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# Seductive Poison

A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life  
and Death in the Peoples Temple

Deborah Layton



DEBORAH LAYTON

***Seductive Poison***

Deborah Layton was born in Tooele, Utah, in 1953. She grew up in Berkeley, California, and attended high school in Yorkshire, England. After her escape from Jonestown, Guyana, in May 1978, she worked as an assistant on the trading floor for an investment banking firm in San Francisco until she resigned in 1996 to begin writing *Seductive Poison*. Layton lives in Piedmont, California, where she is raising her daughter.



DEBORAH LAYTON



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# SEDUCTIVE POISON

A JONESTOWN SURVIVOR'S STORY  
OF LIFE AND DEATH  
IN THE PEOPLES TEMPLE

**For**

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**Lauren Elizabeth,**

*my daughter,*

*who asked tough questions and gave me the strength to go  
back and face the darkness*

In memory of my mother, Lisa Philip Layton,

her mother before her, Anita Philip,

and

the nine hundred thirteen innocent children, teenagers, and families

who perished,

wholly deceived, in Jonestown

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# Foreword

CHARLES KRAUSE

In April 1978, Debbie Layton Blakey was still in Jonestown as I was taking up my new assignment for the *Washington Post* in Buenos Aires. We didn't know each other then, nor would we meet for many years to come. Yet our lives would soon be intertwined.

That spring twenty years ago, Debbie, increasingly worried about conditions in Jonestown, was about to make a decision that would reverberate around the world; I was a young reporter intrigued by the prospect of covering wars and revolution in Latin America. Buenos Aires was my first foreign assignment after having spent five years covering local politics in the Washington suburbs.

I knew that reporting, especially from countries where leftist guerrillas were battling right-wing military governments, and where the press was often suspect, could be dangerous. But no one had ever mentioned cults—or being shot at by Americans. In fact, I think it would be safe to say that in April 1978 no one at the *Washington Post*—or probably in Washington—had ever heard of the Peoples Temple or Jonestown.

As I was en route to Buenos Aires from the United States, it is entirely possible that my Pan Am flight overflew Guyana, the former British colony turned socialist Co-operative Republic of Guyana, located—“lost” might be a better word—on the northeast bulge of South America.

I had no way of knowing that down below, Debbie Layton, her mother, and some nine hundred other Americans were living as virtual prisoners in the Guyanese rain forest; Jonestown, the Utopia they had been promised before they left San Francisco, was essentially a Potemkin village. Nor was there any way I could possibly have known that seven months after arriving in Buenos Aires, I would be shot and nearly killed because of the fateful decision Debbie would make in May 1978 to escape from Jonestown—to seek help for her mother and for the hundreds of other members of the Peoples Temple she believed were being held in the jungle camp against their will.

There were probably many things that could have triggered Jonestown's fiery end. But, sadly, it was Debbie's decision to escape and seek help that became the catalyst for what is still perhaps the most bizarre and tragic episode in the history of American religious movements and messianic cults—the mass suicide-murder of more than nine hundred of Jim Jones's followers on November 18, 1978.

For weeks, Jonestown would remain front-page news, not only in the United States but around the world. Even today, I suspect there are few Americans over the age of thirty who don't remember where they were when they first heard that more than nine hundred of their countrymen had killed themselves, having drunk Flavour-aide laced with cyanide, in a place called Jonestown.

At the time, as horrified and as fascinated as they were, it was easy for most Americans to dismiss the Peoples Temple as a bunch of “crazies”—people not like us—and to dismiss what happened in Jonestown as solely the result of religious fanaticism, or the craziness of the times, or the bizarre hold of charismatic leaders like Jim Jones and, more recently, David Koresh and Marshall Applewhite, on a particular group of ignorant, emotionally needy, confused, or simply naïve followers.

Yet Jonestown did not happen in a vacuum.

Cults and cult-like groups had begun to proliferate during the 1960s in the United States, in reaction to the profound political, social, and sexual revolutions then under way. For many Americans, especially many young Americans, the civil rights and antiwar movements provided a very real sense of liberation. Yet others could not



cope with the new freedom and the consequent disintegration of family structures, institutions, and traditional values.

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Drugs, sex, rock 'n' roll, dropping in and dropping out, all became a part of the new culture. But nobody was supposed to get hurt. There weren't supposed to be consequences. So the awful reality that hundreds of Americans—men, women, and children—had died of cyanide poisoning in the Guyanese rain forest came as a real shock, even to those enveloped in their own psychedelic haze.

Instantly, “Jonestown” entered the lexicon, an ominous warning to all those Americans who sought meaning for their lives, and “truth,” by experimenting with all manner of quasi-religious, quasi-psychological, quasi-libertarian, or quasi-authoritarian self-help movements and cults. Jonestown would demonstrate in bold relief just how dangerous these groups—and their leaders—could be.

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In December 1977, when Debbie Layton arrived in Jonestown from California for the first time, she had already been a member of the Peoples Temple for nearly seven years. Indeed, she was one of Jim Jones's favorites, a member of the inner circle. Yet it did not take her very long to conclude that Jonestown was not the idyllic refuge she and all the others had been told it was before they got there.

Just twenty-four at the time, Debbie quickly realized that she and the others had been deliberately deceived; Jonestown was essentially a concentration camp in the jungle. Unlike many Temple members, though, Debbie was clear-headed enough to recognize that Jim Jones, the man they had given their lives to and had believed in without reservation, was increasingly paranoid, psychotic, and dangerous. That process of realization led her to contemplate trying to escape, even if that meant risking her life and leaving behind her mother, terminally ill with cancer, who had herself escaped from Nazi Germany forty years before.

The parallels—and ironies—are chilling. Both Debbie and her mother, Lisa, were obviously tough and intelligent women, survivors alert to the very real dangers around them. Yet both were, initially at least, taken in by Jones, the false prophet they chose to believe and follow, just as many German Jews of Lisa's parents' generation were somehow deluded into thinking that Hitler would never carry out his threats against them.

