

# THE FAMILY

---

*The Secret Fundamentalism  
at the Heart of American Power*

J E F F S H A R L E T

 HarperCollins e-books

# CONTENTS

Introduction: The Avant-Garde of American Fundamentalism	1
--	---

## I. AWAKENINGS

1. Ivanwald	13
2. Experimental Religion	56
3. The Revival Machine	73

## II. JESUS PLUS NOTHING

4. Unit Number One	87
5. The <i>F</i> Word	114
6. The Ministry of Proper Enlightenment	144
7. The Blob	181
8. Vietnamization	205
9. <i>Jesus + 0 = X</i>	241
10. Interesting Blood	257

## III. THE POPULAR FRONT

<i>Interlude</i>	287
11. What Everybody Wants	291
12. The Romance of American Fundamentalism	322

13. Unschooling	336
14. This Is Not the End	370
Acknowledgments	389
Notes	393
Index	433
About the Author	
Other Books by Jeff Sharlet	
Credits	
Cover	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	

# INTRODUCTION

## THE AVANT-GARDE OF AMERICAN FUNDAMENTALISM

THIS IS HOW THEY pray: a dozen clear-eyed, smooth-skinned “brothers” gather in a huddle, arms crossing arms over shoulders like the weave of a cable, leaning in on one another and swaying like the long grass up the hill from the house they share, a handsome, gray, two-story colonial that smells of new carpet, Pine-Sol, and aftershave. It is decorated with lithographs of foxhunters and pictures of Jesus, and, in the bunk room, a drawing of a “C-4” machine gun given to them by their six-year-old neighbor. The men who live there call the house Ivanwald. At the end of a tree-lined cul-de-sac in Arlington, Virginia, quiet but for the buzz of lawn mowers and kids playing tag in the park across the road, Ivanwald is one house among many, clustered like mushrooms, nearly two dozen households devoted, like these men, to the service of a personal Jesus, a Christ who directs their every action. The men tend every tulip in the cul-de-sac, trim every magnolia, seal every driveway smooth and black as boot leather. Assembled at the dining table or on their lawn or in the hallway or in the bunk room or on the basketball court, they also pray, each man’s head bowed in humility and swollen with pride (secretly, he thinks) at being counted among this select corps for Christ, men to whom he will open his heart and whom he will remember when he returns to the world not born-again but remade, no longer an individual but part of the Lord’s revolution, his will transformed into a weapon for what the young men call *spiritual war*.

“Jeff,” says Bengt, one of the house leaders, “will you lead us in prayer?”

Surely, brother. I have lived with these men for close to a month, not as a Christian—a term they deride as too narrow for the world they are building in Jesus’ honor—but as *a follower of Christ*, the phrase they use to emphasize what matters most to their savior. Not faith or kindness but obedience. I don’t share their faith, in fact, but this does not concern them; I’ve obeyed, and that is enough. I have shared the brothers’ meals and their work and their games. I’ve wrestled with them and showered with them and listened to their stories: I know which man resents his father’s fortune and which man succumbed to the flesh of a woman not once but twice and which man dances so well he is afraid of being taken for gay. I know what it means to be *a brother*, which is to say I know what it means to be a soldier in the army of God. I have been numbered among them.

“Heavenly Father,” I begin. Then, “O Lord,” but I worry that doesn’t sound intimate enough. I settle on “Dear Jesus.” “Dear Jesus, just, please, Jesus, let us fight for Your name.”

THIS IS A story about two great spheres of belief, religion and politics, and the ways in which they are bound together by the mythologies of America. America—not the legal entity of the United States but the idea with which Europe clothed a continent that it believed naked and wild—America has been infused with religion since the day in 1630 when the Puritan John Winthrop, preparing to cross the Atlantic to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony, declared the New World the *city upon a hill* spoken of by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Three hundred and fifty-nine years later, Ronald Reagan, during the last days of his presidency, would see in Washington’s traffic jams that same vision, like a double exposure: “a tall proud city, built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed.” In his farewell address he’d call it a *shining* city upon a hill. This is a story about that imaginary place, so real in the minds of those for whom religion, politics, and the mythologies of America are one singular story, and

how that vision has shaped America's projection of power onto the rest of the world.

My "brothers" were members of a very peculiar group of believers, not representative of the majority of Christians but of an avant-garde of the social movement I call *American fundamentalism*, a movement that recasts theology in the language of empire. *Avant-garde* is a term usually reserved for innovators, artists who live strange and dangerous lives and translate their strange and dangerous thoughts into pictures or poetry or fantastical buildings. The term has a political ancestry as well: Lenin used it to describe the elite cadres he believed could spark a revolution. It is in this sense that the men to whom my brothers apprenticed themselves, a seventy-year-old self-described "invisible" network of followers of Christ in government, business, and the military, use the term avant-garde. They call themselves "the Family," or "The Fellowship," and they consider themselves a "core" of men responsible for changing the world. "Hitler, Lenin, and many others understood the power of a small core of people," instructs a document given to an inner circle, explaining the scope, if not the ideological particulars, of the ambition members of this avant-garde are to cultivate.<sup>1</sup> Or, as a former Ivanwald brother who'd used his Ivanwald connections to find a foothold in the insurance industry told my brothers and me during a seminar on "biblical capitalism," "Look at it like this: take a bunch of sticks, light each one of 'em on fire. Separate, they go out. Put 'em together, though, and light the bundle. Now you're ready to burn."

Hitler, to the Family, is no more real than Attila the Hun as drafted by business gurus who promise unstoppable "leadership" techniques drawn from history's killers; or for that matter Christ, himself, as rendered in a business best seller called *Jesus, CEO*. The Family's avant-garde is not composed of neo-Nazis, or crypto-Nazis, or fascists by any traditional definition; they are fundamentalists, and in this still-secular age, fundamentalism is a religion of both affluence and revolution.

