourished.

One year Mimi made brownies for my birthday celebration at school. I relished her brownies—a family recipe and much-anticipated treat for every special occasion. I loved to lick the bowl and spoon as the goodies baked in the oven. I delighted in the dense smell of chocolate working its way throughout the apartment. Whenever Mimi made brownies, I knew I was cared for and adored.

This time, Mimi baked while I was asleep. I took my birthday treats with me in the morning and passed them out to my class, skipping from desk to desk, promising everyone—as I always did—that these were the best brownies ever. Like nothing they had tried before.

I sat at my seat, impatient to dive into my own sugary delight, when I looked up and noticed that no one was eating. In fact, some kids crumpled the brownies up in the paper napkins I had given them. A few walked over to the trash and dumped theirs. “Ew,” I heard one girl say.

I took a tiny bite of my brownie. It was disgusting. Mimi had decided to make them healthier this year, using carob powder instead of chocolate, whole-wheat flour instead of white, and date sugar instead of refined sugar.

Our apartment was not only sweets-free, it was TV-less. After someone broke in and stole our little set, Mimi cursed. “I hope they drop it and it smashes their toes,” she said. Then she refused to replace it. Mom and Pop offered to buy us a new one, but Mimi decided we were better off without it. Like my bizarre lunches, not having a television affected my popularity at school. I had no idea

what kids were talking about when they discussed the previous night's shows. Even in high school I would have moments of "Huh?" when my friends mentioned their favorite cartoons and sitcoms from when we were young.

I remember one year when Robbie and I longed to see *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. We begged Mimi to take us to Mom and Pop's to watch, but she said no. We pleaded and cajoled until she suggested we go down to the corner store, to see if we could watch there.

Near the end of our block was a little luncheonette that sold basic necessities—such as Mimi's cigarettes—and served simple meals at the counter. The owners had a TV near the cash register, where they watched soap operas during the afternoon. Robbie and I set off down the street, bundled up against the winter winds, hoping the owners were in a holiday spirit. I crossed my fingers and promised I'd be good if I could see *Rudolph*.

Luckily they said yes. Robbie and I climbed up on the high red stools at the counter, sipped the Cokes placed in front of us, and watched Rudolph save the day.

The stolen TV was not the only time someone tried to take our stuff. Once, when I was about five, I needed to get something from my dresser. I opened the door to my room, tiptoed through the mess, and saw a string hanging from the window. String with a hook on the end!

I looked up and froze. Two faces peered back at me. "Mimi!" I yelled. "There are kids fishing into our room."

She came running to see a couple of boys a few years older than me sitting outside our bedroom windows with poles and hooks, trying to get whatever they could from the trash on the floor. Because we were in a basement apartment, the windows were high up on the wall, yielding a pool of opportunity stocked with the toys Robbie had smashed in his fits of rage.

"What are you doing?" Mimi shouted at them. They glanced at her and went back to their task.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she shouted again. She turned and ran from the room. I rushed after her through the

apartment, out our front door, down the hall, out the door of the building, up the steps, and around the corner to the windows. When we got to where the boys were, they laughed, picked up their poles, and left.

We also needed to be saved from some of the men Mimi was involved with. Larry, who lived with us on and off, was the worst.

“Get the kids out of here or I’ll kill her!” Larry shouted from somewhere in the small house. Mimi, Larry, Robbie, and I had gone to visit my mother’s friend Tess at her home in rural Connecticut. Robbie was eight years old, and I was seven. We huddled together on the brown pullout couch in the middle of the living room, listening to Larry’s angry demands. We were terrified for Mimi—not knowing where she was or what was happening.

“Get them out of here!” Larry yelled again. We turned to each other for guidance, our eyes wide with a mix of fear and confusion.

“Larry, no!” Mimi cried.

At that, Robbie and I jumped up and followed the sounds to the spare bedroom. Larry was sitting on top of Mimi on the bed, with a knife to her throat.

“What did we do?” I whispered. Robbie shot me a look, shaking his head fiercely, urging me to be silent. I ignored him, wiping my face, willing the tears not to make it past the corners of my eyes. I somehow knew that to keep Mimi safe I had to not be scared or at the minimum not seem scared. “I don’t want to go! What if something happens?”

“Lisa, shut up!” Robbie hissed through clenched teeth. His body was clenched as well, his face white, his muscles tensed with determination to handle the situation.

I didn’t know why Larry had erupted. I only knew I felt a rush of relief when Tess ran into the room, grabbed us, and dragged us away. “Just go,” she urged. “Go for a while, and let him settle. I’m sure he’ll calm down, and it will be fine.”

With that she opened the front door, pushed us outside, and pulled the door closed. Robbie and I crept away in the dark, looking for a place to sit. I reached for his hand, and to my surprise he didn’t pull away but held mine tightly.

Larry was in our lives for about four years, starting when I was five. He and Mimi were such a contrast walking down the street together. He was broad and tall, well over six feet, and strutted down the road as if he owned the world. She carried an air of defiance mixed with submission in her short frame. He had dark eyes and longish black hair, graying at the temples. She had bright blue eyes and cropped brown hair.

I don't remember what led up to the fight that night. I didn't know then that Larry was violent. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned that he hit Mimi regularly. One time he beat her so badly she had to have a friend take her to the emergency room. After that she asked him to move out but continued to see him. She couldn't get away from him, so neither could we.

She hid his aggression from us—perhaps from everybody. I did know that Larry petrified me, even before he threatened to kill my mother. We'd be playing cards, and his comments and leers made me want to crawl back inside myself to escape. I hated to be near him and dreaded being alone with him. I was on guard, incessantly vigilant.

That night in Connecticut when Robbie and I snuck back into the house, we found Mimi alone in the bedroom, sitting on the bed. Larry was gone. We knew better than to ask what had happened, and we sat with her in silence until Tess came back. Tess had somehow convinced Larry to leave and had dropped him at the train. Later we realized he had taken our car keys with him and left us stranded.

one woman's  
story of growing  
up in a cult.

order now