Neither Debbie nor her mom was deranged. Nor were they unstable women abnormally susceptible to the appeal of a charismatic preacher/politician. People join cults unwittingly. Even reasonable, intelligent people can be fooled by demagogues, and too often, the deeper they become involved in one of these quasi-religious or quasi-political groups, the more difficult it may be to see the potential dangers. As Debbie makes clear in this memoir, both she and her mother were searching for a life with *meaning*—not unlike so many other Americans at that time and since. Except that their search led them to the Peoples Temple and Jim Jones. Having escaped from the Nazis, it was Lisa's fate to die in Jonestown.

During the few hours I was in Jonestown, it became apparent to me that there were a variety of reasons why people had joined the Peoples Temple. For some, it was a political statement; Jones offered the promise of a socialist society free of materialism and racism at a time when such a society was particularly attractive. For others, the Temple offered religion, structure, and discipline—a way to escape the violence of the ghetto and the dead end of alcohol and drugs (which were strictly forbidden).

But Jones cleverly manipulated both his followers and public perceptions of what he and the Peoples Temple were all about, and that is the larger lesson yet to be widely understood. In both California and Guyana, the Peoples Temple was allowed to become a state within a state, enjoying the privileges, and acquiring the legitimacy, that allowed it to thrive over many years. Meanwhile, that legitimacy hid Jones's increasing paranoia and his increasingly erratic demands for control and for power.

The First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of religion makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to investigate

religious organizations, even when, as was the case with the Peoples Temple, they deliberately seek political power to shield their immoral and illicit practices from investigation. Jim Jones was a Housing Commissioner in San Francisco, courted by the mayor, the governor, and Rosalynn Carter, even while he was raping young members of his church, stealing their parents' money, staging fake "healings" to impress the ignorant, and threatening, perhaps even murdering, those who attempted to defect from the Temple.

Jones's appeal to the politicians may be difficult to understand now, but it was simple—and he understood it better than they did. In 1968 the Democratic National Convention and Mayor Daley had put the final nail in the coffin of old-fashioned political machines in the United States. But to win, politicians still had to campaign and get out the vote on Election Day. Jim Jones was smart enough to identify the void; in the political free-for-all that was San Francisco in the 1970s, he had the only political machine in town.

Because he had absolute control over his own followers, Jones could, and did, produce legions of campaign workers for favored candidates, then made sure their supporters got to the polls on Election Day. Shiva Naipaul, whose book *Black and White* is, in many ways, the best examination of the politics of the Peoples Temple, describes the peculiar political culture in which it thrived. Among his many questions, Naipaul asked Jones's political allies if they felt they had been taken in by him.

Strangely enough, what Naipaul found was that Willie Brown and most of the others with whom he talked were unapologetic, even a year after having lost more than nine hundred of their constituents to cyanide poisoning in the Guyanese jungle. How could they have known? Did they have an obligation to find out? These were questions that didn't seem to register with Brown and the others.

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Jim Jones was always a charlatan. But his delusions and paranoia grew more pronounced as he grew more powerful. The same could be said for the jungle retreat in Guyana. Whatever its initial reason for being, over the years it evolved into a terrible charade where appearances and reality grew further and further apart.

To the outside world, Jonestown was portrayed as a kind of multiracial kibbutz populated by willing pioneers determined to forge a new life in one of the world's most remote and inhospitable environments. Visitors, including consular officers from the U.S. Embassy in Georgetown, Guyana's fetid capital, were fooled into believing that Jonestown's residents were well fed and well cared for.

In the end, it was the press, that other reviled institution protected by the First Amendment, not the prosecutors or the political establishment, which finally began to pierce the veil and reveal the truth about the Peoples Temple. Only then did Jim Jones flee California for Guyana, setting in motion the awful tragedy that would soon follow.

To me, that tragedy—the mass suicide-murder of more than nine hundred of Jim Jones's followers and the bloody ambush that preceded it—seems as if it happened yesterday. I can still remember, vividly, the call from my editors in Washington several days before, telling me that a congressman from California, Leo J. Ryan, would be leaving California the next day to investigate "some crazy cult group" in Guyana.

I was in Caracas, interviewing voters and politicians for a story I was writing on Venezuela's upcoming presidential election. The trip and the coverage had been approved, but now it could wait, I was told. We want you to meet up with the congressman. "It sounds like a more interesting story."

I wasn't entirely convinced. But the next day, I flew from Caracas to Trinidad, where the congressman's flight from San Francisco and New York would stop en route to Guyana. It was nearly 10 P.M. as we took off on the final leg of that flight to Georgetown. For the next hour, I was told chilling stories about Jonestown.

According to a group of concerned relatives aboard the plane with Congressman Ryan, the Jonestown commune was a hellhole where armed guards, torture, tranquilizers, sleep deprivation, and, above all, misplaced faith had combined to trap hundreds of innocent people against their will. Jones was described as a good man gone bad, a

charismatic figure who'd led his followers astray, a sadist, a megalomaniac, the Devil incarnate. People were starving in Jonestown, I was told; there wasn't enough food, water, or medicine. Anyone who complained or expressed doubts was beaten or worse.

I listened. But I was skeptical. How could nearly a thousand Americans be tricked into leaving California for Guyana? How could they not have known what they were getting into? Could any of what I was being told possibly be true?

For three days, the congressman, his staff, the concerned relatives, and a small brigade of journalists, my colleagues, waited in Georgetown. Jones and his lawyers, Mark Lane and Charles Garry, did whatever they could to stop us from reaching the jungle commune, which was located about three hundred miles from the capital near a tiny Guyanese village called Port Kaituma.

Finally, on Friday, November 17, frustrated by what he perceived to be stalling tactics, the congressman announced that we would fly to Port Kaituma that afternoon and try to enter Jonestown, with—or without—Jones's permission.