"Fundamentalist" is itself a relatively recent and much-contested word, coined early in the last century by a conservative Baptist who wanted to clear away the confusion about what Christians, by his lights, were supposed to stand for.<sup>2</sup> What they stood for, in fact, was

confusing. One of the biggest surprises to be found in “The Fundamentals,” a series of dense pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915, is the argument that evolution is reconcilable with a literal reading of scripture. Much has changed since then; such is the evolution of American fundamentalism. Imagine it traveling a path twisted like that of a Möbius strip, the visual paradox made popular in M. C. Escher’s optical illusions, from liberation to authoritarianism. American fundamentalism’s original sentiments were as radically democratic in theory as they have become repressive in practice, its dream not that of Christian theocracy but of a return to the first century of Christ worship, before there was a thing called Christianity. The “age of miracles,” when *church* was no more than a word for the great fellowship—the profound friendship—of believers, when Christ’s testament really was new, revelation was unburdened by history, and believers were martyrs or martyrs-to-be, pure and beautiful.

Is fundamentalism too limited a word for such utopian dreams? Lately some scholars prefer “maximalism,” a term meant to convey the movement’s ambition to conform every aspect of society to God. In contemporary America—from the Cold War to the Iraq War, the period of the current incarnation’s ascendancy—that means a culture remade in the image of a Jesus strong but tender, a warrior who hates the carnage he must cause, a man-god ordinary men will follow as he conquers the world in order to conform it to his angry love. These are days of the sword, literally—wealthy members of the movement gift one another with real blades crafted to battle standards, a fad inspired by a Christian best seller called *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul*. As jargon, then, maximalism isn’t bad, but I think fundamentalism still strikes closest to the movement’s desire for a story that never changes, a story to redeem all that seems random, a rock upon which history can rise.

I offer these explanations not as excuses for the consequences of American fundamentalism, an expansionist ideology of control better suited to empire than democracy, but to point to the defining tension of a creed that is both fearful and proud even as it proclaims itself joyous and humble. It is a martyr’s faith in the hands of the

powerful, its cross planted in the blood-soaked soil of manifest destiny. It is the strange and dangerous offspring of two intensely fertile sets of stories, “America” and “Christianity.”

Before moving into Ivanwald, I spent several months on the road, researching God in America for an earlier book. My quarry soon became the gods of America: a pantheon. Not Vishnu or Buddha or the Goddess, though they reside here too, but a heaven crowded with the many different Christs believed in by Americans. There’s a Jesus in Miami’s Cuban churches, for instance, who seems to do nothing but wrestle Castro; a Jesus in Heartland, Kansas, who dances around a fire with witches who also consider themselves Christians; a Jesus in Manhattan who dresses in drag; a baby Jesus in New Mexico who pulls cow tails and heals the lame or simply the sad by giving them earth to eat; a muscle-bound Jesus in South Central L.A. emblazoned across the chest of a man with a gun in his hand; a Jesus in an Orlando megachurch who wants you to own a black Beamer.

So many Jesuses. And yet there has always been a certain order to America’s Christs, a certain hierarchy. For centuries, the Christ of power was high church, distant, and well mannered. The austere, severe god of Cotton Mather, the Lord of the Ivy League and country club dinners. But from the beginning another Christ has been vying for control, the ecstatic Christ of the Great Awakeners, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Grandison Finney, the angry farmer god William Jennings Bryan saw crucified on a cross of gold, the sword-tongued, fire-eyed Revelation Jesus of a thousand street-corner ranters. A Christ of absolute devotion, not questions. A volatile, exuberant, American god, almost democratic, almost totalitarian. This wild Christ is not supplanting the old, upper-crust Jesus; rather, the followers of these two visions of the divine are finding common cause. The elite and the populist Jesuses are merging, becoming once again a Christ who thrives not so much as a deity or through a theology as what the historian Perry Miller called in *The New England Mind*, his 1939 classic account of Puritanism, a *mood*.



“YOU CAN’T PUT a heart in a box,” one of my Ivanwald brothers, a Senate aide named Gannon Sims, told me one night. He was trying to make me understand why political terminology, *left* and *right*, *liberal* and *conservative*, could not contain the movement’s vision. We were sitting on Ivanwald’s porch, listening to the crickets and watching a silvery moon over the Potomac River wink through the trees. Gannon, former student body president of Baylor University, twisted his class ring. He had blue eyes and blond hair and a voice like an angel born in Texas; he sang in a choir and wrote songs about Jesus and hoped one day to be a senator like the one he worked for, Don Nickles, then the second-ranking Republican. Gannon wanted power. Not for himself but for God. It wasn’t up to him; Jesus would use him. “I don’t try to explain,” he told me. “I just get involved.”

Gannon referred to Senator Nickles as a member of the Family, and he dropped names of others he called members with ease: Senator James Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma, for instance, who’d traveled across Africa on the Family’s behalf, insisting that the continent’s leaders hear him out about his American Christ before any business could occur, and Representative Joe Pitts, Republican of Pennsylvania, a leader of the anti-abortion movement since the 1970s who often stopped by the Cedars, a Family retreat for political leaders. But such elected officials—means to an end—didn’t really impress Gannon because in the end he hoped for, the kingdom of heaven on earth toward which both he and the congressmen in the Family were working wouldn’t be a democracy.

“It won’t?” I asked.

“*King-dom*,” said Gannon.

I remembered something another brother, Pavel, had said. He was Czech. His father had been influential in the former communist regime and the post-Soviet one that followed, but now he was a businessman, which was why, Pavel told me, he had sent him to Ivanwald. “Contacts,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. One time we had a visitor, a Venezuelan evangelist, who asked Pavel if he had come to Ivanwald to learn about the American way of life. Pavel smiled. He was very tall, and he had a head shaped like a lightbulb. Alone among

the brothers he possessed what might be called a sense of irony. “This is not America,” he replied.

But it is.

WHAT FOLLOWS, “AWAKENINGS,” begins with my own, at Ivanwald. Not to the exclusive truth of Ivanwald’s Christ but to what Charles W. Colson, the Watergate felon who was born again through the Family, called in his memoir, *Born Again*, “a veritable underground of Christ’s men all through government.” This so-called underground is not a conspiracy. Rather, it’s a seventy-year-old movement of elite fundamentalism, bent not on salvation for all but on the cultivation of the powerful, “key men” chosen by God to direct the affairs of the nation. From Ivanwald I traveled backward, to American fundamentalism’s forebears: Jonathan Edwards, there at the creation of the First Great Awakening in 1735, and Charles Grandison Finney, who awakened the nation again a century later.

Edwards, remembered mostly for one violent phrase—“We are sinners in the hands of an angry God”—gave to what would eventually become American fundamentalism not its fury but its “heart,” a sentimental story shaped and softened ever since by elite believers. Finney, the great revivalist of the Second Great Awakening, provided to the growing evangelical movement the theatrical tools for rallying its masses. Edwards and Finney are ancestors of the two great strands of American fundamentalism, elite and populist. Populist fundamentalism takes as its battleground domestic politics, to be conquered and conformed to the will of God; elite fundamentalism sees its mission as the manipulation of politics in the rest of the world. Both populists and elites call their attempts to control the lives of others “evangelism.”

Secular America recognizes radical religion only when it marches into the public square, bellowing its intentions. When Charles Finney built the nation’s first megachurch 170 years ago—at Broadway and Worth, in lower Manhattan—he understood that making a spectacle of faith provided a foundation for power. More recently, Jerry Fal-

well and Pat Robertson translated the tent revivals of old into political networks, moral majorities, and Christian coalitions. But now, even that modernization has become shiny with age. Falwell is dead; Robertson is a farce. The secular media finds itself wondering—as it has periodically ever since the Scopes “monkey” trial of 1925—whether theocratic politics are gone for good from America.

Not likely. From Jonathan Edwards and the Revolutionary War that followed the First Great Awakening to the War on Terror, the theocratic strand has been woven into the American fabric, never quite dominant but always stronger and more enduring than those who imagine religion to be a personal, private affair realize.

Part Two, “Jesus Plus Nothing,” brings the elite thread into the twentieth century through the story of the founder of the Family, a Norwegian immigrant named Abraham Vereide, and his successor, Doug Coe. Vereide counseled presidents and kings and was spiritual adviser to more senators and generals than Billy Graham has prayed with in all his days of bowing to power. And yet his story is unknown. He preferred it that way; God, thought Vereide, works through men who stay behind the scenes. In Vereide’s day, the Family maintained a formal front organization, International Christian Leadership. In Coe’s, it “submerged,” following instructions he issued in 1966, an era of challenge to the kind of establishment power Vereide and Coe protected as God-ordained.

Why haven’t we seen them and their work? The secular assumption since the Scopes trial has been that such beliefs are obsessions of the fringe. In their populist manifestations—prurient antipornography crusaders, rabid John Birchers, screaming foes of abortion wielding bloody fetuses like weapons—they often are. But there is another thread of American fundamentalism, invisible to secular observers, that ran through the post-Scopes politics of the twentieth century, concerned not so much with individual morality as with “Christian civilization,” Washington, D.C., as its shining capital. It is this elite thread, the avant-garde of American fundamentalism, and the ways in which it has shaped the broad faith of a nation and the uneasy politics of empire, that is at the heart of my story.

Part Three, “The Popular Front,” carries that story into the present. The current manifestation of fundamentalist power is only—only!—the latest revival of emotions stirred by Jonathan Edwards nearly three hundred years ago, the fear of an angry God, the love of a personal Jesus, and the ecstasy wrought by the Holy Ghost. That trinity of sentiments was bound together then by the belief that to the European conquerors of the New World was given the burden of spreading their light—their power—to all of humanity.

This is not a book about the Bible thumpers portrayed by Hollywood, pinched little hypocrites and broad-browed lunatics, representatives of that subset of American fundamentalism that declares itself a bitter nation within a nation. Rather, it’s a story that begins on Ivanwald’s suburban lawn, with a group of men gripping each other’s shoulders in prayer. It is the story of how they got there, where they are going, and where the movement they joined came from; the story of an American fundamentalism, gentle and militant, conservative and revolutionary, that has been hiding in plain sight all along.

## 1.

### IVANWALD

NOT LONG AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, a man I'll call Zeke<sup>1</sup> came to New York to survey the ruins of secularism. "To bear witness," he said. He believed Christ had called him.

He wandered the city, sparking up conversations with people he took to be Muslims—"Islamic," he called them—knocking on the doors of mosques by day and sliding past velvet ropes into sweaty clubs by night. He prayed with an imam (to Jesus) and may or may not have gone home with several women. He got as close as possible to Ground Zero, visited it often, talked to street preachers. His throat tingled with dust and ashes. When he slept, his nose bled. He woke one morning on a red pillow.

He went to bars where he sat and listened to the anger of men and women who did not understand, as he did, why they had been stricken. He stared at photographs and paintings of the Towers. The great steel arches on which they'd stood reminded him of Roman temples, and this made him sad. The city was fallen, not just literally but spiritually, as decadent and doomed as an ancient civilization. And yet Zeke wanted and believed he needed to know why New York was what it was, this city so hated by fundamentalists abroad and, he admitted after some wine, by fundamentalists—"Believers," he called them, and himself—at home.

At the time Zeke was living at Ivanwald. His brothers-in-Christ, the youngest eighteen, the oldest in their early thirties, were much like him: educated, athletic, born to affluence, successful or soon to

be. Zeke and his brothers were fundamentalists, but not at all the kind I was familiar with. “We’re not even Christian,” he said. “We just follow Jesus.”

I’d known Zeke on and off for twelve years. He’s the older brother of a woman I dated in college. Zeke had studied philosophy and history and literature in the United States and in Europe, but he had long wanted to find something . . . better. His life had been a pilgrim’s progress, and the path he’d taken a circuitous version of the route every fundamentalist travels: from confusion to clarity, from questions to answers, from a mysterious divine to a Jesus who’s so familiar that he’s like your best friend. A really good guy about whom Zeke could ask, What would Jesus do? and genuinely find the answer.