Yes, Jonestown was technically private property and, yes, the Peoples Temple was technically a religious institution located in a sovereign country. But the congressman said Jim Jones had no right to stop a United States congressman from determining for himself whether anyone in Jonestown was being seriously mistreated or held there against his or her will.

What I didn't know at the time was that much of the congressman's information, and urgency, was the result of an affidavit Debbie had written shortly after she escaped from Jonestown the previous May; in effect, it was Debbie who had convinced Congressman Ryan that the situation was serious enough that he should investigate, and the longer Jones stalled, the more determined the congressman became to reach Jonestown.

At about 4 P.M. that Friday, we boarded a tiny Guyanese Airways plane that had been specially chartered for the hourlong trip. There was room for no more than two dozen passengers, so most of the relatives were forced to remain behind. Although they didn't think so at the time, in many ways they were fortunate. Just twenty-four hours later, the congressman and three of the journalists aboard the plane would be dead, and most of the rest of us wounded—victims of the mass hysteria that was about to ensue.

The airstrip at Port Kaituma was nothing more than a clearing in the jungle: no terminal or tower, no lights in case of darkness, and no mechanic in case of trouble. The landing strip wasn't even paved—it was mud, like everything else in the rain forest.

Once on the ground, the congressman, his staff, and the two Temple lawyers were taken immediately to the commune, about five miles away. The rest of us were held at gunpoint by the local sheriff for about an hour, until Jones sent another dump truck to the airstrip; the relatives and all but one of us journalists would be allowed to proceed.

I will never forget my first impressions of Jonestown as we made our way through the simple wooden gate and continued down the long muddy road toward the central Pavilion. What I saw reminded me of a Southern plantation before the Civil War, not so much because of the architecture but because of the scene. To one side of the large wooden Pavilion was a communal kitchen where women, mostly black, were cooking large vats of stew; others were baking bread. Young children were playing in what appeared to be a schoolyard. Still other members of the Temple, black and white, young and old, were eating their dinner in and around the Pavilion, which served as both an open-air dining hall and a meeting place.

At the center of the Pavilion, seated at the head of a long table, was the white master, Jim Jones. He was an arresting man, his hair dyed jet black. Although he had a kind of commanding stature, it also quickly became clear that he was unnerved by our presence; as we journalists gathered round to ask questions, he responded rationally

one minute, emotionally and irrationally the next.

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“Threat, threat, threat of extinction,” he bellowed in response to a question about Debbie Layton and others who had defected. “I wish I wasn’t born at times. I understand hate; love and hate are very close. I wish I wasn’t born sometimes.”

Those were his words, recorded and played back many times since. Yet despite his odd behavior, there was no visible evidence of starvation, torture, or, initially at least, that Jonestown’s residents were desperate to leave. We saw no guns or signs of the kind of intimidation that the concerned relatives talked so much about. Considering its location, Jonestown itself was rather impressive.

But those first impressions would not last.

Jones refused to allow the journalists to remain in Jonestown overnight, so we were sent back to Port Kaituma to sleep on the wooden floor of a tiny bar. That night, as we drank beer and rum, we learned from the sheriff (the same sheriff who had held us captive at the airstrip just hours before) that there were indeed guns in Jonestown and that several members of the Temple had tried to escape. Some of the escapees, he told us, had been covered with bruises that could have been the result of torture.

We also learned that Jones’s worst fears were coming true; at least one family had secretly told the congressman they wanted to leave with us the next day.

We were back in Jonestown early, and it was immediately clear the mood had changed. NBC correspondent Don Harris was preparing to begin a tough interview with Jones, asking about the guns we’d been told about, the allegations of torture, and the family that wanted to leave. Meanwhile, I heard muffled coughing from a large wooden building that looked like a tobacco shed; inside, a group of elderly women, most of them black, were living in clean but extremely cramped and primitive quarters. It was a side of life in the commune Jones had not wanted us to see.

Tension built as the day wore on. There were crying and hysteria at the Pavilion; families were being torn apart as some of their members told the congressman they wanted to stay while others wanted to leave. Jones himself, said to be running a fever, looked and sounded as if he were a defeated man.

Then, toward midafternoon, after most of us were already aboard the dump truck that was to take us back to the airstrip, one of the Temple loyalists attempted to stab Congressman Ryan. There was more screaming. As several of us rushed toward the Pavilion, Ryan emerged uninjured. But his shirt was covered with blood. He was okay, he told us. The blood belonged to his would-be assassin, who had been stabbed after someone grabbed him from behind.

Finally, at about 3 P.M. that Saturday, we were ready to leave Jonestown. As we made our way slowly toward the airstrip, it seemed as if the worst was over. And even then, I was unconvinced that Jonestown was as bad as it had initially been described. Yes, some twenty members of the Temple had decided to leave with us, but more than nine hundred others had decided to stay. Yes, conditions were harsh, but there was no evidence of malnutrition or serious physical abuse. Yes, Jones seemed psychotic, but despite everything, he appeared to have many devoted followers.

Two planes were waiting for us at the airstrip, where we had arrived less than twenty-four hours before. Because the “defectors,” as we called them, were fearful, the loading began almost immediately. They couldn’t believe Jones would allow them—and us—to leave in peace.

They were right.

Suddenly, without warning, a tractor pulling a hay wagon appeared at the end of the airstrip; there was near panic as the defectors rushed to get on board the two planes.

The tractor began moving toward us.

I was standing by the door of the larger of the two planes, trying to help the defectors get aboard, when I saw the

tractor crossing the runway. I still wasn't sure what was happening or why it was moving toward us. Then I heard *pop, pop, pop!*

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It was then I realized that people were running, diving for cover, screaming. The popping sounds were gunshots, and they were becoming louder as the tractor moved ever closer. Death was making its way across the runway. I understood instinctively that it would soon reach me.