His whole life Zeke had been searching for a friend like that, someone whose words meant what they meant and nothing less or more. Zeke himself looks like such a man, tall, lean, and muscular, with a square jaw and wavy, dark blond hair. One of his grandfathers had served in the Eisenhower administration, the other in Kennedy’s. His father, the family legend went, had once been considered a possible Republican contender for Congress. But instead of seeking office, his father had retreated to the Rocky Mountains, and Zeke, instead of attaining the social heights his pedigree seemed to predict, had spent his early twenties withdrawing into theological conundrums, until he peered out at a world of temptations like a wounded thing in a cave. He drank too much, fought men and raged at women, disappeared from time to time and came back from wherever he had gone quieter, angrier, sadder.

Then he met Jesus. He had long been a committed Christian, but this encounter was different. This Jesus did not demand orthodoxy. This Jesus gave him permission to stop struggling. So he did, and his pallor left him. He took a job in finance and he met a woman as bright as he was and much happier, and soon he was making money, in love, engaged. But the questions of his youth still bothered him. Again he drank too much, his eye wandered, his temper kindled. So, one day, at the suggestion of an older mentor, he ditched his job, put

his fiancée on hold, and moved to Ivanwald, where, he was told, he'd meet yet another Jesus, the true one.

When he came up to New York, his sister asked if I would take him out to dinner. What, she wanted to know, was Zeke caught up in?

We met at a little Moroccan place in the East Village. Zeke arrived in bright white tennis shorts, spotless white sneakers, and white tube socks pulled taut on his calves. His concession to Manhattan style, he said, was his polo shirt, tucked in tight; it was black. He flirted with the waitress and she giggled, he talked to the people at the next table. Women across the room glanced his way; he gave them easy smiles. I'd never seen Zeke so charming. In my mind, I began to prepare a report for his sister: Good news! Jesus has finally turned Zeke around.

He said as much himself. He even apologized for arguments we'd had in the past. He acknowledged that he'd once enjoyed getting a rise out of me by talking about "Jewish bankers." (I was raised a Jew by my father, a Christian by my mother.) That was behind him now, he said. *Religion* was behind him. Ivanwald had cured him of the God problem. I'd love the place, he said. "We take Jesus out of his religious wrapping. We look at Him, at each other, without assumptions. We ask questions, and we answer them together. We become brothers."

I asked if he and his brothers prayed a great deal. No, he said, not much. Did they spend a lot of time in church? None—most churches were too crowded with rules and rituals. Did they study the Bible in great depth? Just a few minutes in the morning. What they did, he said, was work and play games. During the day they raked leaves and cleaned toilets, and during the late afternoon they played sports, all of which prepared them to serve Jesus. The work taught humility, he said, and the sports taught will; both were needed in Jesus' army.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Back up. What leaves? Whose toilets?"

"Politicians," he said. "Congressmen."

"You go to their houses?"

"Sometimes," Zeke answered. "But mostly they come to us."

I was trying to picture it—Trent Lott pulling up in a black Lincoln, a toilet badly in need of a scrub protruding from the trunk. But

what Zeke meant was that he and his brothers raked and polished for politicians at a retreat called the Cedars, designed for their spiritual succor.

“Really?” I said. “Like who?”

“I can’t really say,” Zeke answered.

“Who runs it?”

“Nobody.”

“Who pays?”

“People just give money.” Then Zeke smiled. Enough questions. “You’re better off seeing it for yourself.”

“Is there an organization?” I asked.

“No,” he said, chuckling at my incomprehension. “Just Jesus.”

“So how do you join?”

“You don’t,” he said. He smiled again, such a broad grin. His teeth were as white as his sneakers. “You’re recommended.”

ZEKE RECOMMENDED ME to Ivanwald, and because I was curious and had recently quit a job to write a book about American religious communities, I decided to join for a while. I had no thought of investigative reporting; rather, my interest was personal. By the time I got there, I’d lived for short spells with “Cowboy Christians” in Texas, and with “Baba lovers,” America’s most benign cultists, in South Carolina, and in Kansas with hundreds of naked pagans. I thought Ivanwald would simply be one more bead on my agnostic rosary. I thought of the transformation Ivanwald had worked on Zeke, and I imagined it as a sort of spiritual spa where angry young men smoothed out their anxieties with new-agey masculine bonding. I thought it would be silly but relaxing. I didn’t imagine that what I’d find there would lead me into the heart of American fundamentalism, that a spell among Zeke’s Believers would propel me into dusty archives and the halls of power for the next several years. I had never thought of myself as a religious seeker, but at Ivanwald I became one. Since then, I’ve been searching, not for salvation, but for the meaning behind the words, the hints of power, that I found there.



Zeke was gone by the time I arrived. He had returned to finance, a path the brothers approved of, and to his fiancée, whom they did not—she was a graduate student and a free-spirited Scandinavian who loved to party. Jeff Connally, one of the Ivanwald house leaders who picked me up at Union Station in Washington one April evening, told me he thought Zeke might have made the wrong choice. Zeke's fiancée did not obey God. She was, he said, a "Jezebel." Jeff was a small, sharply handsome man with cloudy blue eyes above high cheekbones. When he said "Jezebel," he smiled.

Jeff had come with two other brothers: Gannon Sims, the Baylor grad, and Bengt Carlson, the other house leader, a twenty-four-year-old North Carolinian with spiky brown eyebrows. In the car, after a long silence, he said, "Well, I think you're probably the most misunderstood Ivanwalder ever."

"Yeah?" I said.

"I didn't really know how to explain you to the guys," Bengt went on. "So I just told him we got a new dude, he's from New York, he's a writer, he's Jewish, but he wants to know Jesus. And you know what they said?"

"No," I answered, my fingers curling around the door handle.

"*Bring him on!*" My three new brothers laughed, and Gannon's Volvo eased down tree-lined streets, each smaller and sleepier than the last, until we arrived at the gray colonial that was to be my new home. Bengt showed me my bunk and two drawers in a bureau and a cubbyhole in the bathroom for my toiletries. One by one, a dozen men drifted by in various states of undress, slapping me on the back or the ass or hugging me, calling me "brother." Someone was playing the soundtrack to *Hair*. One man crooned the words to "Fellatio," but then he said he was just kidding, and another switched out *Hair* for Neil Young's "Keep On Rockin' in the Free World." Pavel the Czech winked.

Ready for bed, the men introduced themselves. From Japan there was Yusuke, a management consultant studying Ivanwald in order to replicate it in Tokyo; from Ecuador, a former college soccer star named Raf, a Catholic who was open about his desire for business

connections. From Atlanta there was thick-necked Beau and bespectacled Josh, best friends who'd put off their postcollege careers; from Oklahoma, Dave, a tall, redheaded young man with a wide, daffy smile on a head of uncommon proportions. "Our pumpkin on a beanpole," one of the brothers called him, a "gift" to our brotherhood from former representative Steve Largent, who Dave said had arranged with Dave's father for Dave to be sent to Ivanwald to cure him of a mild case of college liberalism.

Before the lights went out after midnight, they came together to pray for me, Jeff Connally's voice just above a whisper, asking God to "break" me. Dave, already broken, mumbled an *amen*.<sup>2</sup>

IVANWALD, WHICH SITS at the end of Twenty-fourth Street North in Arlington, was known only to its residents and to the members and friends of the Family. The Family is in its own words an "invisible" association, though it has always been organized around public men. Senator Sam Brownback (R., Kansas), chair of a weekly, off-the-record meeting of religious right groups called the Values Action Team (VAT), is an active member, as is Representative Joe Pitts (R., Pennsylvania), an avuncular would-be theocrat who chairs the House version of the VAT. Others referred to as members include senators Jim DeMint of South Carolina, chairman of the Senate Steering Committee (the powerful conservative caucus cofounded back in 1974 by another Family associate, the late senator Carl Curtis of Nebraska); Pete Domenici of New Mexico (a Catholic and relatively moderate Republican; it's Domenici's status as one of the Senate's old lions that the Family covets, not his doctrinal purity); Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa); James Inhofe (R., Oklahoma); Tom Coburn (R., Oklahoma); John Thune (R., South Dakota); Mike Enzi (R., Wyoming); and John Ensign, the conservative casino heir elected to the Senate from Nevada, a brightly tanned, hapless figure who uses his Family connections to graft holiness to his gambling-fortune name. "Faith-based Democrats" Bill Nelson of Florida and Mark Pryor of Arkansas, sincere believers drawn rightward by their understanding of Christ's

teachings, are members, and Family stalwarts in the House include Representatives Frank Wolf (R., Virginia), Zach Wamp (R., Tennessee), and Mike McIntyre, a North Carolina Democrat who believes that the Ten Commandments are “the fundamental legal code for the laws of the United States” and thus ought to be on display in schools and courthouses.<sup>3</sup>

The Family’s historic roll call is even more striking: the late senator Strom Thurmond (R., South Carolina), who produced “confidential” reports on legislation for the Family’s leadership, presided for a time over the Family’s weekly Senate meeting, and the Dixiecrat senators Herman Talmadge of Georgia and Absalom Willis Robertson of Virginia—Pat Robertson’s father—served on the behind-the-scenes board of the organization. In 1974, a Family prayer group of Republican congressmen and former secretary of defense Melvin Laird helped convince President Gerald Ford that Richard Nixon deserved not just Christian forgiveness but also a legal pardon. That same year, Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist led the Family’s first weekly Bible study for federal judges.<sup>4</sup>

“I wish I could say more about it,” Ronald Reagan publicly demurred back in 1985, “but it’s working precisely because it is private.”

“We desire to see a leadership led by God,” reads a confidential mission statement. “Leaders of all levels of society who direct projects as they are led by the spirit.” Another principle expanded upon is stealthiness; members are instructed to pursue political jujitsu by making use of secular leaders “in the work of advancing His kingdom,” and to avoid whenever possible the label *Christian* itself, lest they alert enemies to that advance. Regular prayer groups, or “cells” as they’re often called, have met in the Pentagon and at the Department of Defense, and the Family has traditionally fostered strong ties with businessmen in the oil and aerospace industries.

The Family’s use of the term “cell” long predates the word’s current association with terrorism. Its roots are in the Cold War, when leaders of the Family deliberately emulated the organizing techniques of communism. In 1948, a group of Senate staffers met to discuss

ways that the Family’s “cell and leadership groups” could recruit elites unwilling to participate in the “mass meeting approach” of populist fundamentalism. Two years later, the Family declared that with democracy inadequate to the fight against godlessness, such cells should function to produce political “atomic energy”; that is, deals and alliances that could not be achieved through the clumsy machinations of legislative debate would instead radiate quietly out of political cells. More recently, Senator Sam Brownback told me that the privacy of Family cells makes them *safe spaces* for men of power—an appropriation of another term borrowed from an enemy, feminism.<sup>5</sup> “In this closer relationship,” a document for members reads, “God will give you more insight into your own geographical area and your sphere of influence.” One’s cell should become “an invisible ‘believing group’” out of which “agreements reached in faith and in prayer around the person of Jesus Christ” lead to action that will appear to the world to be unrelated to any centralized organization.