The gunmen were now rounding the front of the plane, so I ran toward the tail. There, I was faced with a life-or-death choice. If I ran straight, I would have to cross the broad open expanse of the landing strip. It seemed better to turn left, where, out of the corner of my eye, I could see others were taking cover behind a wheel of the plane.

I threw myself down behind the wheel. But within minutes, seconds maybe, the shots were coming from behind. The gunmen had circled from the other side of the plane. Now they were directly behind the wheel where we had sought protection, and they were going to kill the rest of us.

Dirt sprayed onto my face as the bullets tore into the earth nearby. My only thought was, If I lie very still, maybe they'll think I'm already dead.

Then I felt a powerful jolt and a terrible sting. A bullet had struck my hip. Thoughts of my family and friends rushed through my mind. Bullets were still coming. I could hear them. I could feel the dirt. I was going to die.

There was a lull. Then three more shots, spaced maybe thirty seconds apart. Very close. Very loud. *Bang. Bang. Bang!*

Then silence.

A minute passed. Maybe two. I heard the plane's engine begin to rumble.

I opened my eyes without moving my head or body. I could see down the flat expanse of runway. The tractor and the gunmen were moving toward the end of the airstrip, slowly retreating in the same direction from which they had come. My only thought was that if the plane was going to leave, I was going to try to get on it.

I jumped up, not knowing if I could walk. I wobbled a bit. But as painful as it was, the bullet had only grazed my hip and I could manage. I ran around to the door and threw myself aboard the plane. But it couldn't move; one of the engines had been damaged by the gunfire.

Only then did I realize the enormity of what had happened. Lying on the airstrip were seven bodies. Congressman Leo J. Ryan. Dead. NBC correspondent Don Harris. Dead. NBC cameraman Bob Brown. Dead. *San Francisco Examiner* photographer Greg Robinson. Dead. Patricia Parks, one of the "defectors." Dead. Anthony Katsaris, one of the concerned relatives. Badly wounded. And Steve Sung, the NBC soundman. Badly wounded.

Inside the other plane, there were two more seriously wounded people; both were defectors shot by a third Temple member posing as a defector. Ironically, that third "defector" was Larry Layton, Debbie Layton's brother.

In all, four of the congressman's original party were dead, and twelve wounded, including myself; after the shooting, the Guyanese pilots secretly gathered in the smaller of the two planes, which had not been damaged, and flew back to Georgetown without telling us.

As night fell, we knew there would be no way out until at least the next morning; we treated the wounded as best we could and tried to find protection for ourselves, fearful the gunmen might return. It was a nightmare.

But what we didn't know then was that another nightmare was just beginning five miles away. In the early evening hours of Saturday, November 18, 1978, after the gunmen returned from the airstrip and reported that the congressman had been killed, Jones called his followers to the Pavilion. The Temple was under attack, he told them, the Temple had been betrayed. It was time for all loyal members of the Peoples Temple to commit the revolutionary suicide they had practiced so many times before.

There was some resistance, but not much. After a rambling harangue, Jones urged his followers to "die with

dignity.” The fatal liquid, Flavour-aide mixed with cyanide, was then poured from a washtub into small cups and distributed. One after another, some nine hundred members of the Peoples Temple, many of them parents with children in their arms, drank the poison. Then they huddled together around the Pavilion, writhing in pain, waiting to die. Those who resisted were forced to drink the poison at gunpoint. Jones, however, chose to die in a different way: he shot himself, or was shot, at pointblank range on the floor of the Pavilion, surrounded by his wife, Marceline, and other members of the Temple’s inner circle.

By the time I got there thirty-six hours later, the first journalist to reach Jonestown after the suicide-murder, hundreds of bloated bodies, mosquito-infested and rotting in the hot tropical sun, were piled two, three, sometimes even four deep, in the area around the Pavilion. Jones’s corpse lay at the center.

Guyanese soldiers had secured the compound but otherwise had done very little. The vat, half-full of the deadly purplish liquid, was still there.

The only survivors were several members of the armed “security squad,” whose job it had been to force others to drink the poison. They were then supposed to drink it themselves. But somehow they had survived, and their eyewitness accounts provided the first information of what had happened.

“They started with the babies” was what I was told by the security squad. And that’s how I began my report in the next day’s *Washington Post*.

Even the dogs had been poisoned.

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Debbie Layton survived Jonestown by escaping, and *Seductive Poison* is her account, twenty years later, of how she got involved with Jones and joined the Peoples Temple, and what it was that kept her there for nearly seven years: the psychological and sexual manipulation, the terror and violence used to prevent otherwise sane people from leaving, the strange mixture of idealism, religion, “miracles,” and political gobbledygook that Jones concocted to attract a following and then to keep it.

More important, *Seductive Poison* is the story of why Debbie became disillusioned, how and why she began to question the premises, and see through Jones’s hypocrisy and lies. It is a personal story that is fascinating in and of itself. But it is also a story that should serve as a guide, a warning, and an inspiration to millions of others throughout the world who find themselves in similar circumstances, taken in by false prophets of a religious—or political—kind.

As a foreign correspondent, I would remain familiar with Jonestown territory. Over the years, I have observed, and reported on, the abuse of power by regimes of both the left and right, from the Communists in Poland and Cuba, to the pro-West military juntas in Argentina and Chile, to the fundamentalist Islamic regimes of the Middle East. Each offered—or offers—something to its people. Like Jim Jones, not even Saddam Hussein in Iraq remains in power by force alone.

Still, terror is terror. And absolute power is absolute power, whether it’s wielded by generals with well-equipped armies, ayatollahs with all-powerful secret police, or Jim Jones with only a makeshift goon squad to enforce his perverted will. The abuse of power and the use of repression to subjugate people, whether by Jim Jones in Guyana or Augusto Pinochet in Chile or Saddam Hussein in Iraq, remains a danger to all of us.