In 1979, the former Nixon aide and Watergate felon Charles W. Colson—born again through the guidance of the Family and the ministry of a CEO of arms manufacturer Raytheon—estimated the Family’s strength at 20,000, although the number of dedicated “associates” around the globe is much smaller (around 350 as of 2006). The Family maintains a closely guarded database of associates, members, and “key men,” but it issues no cards, collects no official dues. Members are asked not to speak about the group or its activities.<sup>6</sup>

“The Movement,” a member of the Family’s inner circle once wrote to the group’s chief South African operative, “is simply inexplicable to people who are not intimately acquainted with it.” The Family’s “political” initiatives, he continues, “have always been misunderstood by ‘outsiders.’ As a result of very bitter experiences, therefore, we have learned never to commit to paper any discussions or negotiations that are taking place. There is no such thing as a ‘confidential’ memorandum, and leakage always seems to occur. Thus, I would urge you not to put on paper *anything* relating to any of the work that you are doing . . . [unless] you know the recipient well

enough to put at the top of the page ‘*PLEASE DESTROY AFTER READING.*’”\*

“If I told you who has participated and who participates until this day, you would not believe it,” the Family’s longtime leader, Doug Coe, said in a rare interview in 2001. “You’d say, ‘You mean that scoundrel? That despot?’”<sup>7</sup>

A friendly, plainspoken Oregonian with dark, curly hair, a lazy smile, and the broad, thrown-back shoulders of a man who recognizes few superiors, Coe has worked for the Family since 1959 and been “First Brother” since founder Abraham Vereide was “promoted” to heaven in 1969. (Recently, a successor named Dick Foth, a longtime friend to John Ashcroft, assumed some of Coe’s duties, but Coe remains the preeminent figure.) Coe denies possessing any authority, but Family members speak of him with a mixture of intimacy and awe. Doug Coe, they say—most people refer to him by his first and last name—is closer to Jesus than perhaps any other man alive, and thus privy to information the rest of us are too spiritually “immature” to understand. For instance, the necessity of secrecy. Doug Coe says it allows the scoundrels and the despots to turn their talents toward the service of Jesus—who, Doug Coe says, prefers power to piety—by shielding their work on His behalf from a hardhearted public, unwilling to believe in their good intentions. In a sermon posted online by a fundamentalist website, Coe compares this method to the mob’s. “His Body”—the Body of Christ, that is, by which he means Christendom—“functions invisibly like the mafia. . . . They keep their organization invisible. Everything visible is transitory. Everything invisible is permanent and lasts forever. The more you can make your organization invisible, the more influence it will have.”

For that very reason, the Family has operated under many guises, some active, some defunct: National Committee for Christian Leadership, International Christian Leadership, National Leadership

\*In a fit of pique or stunning stupidity, the recipient immediately responded to inform the Family that he accepted the rebuke and had made multiple copies of it for the other South African operatives as well, one of which survives. James F. Bell to Ross Main, May 19, 1975. Folder 25, Box 254, Box 459, Billy Graham Center Archives. Main to Doug Coe, June 19, 1975. *Ibid.*

Council, the Fellowship Foundation, the International Foundation. The Fellowship Foundation alone has an annual budget of nearly \$14 million. The bulk of it, \$12 million, goes to “mentoring, counseling, and partnering with friends around the world,” but that represents only a fraction of the network’s finances. The Family does not pay big salaries; one man receives \$121,000, while Doug Coe seems to live on almost nothing (his income fluctuates wildly according to the off-the-books support of “friends”), and none of the fourteen men on the board of directors (among them an oil executive, a defense contractor, and government officials past and present) receives a penny. But within the organization money moves in peculiar ways, “man-to-man” financial support that’s off the books, a constant proliferation of new nonprofits big and small that submit to the Family’s spiritual authority, money flowing up and down the quiet hierarchy. “I give or loan money to hundreds of people, or have my friends do so,” says Coe.<sup>8</sup>

Each group connected to the Family raises funds independently. Ivanwald, for example, was financed in part by an entity called the Wilberforce Foundation. Major evangelical organizations such as Young Life and the Navigators have undertaken the support of Family operatives, and the Family has in turn helped launch Christian conservative powerhouses such as Chuck Colson’s Prison Fellowship, a worldwide ministry that has declared “civil war” on secularism, and projects such as Community Bible Study, through which a failing Texas oilman named George W. Bush discovered faith in 1985.

The Family’s only publicized gathering is the National Prayer Breakfast, which it established in 1953 and which, with congressional sponsorship, it continues to organize every February at the Washington, D.C., Hilton. Some 3,000 dignitaries, representing scores of nations and corporate interests, pay \$425 each to attend. For most, the breakfast is just that, muffins and prayer, but some stay on for days of seminars organized around Christ’s messages for particular industries. In years past, the Family organized such events for executives in oil, defense, insurance, and banking. The 2007 event drew, among others, a contingent of aid-hungry defense ministers from

Eastern Europe, Pakistan's famously corrupt Benazir Bhutto, and a Sudanese general linked to genocide in Darfur.

Here's how it can work: Dennis Bakke, former CEO of AES, the largest independent power producer in the world, and a Family insider, took the occasion of the 1997 Prayer Breakfast to invite Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, the Family's "key man" in Africa, to a private dinner at a mansion, just up the block from the Family's Arlington headquarters. Bakke, the author of a popular business book titled *Joy at Work*, has long preached an ethic of social responsibility inspired by his evangelical faith and his free-market convictions: "I am trying to sell a way of life," he has said. "I am a cultural imperialist." That's a phrase he uses to be provocative; he believes that his Jesus is so universal that everyone wants Him. And, apparently, His business opportunities: Bakke was one of the pioneer thinkers of energy deregulation, the laissez-faire fever dream that culminated in the meltdown of Enron. But there was other, less-noticed fallout, such as the no-bid deal Bakke made with Museveni at the 1997 Prayer Breakfast for a \$500-million dam close to the source of the White Nile—in waters considered sacred by Uganda's 2.5-million-strong Busoga minority. AES announced that the Busoga had agreed to "relocate" the spirits of their dead. They weren't the only ones opposed; first environmentalists (Museveni had one American arrested and deported) and then even other foreign investors revolted against a project that seemed like it might actually increase the price of power for the poor. Bakke didn't worry. "We don't go away," he declared. He dispatched a young man named Christian Wright, the son of one of the Prayer Breakfast's organizers, to be AES's in-country liaison to Museveni; Wright was later accused of authorizing at least \$400,000 in bribes. He claimed his signature had been forged.<sup>9</sup>

"I'm sure a lot of people use the Fellowship as a way to network, a way to gain entrée to all sorts of people," says Michael Cromartie, an evangelical Washington think tanker who's critical of the Family's lack of transparency. "And entrée they do get."<sup>10</sup>

The president usually arrives an hour early, meets perhaps ten heads of state—usually from small nations, such as Albania, or

Ecuador, or Benin, that the United States uses as proxies in the United Nations—without publicity, and perhaps a dozen other useful guests chosen by the Family. “It totally circumvents the State Department and the usual vetting within the administration that such a meeting would require,” an anonymous government informant told a sympathetic sociologist. “If Doug Coe can get you some face time with the President of the United States, then you will take his call and seek his friendship. That’s power.”<sup>11</sup>

The president always speaks last, usually to do no more than spread a dull glaze of civil religion over the proceedings. For years, the main address came from Billy Graham, but now it’s often delivered by an outsider to Christian conservatism, such as Saudia Arabia’s longtime ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar, or Senator Joe Lieberman, or, as in 2006, Bono. “This is *really* weird,” said the rock star.