There is much that should have been learned (but, unfortunately, was not) from Jonestown about religion, about religion and politics, about the First Amendment, and about the appropriate role of the state in monitoring and regulating groups that claim to be churches.

Just as there are limits on violent or seditious political activity, it may be appropriate, even in a free society, to somehow define the limits of what churches and groups that claim to be religious can and cannot do. Certainly, citizens should be protected from shamans like Jim Jones who conduct fake healings with the help of chicken

gizzards or who, in the name of Christ the Lord, or Muhammed, insinuate themselves into politics by providing politicians with armies of their followers. Or money.

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In the Pavilion, there was a crude hand-lettered sign, which said THOSE WHO DO NOT REMEMBER THE PAST ARE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT IT.

Above all else, that is why I believe *Seductive Poison* is so important, and why I encouraged Debbie to continue with it after she sent me the first chapters—and after we finally met—two years ago.

Hopefully, *Seductive Poison* will both provide a warning and serve as a reminder that Jonestown was more than a freakish aberration, just as the affidavit Debbie wrote after she escaped from Jonestown warned Congressman Ryan that he should investigate—and proved tragically accurate in warning of the events that would follow.

Since then, “another Jonestown” has become shorthand for similar tragedies like Waco and Heaven’s Gate, where mind control, religious fervor, and/or misplaced belief come together in an explosive mix. Parents should read this book, as should their children, because it recounts the experience of someone who was taken in—but who also had the presence of mind to get out.

Legislators, law enforcement officials, and those interested in religion and public policy should also read this book because Debbie Layton’s insights and experience provide valuable lessons that should serve to open an important national discussion on religion, politics, and the First Amendment; otherwise, another Jonestown, or something like it, will surely happen again.

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## Prologue

Driving over the San Francisco Bay Bridge at four-thirty in the morning, preparing, as I have for the past ten years, for another hectic day on the trading floor of a brokerage firm, I listen to the radio. I hear people talking about a strange cult called Branch Davidians that has been surrounded by the FBI. My mind and heart begin to race as I recognize ignorance in the questions and comments about the group. Authorities are misguidedly speculating about why the cult members have walled themselves off against the world and are provoking a dangerous standoff. I wonder: Are they really provoking it or are they being forced into an impasse? I am sure that it is the latter. My head fills with the voices I've tried to silence. Mothers whispering, babies crying, a grandmother weeping softly. People are running, I can smell the dust as it is scattered into the air by the chaos. Father is calling ...

I can barely hear the radio any longer. Someone is saying the authorities are blasting music into the Davidian compound, floodlights are being focused directly on buildings to frighten and force the inhabitants out, perhaps they'll use tear gas.

Entrapped, imprisoned, alone, frightened ... I can hear their thoughts. I feel their pain. I understand what keeps them inside and afraid to surrender. I have been in their shoes. I am one of them.

Old tapes are running in my head. Memories pole-vault me backward into fear and insanity, back into the darkness, into Jonestown. I see the Pavilion in the center of a compound cut into the heart of the jungle. People are running, I hear their anxious voices. Father is calling us ...

Father's voice is filled with emotion. He's shouting over the loudspeakers, broadcasting through the camp. Danger is near. I can hear a siren in the background, "Security alert! White Night! White Night! Quickly, wake up. We must get to the safety of the Pavilion. Run, mothers! Hurry, children! We must make it to the safety of the Pavilion."

I sit up, slightly disoriented, awakened from a heavy and abysmally dreamless sleep. Jumping down from the bunk, I grope about on the wooden planks, unable to find my boots. I fight with my pant legs to allow my feet entrance.

Christ, it must be past midnight. Goddamnit, I don't want to die without my boots on! I don't want to fight the enemy in my socks. Fumbling around in the dark, I am frantic that I'll arrive late at the Pavilion and be confronted and punished for taking too long.

My shirt smells of sweat from days of field work. Finally, I grab my worn and tattered boots, crusty with mud from the torrential rain last night. I scramble to the outside stairs where the moonlight is bright.

I see other residents rushing, pulling on shirts, zipping up pants, stumbling out of their cabins, some with babies in their arms, most alone, running to what we are told is safety, the Pavilion, our sanctuary, where Father will protect us.

I can hear gunfire in the jungle surrounding us. Father warned us that mercenaries are out there. Every day, he warns us about the enemy, the "others" out there who are against us. I can hear by the gunshots that they are coming closer. He has told, and told, and told us that they will harm us. With each blast of the siren, our existence in Jonestown becomes more tenuous. I am frightened. I don't want to be murdered. I've done nothing wrong. These poor black grandmothers have done nothing wrong. Please, why must they hurt the children? The children were brought here by their parents, young adults, who thought they were giving their babies a better life, a life free of racism and oppression. Here in Guyana, the Promised Land, we would have a chance to live life to its fullest, because Father had promised it would be so.



Voices on my car radio draw me back to the present. Armored vehicles are on their way to the Branch Davidian compound. I feel panic rise up inside of me. Oh God, I should do something. I should contact the FBI, warn them about their tactics. I know that their harsh, combative language will only entrench the victims further. Who in their right mind would flee to the “safety” of such intimidation? Hasn’t the FBI understood by now how the mind of a captive perceives danger? If only I could help. If only I could stop the insanity from happening again. But what would happen to me if I came forward? How would I protect my secrets? How could I spare my little daughter?

In my memory I hear more gunfire blasting up from the jungle. The howler monkeys won’t bellow their songs tonight. They sense the insanity around them. I race on in my mud-caked boots, past the tin-roofed cabins, past the wooden outdoor showers where we’re allowed our two-minute wash at the end of our twelve-hour days in the field. The cool air tries to invigorate my tired mind. Why again tonight? It seems every week we’re told we’ll die. Every week we’re ordered to drink some liquid, every week we’re promised death, a relief from this miserable life. I hope tonight is the last one. I’m so desperately tired. Perhaps death is better than this.

I wonder if my friend Annie will be in the Pavilion in time to avoid Father’s wrath. Is someone helping Mama up the narrow path from her cabin? I climb the fence near the podium and sit down close to Father. His big white chair has armrests, a seat pillow, and a back to lean against. Everyone else sits on hard benches or on the dirt floor. All of us assume our positions knowing that it will be many hours before we will leave the “safety” of the Pavilion.

White Night becomes day. Another night of lost sleep fades into dawn. My butt numb, feelings suffocated, reflexes stiff, the inside of my mouth raw and aching from biting it to stay awake, I continue to listen to Father’s ravings about our prophesied demise. When the sun rises and heats our exhausted bodies, the gunfire has ceased. The mercenaries, we imagine, are resting through the heat vacuum, an intense throbbing that sucks our energy and absorbs our very essence, then dries it like jerky. Automatons sit in the Pavilion now, hungry only because we are reminded to be by the whimpering of the famished children. We are shells of humans, waiting for our next instructions from Father.

Suddenly, Father informs us that we have been saved by a miracle: the mercenaries have departed and we are now free again to enjoy our lives. He dispatches a few of the kitchen staff to prepare a little sustenance for his entrenched warriors. Exhausted, we sip our rice-water soup and nibble on bread crumbs from an earlier meal. A new day hath arrived. Father begins to hum and the pianist begins her melodic accompaniment. He stands and sings, “We shall not ... We shall not be moved. We shall not ... We shall not be moved,” smiles and claps his hands. We all stand and sing. Once again, we have fought the enemy and won!

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Since the destruction of the Branch Davidian cult, my mind has returned again and again to my past. It is brought back to this darkness because of the inquisitive questions of my six-year-old daughter.

“Mommy? Where is Grandma Nanni buried? Why can’t we visit her grave?”

The tightly wrapped secrets of my past are being cautiously opened. Secrets handed down from my mother to me. Untruths that spurred us both, while looking for answers, into another deceitful world, Peoples Temple.

I thought I could keep the past hidden forever, the way my mother did when I was growing up, but that is no longer healthy or possible. I must return to the suffocating confusion of my youth to understand my sorrow, make sense of my shame, and integrate the secrets of my unclaimed history. I must break the pattern of well-intentioned deceit passed from parent to child.

“Why is Uncle Larry in prison? He isn’t bad ... is he, Mommy?”

How can I explain to a child that my brother became a pawn the moment I escaped from Jonestown? My mother was dying of cancer; he was the only hostage Jones could use to try and coerce me back or force me into silence. My brother must have been severely threatened, perhaps in panic, when he followed orders to shoot at people. Why is he

the only one held accountable for the insanity designed by Jones and unwittingly implemented by a thousand of us?

I was one of them. On my own, with no one to answer to, I have kept my shame locked in a small compartment just beneath the surface. But my daughter's innocent probing has emboldened me to face the horror again, after twenty years.

"Why didn't you just leave when Jim got mean?"

I'm not sure. What took me so long to comprehend and finally heed the danger signs? Was it my naïveté? Perhaps it was my childlike belief in my own papa's goodness that kept me from grasping the truth. Being a good obedient daughter seemed incompatible with having questions and doubts.

"Couldn't the children have refused to drink their juice, Mama? I would have closed my lips tight and not allowed them to do it."

How can I make her understand what people are liable to do under extreme pressure or in a desperate need to please? How they can choose to take their own lives rather than disobey and risk an even more violent death at the hands of either the "enemy" or the armed guards of their own group?

I'm propelled by my daughter's innocence to turn inward to my cavern of painful, frightening memories. But facing them requires that I first learn how to cope with the shame. I must face my acts of treason against my mentor and friend, Teresa B., whose trust I betrayed for my own survival. In order to prove my devotion to the Peoples Temple, I devoutly reported her secrets, condemning her to a purgatory from which she barely escaped.

It does not help to explain that all of us were taught to spy and report on each other—our families, our loved ones, our friends. Loyalty to Father required it. Any longing for friends or lovers, any expression of love for our family, was a breach of that loyalty. "Thou shalt have no other God before me."

I never dreamed of reporting on my mother. The only alternative was to withdraw. It took all my strength to hide my fear for her. I worried that she might put herself into grave danger by being honest, by confessing to Jim her fears and misgivings about Jonestown. Mama's secrets remained safe with me. And yet, I am still haunted by the fact that I saw no other choice than to forsake her. I knew the pain my slow withdrawal caused her. She was afraid in Jonestown, sick with cancer and desperate for my companionship, but I was unable to give her the love and affection she needed. When she needed me the most I escaped and left her behind. I abandoned her in order to save myself.

How could we do such awful things? Why were we unable to see the corruption, call Father's bluff, stop it before the end? We had embarked on a peaceful exodus into a "land of freedom," only to see our lives in the Promised Land turn into a dreary prison camp existence. Our dreams evaporated into twelve-hour days of hard labor, watched by armed guards from morning to night. We hardly got enough food to sustain ourselves and many of us fell sick from malnutrition.

Sundays meant standing in a long line snaking from the radio room, where Father sat in the doorway, down the wooden walkway, past the kitchen huts, and onto the dirt pathway. The line of a thousand of us moved slowly as Father spoke personally to each resident, handing out the special weekly treat of a sweet cassava cookie. Finally, I, too, would stand before him as he lovingly bequeathed the delicacy to me.

"Debbie, my little warrior," he would sadly smile, "it has been a tough week, but toughest on me. I carry your hopes and dreams upon my shoulders. It is I who worries about you and your future while you sleep. Here, my child, enjoy my offering, my treat. The kitchen staff made it for you even though the ingredients are too expensive and we can't afford such a luxury."