“Anything can happen,” according to an internal planning document, “the Koran could even be read, but JESUS is there! He is infiltrating the world.”<sup>12</sup> Too bland most years to merit much press, the breakfast is regarded by the Family as merely a tool in a larger purpose: to recruit the powerful attendees into smaller, more frequent prayer meetings, where they can “meet Jesus man to man.”

In the process of introducing powerful men to Jesus, the Family has managed to effect a number of behind-the-scenes acts of diplomacy. In 1978 it helped the Carter administration organize a worldwide call to prayer with Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat. At the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast, Family leaders persuaded their South African client, the Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, to stand down from the possibility of civil war with Nelson Mandela. But such benign acts appear to be the exception to the rule. During the 1960s, the Family forged relationships between the U.S. government and some of the most oppressive regimes in the world, arranging prayer networks in the U.S. Congress for the likes of General Costa e Silva, dictator of Brazil; General Suharto, dictator of Indonesia; and General Park Chung Hee, dictator of South Korea. “The Fellowship’s reach into governments around the world,” observes David Kuo, a



former special assistant to the president in Bush's first term, "is almost impossible to overstate or even grasp."<sup>13</sup>

In 1983, Doug Coe and General John W. Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, informed the civilian ambassadors of the Central American nations that the Prayer Breakfast would be used to arrange "private sessions" for their generals with "responsible leaders" in the United States; the invitations would be sent from Republican senators Richard Lugar and Mark Hatfield, and Dixiecrat John Stennis, the Mississippi segregationist after whom an aircraft carrier is now named. The Family went on to build friendships between the Reagan administration and the Salvadoran general Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, found liable in 2002 by a Florida jury for the torture of thousands, and the Honduran general Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, who before his assassination was linked to both the CIA and death squads. El Salvador became one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the Cold War; U.S. military aid to Honduras jumped from \$4 million per year to \$79 million.<sup>14</sup> In Africa, the Family greased the switch of U.S. patronage from one client state, Ethiopia, to another that they felt was more promising: Somalia. "We work with power where we can," Doug Coe explains, "build new power where we can't." Former secretary of state James Baker, a longtime participant in a prayer cell facilitated by Coe, recalls that when he visited Albania after the collapse of Eastern European communism, the Balkan nation's foreign minister met him on the tarmac with the words, "I greet you in the name of Doug Coe."<sup>15</sup>

Coe's status within Washington has been quantitatively calculated by D. Michael Lindsay, a Rice University sociologist who traded on his past work with evangelicals as a pollster—and his sympathetic perspective—to win interviews with 360 evangelical elites. "One in three mentioned Coe or the Fellowship as an important influence," he reports. "Indeed, there is no other organization like the Fellowship, especially among religious groups, in terms of its access or clout among the country's leadership."<sup>16</sup> At the 1990 National Prayer Breakfast, President George H. W. Bush praised Doug Coe for what he described as "quiet diplomacy, I wouldn't say secret diplomacy."

Bush was apparently ignorant of one of the nation's oldest laws, the Logan Act, which forbids private citizens to do just that lest foreign policy slip out of democratic control. Sometimes Coe's role *is* formal; in 2000, he met with Pakistan's top economic officials as a "special envoy" of Representative Joe Pitts, a key power broker for the region, and when he and Bush Senior hosted an off-the-record luncheon with Iraq's ambassador to the United States in the mid-1980s, he may also have been acting in some official capacity. Mostly, however, he travels around the world as a private citizen. He has prayed with dictators, golfed with presidents, and wrestled with an island king in the Pacific. He has visited nearly every world capital, often with congressmen at his side, "making friends" and inviting them back to the Cedars, the Family's headquarters, bought in 1978 with \$1.5 million donated by (among others) Tom Phillips, then the CEO of arms manufacturer Raytheon, several oil executives, and Clement Stone, the man who financed the campaign to insert "under God," into the Pledge of Allegiance.<sup>17</sup>

Coe, who while I was at Ivanwald lived with his wife in an elegantly appointed carriage house on the mansion's grounds, considers the mansion a refuge for the persecuted and the afflicted: Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas retreated there when Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment; Senator David Durenberger, a conservative Catholic, boarded there to escape marital problems that began with rumors of an affair and ended with Durenberger's pleading guilty to misuse of public funds; James Watt, Reagan's anti-environmental secretary of the interior, weathered the controversy surrounding his appointment in one of the Cedars' bedrooms.<sup>18</sup> A waterfall has been carved into the mansion's broad lawn, from which a bronze bald eagle watches over a forested hillside sloping down to the Potomac River. The mansion is white and pillared and surrounded by magnolias, and by red trees that do not so much tower above it as whisper. The Cedars is named for these trees, but Family members speak of it as a person. "The Cedars has a heart for the poor," they like to say.