"Thank you, Father." I would lower my eyes respectfully and walk away, allowing the next residents their moment with Father, keeping my thoughts to myself. But as I walked away, I wondered why we didn't have enough money when Teresa, Carolyn, Maria, and I had deposited millions of dollars in Panamanian bank accounts. Teresa and I

had flown to England, France, and Switzerland to open even more accounts. Carolyn and Jim had said we needed to ~~do this so the government couldn't take it away from us and that Jim would use the funds for the people when the time came.~~ Why was Father acting as though we had nothing? Why, with so many millions of dollars abroad, could we barely exist?

It makes my heart ache to think how bravely and how desperately we endured. Only very few people were lucky enough to have been elsewhere when the suicide command was given. Those in the capital, some 250 miles away, refused to take their lives when Father's orders came over the radio. Just that little bit of distance allowed them to think for themselves ... and they chose to live.

Those of us who survived are left with the task of making sense of the losses suffered by so many. The survivors, whether they lived in Jonestown or were only associated with Peoples Temple in the United States, must live with a quiet and dull vibration that agitates our conscience. We have compartmentalized our shame, despair, and fear, struggled to disentangle ourselves from our own misconceptions of who we were.

In order to find answers for my daughter, I must find answers for myself. For the welfare of us both, I must descend again into the darkness. Although I am fearful of what I may find, I must remember.



# ONE

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*We who have come back, by the aid of many lucky chances or miracles—  
whatever one may choose to call them—we know: the best of us  
did not return.*

—VIKTOR E. FRANKL,  
*Man's Search for Meaning*

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## Secrets and Shadows

My mother was a mystery to me. Beautiful, often quiet, she secretly sketched portraits of women, closing her portfolio whenever I came unexpectedly into the sunroom. I often felt I was intruding on someone unfamiliar and interrupting something quite private. She seemed like a shadow, her silhouette casting a haze on my imperfect form. Always gentle and kind, she cuddled me and continually asked after my thoughts. I sensed that she was worried about me and desperately wanted to protect me, but I had no idea from what. In return, from a very young age, I felt protective of her.

Every evening she would lie next to me and read aloud. I loved the sound of her voice, soothing and warm. My favorite poem was Walter de la Mare's "Sleepyhead." The way in which Mama pronounced each word lulled me into a trance. I begged her to read it over and over again, especially one segment:

*"Come away,  
Child, and play  
Light with the gnomies;  
In a mound  
Green and round,  
That's where their home is.*

*"Honey sweet,  
Curds to eat,  
Cream and frumenty,  
Shells and beads,  
Poppy seeds,  
You shall have plenty."*

*But as soon as I stooped in the dim moonlight  
To put on my stocking and my shoe,  
The sweet sweet singing died sadly away,  
And the light of the morning peeped through ...*

After the fifth reading, when we'd finished saying the Lord's Prayer, I'd plead with her not to leave me. When she finally rose and kissed me gently on the cheek, then closed the door behind her, believing I was asleep, I would cry. She seemed so sad, like a fairy princess in a moated castle, and I grieved for her.

My mother, Lisa, was born to Anita and Hugo Philip in 1915. Although she shared few of her childhood stories with me, I had glimpses into her past. It was my father who bragged about her life. I knew she was proud and had grown up in Hamburg surrounded by vast amounts of art and culture. Concert musicians used to play in her extraordinarily modern home that was designed and built by her cousin through marriage, Ernst Hochfeld, a pioneer of the Bauhaus architectural era. There were built-in cabinets for their extensive art

collection, a humidity-controlled vault for Grandpa's tobacco and cigars, and the beloved music room where Mama's Steinway and her father's Guadagnini violin were kept.

Mama explained on several occasions that the bronze nude in our living room was not a subject to snicker at but a famous sculpture, *Die Erwachende* ("The Awakening") by Klimt and that she loved it. I understood that her father had packed it together with a few other valuables and brought it from Germany. Why her parents hadn't hired a moving company to ship all their belongings from Hamburg was a question that never seemed to be answered. There was the beautifully shaped silver cutlery we used daily, some exquisite jewelry Mama kept in her silk-embroidered jewelry box, and several large pieces of art, paintings and sculptures that Grandpa Hugo and Grandma Anita had personally carried to America.

I loved hearing the story attached to each one. There was an etching of Albert Einstein signed by the genius himself, his hands so dirty his fingerprints showed clearly next to his signature, and an etching of Pablo Casals tuning his cello, signed by the maestro. Beatrice d'Este of Ferrara, the painting commissioned by my grandfather in Italy that stared away from me in the library, wore a headdress of leather and pearls and was covered in a maroon dress with a luxurious black velvet cape. I often wished the statue on the table, a beautiful bronze woman, her bared breasts firm, her long, sleek legs taut as she stretched upward on her toes. She had considered wearing clothes on the day of her posing. My mother's legs were beautiful too. I loved to sit on her bed each morning and watch her pull her stockings up over her ankles, then point her toes and extend her legs into the air as she attached the silk to her black garter. My mother was what I wanted to be: an enchanting enigma.

I sensed that my mother missed her life in Germany. The past seemed to consume and console her. When I was a little older I wondered what it must have been like to leave a place one deeply loved, all one's friends and relatives, and never see them again. But it was many years before I grasped that my mother's world was filled with sorrow, guilt, and regret. And it wasn't until years after that that I learned why.

Long before I came onto the scene, my mother had begun to spin a cocoon around herself. From her place of solace, she wove interesting stories and gave them to her children as protective shields against the painful truths she could not bear to tell. The one most closely associated with me was the story of my arrival. My birth, it seemed, was a momentous occasion. I loved the pretty stories of the long discussions and appeals from my big sister Annalisa, for a baby sister. Mama, too, said she desired "just one more" baby. I grew up knowing that I was the only really planned-for child because, at age eight, my sister had successfully convinced my parents that she would take care of me. However, the truth was far different. It is only now that I realize my conception must have been on the evening of May 10, 1952, the evening my mother learned of her own mother's suicide. I imagine that night was filled with tears and profound despair, my father holding and consoling my mother, trying to dissuade her from her crushing guilt. On February 7, 1953, exactly nine months after Grandma Anita's death, the secretly grieved-about baby arrived in Tooele, Utah. Although she cared for me deeply and listened intently to my never-ending questions, she seemed sad, preoccupied, and sometimes in awe of me. Perhaps my presence reminded her of the mother she believed she had forsaken. Somewhere deep inside my mother's heart she must have wondered from where my spirit arose.

MAY 10, 1952

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My friends,

Know that I, free and proper, am a good American. But I was a gossip and have been entangled in a network of intrigue. I no longer have the strength to free myself from it.

Forget me not, my beloved children and family.

And you, Hugo, forgive me.

Live well. All of you loved mankind so much!!

-A.-

On the morning of her suicide, Grandma Anita left behind what at the time seemed a mysterious missive written in German. No one understood why she mentioned being a good American. Sadly, however, Anita had a basis for her belief that she was entangled in some terrible intrigue.

In 1951, my father had left his associate professorship at Johns Hopkins to accept a prestigious position as Associate Director of Chemical Warfare at the Dugway Proving Grounds in Utah. My mother was apprehensive about the assignment, as was her mother.

Anita had become very involved with the American Society of Friends (Quakers), the organization that had safeguarded her and Hugo's journey out of Nazi Austria to the United States. The Friends had kept the Nazis at bay while desperately trying to obtain the last of the emergency visas granted to Jews. On March 20, 1940, the Friends gave Anita and Hugo the precious gift of another life in America.

Now Anita was a devoted Friend and believed in their gospel of peace and nonviolence. Her son-in-law's involvement in research on how to "kill humans with chemicals" was abhorrent to her. She talked with her daughter about her misgivings and begged her to convince Laurence not to take the job.

In 1951, Anita could not know that after her son-in-law's arrival in Utah, he was promoted to chief of the entire Chemical Warfare Division. With this high-level appointment, Dr. Layton required the highest level security clearance possible and the FBI began to conduct a thorough background investigation. My father, one of the government's top men at Dugway, was married to a German woman, an "Alien of Enemy Nationality" as denoted on her passport, and her parents had to be closely investigated.

J. Edgar Hoover was in his prime. He was a xenophobe and believed the Society of Friends to have Communist leanings. Hoover's men, with little concern for the fallout of the investigation, began to question my grandmother and her Quaker friends. These men deemed it unnecessary to explain to the Society of Friends and the neighbors of Anita and Hugo what they were investigating the loyalties of the Philips. Anita had no idea that this was a routine inquiry regarding a government employee. All she knew was that "people" were asking questions about her. Anita wrote to her daughter that she was being followed and spied upon. Unaware of the FBI's investigation, Lisa and Laurence thought Anita was becoming paranoid. To them her fears were incomprehensible. Of course she had been persecuted in Germany, but that was Nazi territory, it could not happen here. Never in America! Terrified and not knowing where to turn, Anita jumped to her death from her apartment window.

At the time, my mother did not know that her parents were being investigated. And she could not have fathomed the effect of such an investigation on a Jew who had just escaped from the Nazis. Much later, I would discover how deeply my mother blamed herself for having disbelieved her mother's fears. Long shadows now loomed over Lisa's universe. The world she had hoped to escape into was suddenly soiled. In 1952, Mama had three children under age ten, a husband with an extremely sensitive government job, and a new baby on the way. For reasons I think I now understand, Lisa chose to silence her sorrows. For the sake of her husband and her children, desperately wanting to give them the future she had hoped for, she suppressed her past and hid her own identity as well as her mother's.

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Lisa Philip, born in Hamburg, to nonreligious Jewish parents, was raised a German, not a Jew. Her family never attended synagogue and were completely assimilated into the fabric of Germany's high society. Her father owned a seat on the Hamburg Stock Exchange. The family's circle of friends was predominately Jewish but the Philips often entertained government dignitaries and luminaries from the world of art and theater. On May 6, 1933, the life and world Lisa loved was wrenched away from her. At the age of twenty-three, in order to escape the Nazis, Lisa bid farewell to her parents and her friends and boarded the *S.S. Manhattan* for New York.

It was a hard transition. She was lonely and longed to settle down and attach herself to the new world. In 1939, a year before meeting my father, she wrote to her closest friend in Hamburg, Annelise Schmidt, that she felt worthless and alone. Her friend wrote in response:

You don't have anywhere to go when you are lonesome, but Lisa, you must not give up the longing for something beautiful ... A strong love would be the most cleansing thing for you. The memories of the past are there, and you feel that you have been plucked from your past, but I am sure that you will rebuild your roots. If you have a devil within you, don't hide him but put him in front of your wagon so that he will use up all his strength by pulling you forward.

My parents met while my father was in graduate school. Vastly different in every way, they found each other attractive and believed the other's attributes would help them secure the future of comfort and shelter they both longed for.

Laurence Layton had no secrets. He was born in Boomer, West Virginia, a poor coal mining town. Almost all of the inhabitants worked deep down, under the earth, but Laurence's father was different. John Layton was a college-educated engineer. Life for Laurence began a little better than for others in Boomer. His father spent hours with his son discussing ideas and allowing him to help perform experiments. But when Laurence was eight years old, his devoted father died unexpectedly. Within days, his mother was forced to move back in with her father, where she instantly became a servant. Laurence Layton, the child who became a man overnight, resolved that his siblings would never feel his desperation or loss. He assumed the paternal role until his mother remarried. At that point, he was dealt another cruel blow when his new stepfather told him to leave the household. He was determined to rise above his lot in life, but his adolescent perceptions of desertion and betrayal became the basis for a lifelong fear of abandonment.

By 1938, the year Lisa was torn from the life she loved, my father had escaped from his world of poverty and betrayal to the world of college intellectuals. Intelligent, enterprising



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