By *poor* they mean not the thousands of literal poor living in

Washington's ghettos, but rather the poor *in spirit*: the senators, generals, and prime ministers who coast to the end of Twenty-fourth Street in Arlington in black limousines and town cars and hulking SUVs to meet one another, to meet Jesus, to pay homage to the god of the Cedars. There they forge relationships beyond the "din of the vox populi" and "throwaway religion" in favor of the truths of the Family. Declaring God's covenant with the Jews broken, the group's core members call themselves *the new chosen*.<sup>19</sup>

The brothers of Ivanwald were the Family's next generation, its high priests in training. Sometimes the brothers would ask me why I was there. They knew that I was "half Jewish," that I was a writer, and that I was from New York City, which most of them considered to be only slightly less wicked than Baghdad or Paris. I didn't lie to them. I told my brothers that I was there to meet Jesus, and I was: the Jesus of the Family, whose ways are secret. The brothers were certain that He had sent me to them for a reason, and perhaps they were right. What follows is my personal testimony, to the enduring power of this strange American god.

AT IVANWALD, MEN learn to be leaders by loving their leaders. "They're so busy loving us," a brother once explained to me, "but who's loving them?" We were. The brothers each paid four hundred dollars per month for room and board, but we were also the caretakers of the Cedars, cleaning its gutters, mowing its lawns, whacking weeds, blowing leaves, and sanding. And we were called to serve on Tuesday mornings, when the Cedars hosted a regular prayer breakfast typically presided over by Ed Meese. Meese is best remembered for his oddly prurient antiporn crusade as Ronald Reagan's ethically challenged attorney general; less-often recalled is his 1988 resignation following a special prosecutor's investigation of his intervention on behalf of an oil pipeline for Saddam Hussein. He remains a powerful Washington presence, a quick-witted man who presents himself as an old gumshoe, carrying messages back and forth between social and fiscal conservatives. In 2005 and 2006, he shepherded Supreme

Court justices John Roberts and Samuel Alito through their nomination processes; in 2007, he gave the religious Right's stamp of approval to Attorney General Michael Mukasey.<sup>20</sup> Each week at the Cedars, his breakfast brought together a rotating group of ambassadors, businessmen, and American politicians. Three of Ivanwald's brothers also attended.

The morning I was invited, Charlene, the cook, scrambled up eggs with blue tortillas, Italian sausage, peppers, and papaya. Three women from Potomac Point, an "Ivanwald for young women" across the road from the Cedars, came to serve. They wore red lipstick and long skirts (makeup and "feminine" attire were required on duty) and had, after several months of cleaning and serving in the Cedars while the brothers worked outside, grown unimpressed by the high-powered clientele. "Girls don't sit in on the breakfasts," one of them told me, though she said that none of them minded because it was "just politics," and the Bible generally reserves such doings for men.<sup>21</sup>

The breakfast began with a prayer and a sprinkle of scripture from Meese, who sat at the head of a long, dark oak table. Matthew 11:27: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." That morning's chosen introduced themselves. They were businessmen from Dallas and Oregon, a Chinese Christian dissident leader, and two ambassadors, from Benin and Rwanda, who sat side by side. Rwanda's representative, Dr. Richard Sezibera, was an intense man who refused to eat his eggs and melon. He drank cup after cup of coffee, and his eyes were bloodshot. A man I didn't recognize, whom Charlene identified as a former senator, suggested that negotiators from Rwanda and Congo, trapped in a war that had killed more than 2 million, should stop worrying about who will get the diamonds and the oil and instead focus on who will get Jesus. "Power sharing is not going to work unless we change their hearts," he said.

Sezibera stared, incredulous. Meese chuckled and opened his mouth to speak, but Sezibera interrupted him. "It is not so simple," the Rwandan said, his voice flat and low. Meese smiled. Everyone in

the Family loves rebukes, and here was Rwanda rebuking them. The former senator nodded. Meese murmured, “Yes,” stroking his maroon leather Bible, and the words “Thank you, Jesus” rippled in whispers around the table as I poured Sezibera another cup of coffee.

The brothers also on occasion sat in quietly on meetings at the Family’s four-story, redbrick Washington townhouse, a former convent at 133 C Street SE, run by a Family affiliate called the C Street Foundation. Eight congressmen lived there, paying below-market rents.<sup>22</sup> The C Street House is registered as a church, which allows it to avoid taxes. There’s a house mother and a TV the size of a small movie screen, usually tuned to sports, and a prayer calendar in the kitchen that tells residents which “demonic strongholds,” such as Buddhism or Hinduism, they are to wage spiritual warfare against each day. Eight Christian college women do most of the serving, but we brothers were on occasion called to stand in for them, the better to find spiritual mentors.

The day I worked at C Street, half a dozen congressmen were trading stories over lunch about the power of prayer to “break through” just about anything: political opposition, personal pride, a dull policy briefing. They spoke of their devotions as if they were running backs moving the ball, chuckling over how prayer flummoxed the “other team.” They didn’t mean Democrats—a few *were* Democrats—but the godless “enemy,” broadly defined. All credit to the coach, said one congressman, who was dabbing his lips with a red napkin that read “Let Me Call You SWEETHEART . . . I Can’t Remember Your Name.” Later that day, I ran into Doug Coe himself, who was tutoring Todd Tiaht, a Republican representative from Kansas. Tiaht is a short shot glass of a man, two parts flawless hair and one part teeth. He wanted to know the best way “for the Christian to win the race with the Muslim.” The Muslim, he said, has too many babies, while Americans kill too many of theirs.

Coe agreed that too many Muslim babies could be a problem. But he was more concerned that Tiaht’s focus on labels like *Muslim* and *Christian* might get in the way of the congressman’s prayers. “Religion” distracts people from Jesus, Coe said, and allows them to isolate

Christ's will from their work in the world. God's law and our laws should be identical "People separate it out," he warned Tiaht. "'Oh, okay, I got religion, that's private.' As if Jesus doesn't know anything about building highways or Social Security. We gotta take Jesus out of the religious wrapping."

"All right, how do we do that?" Tiaht asked.

"A covenant," Doug Coe answered. The congressman half smiled, as if caught between confessing his ignorance and pretending he knew what Doug Coe was talking about. "Like the Mafia," Coe clarified. "Look at the strength of their bonds." He made a fist and held it before Tiaht's face. Tiaht nodded, squinting. "See, for them it's honor," Coe said. "For us, it's Jesus."

Doug Coe listed other men who had changed the world through the strength of the covenants they had forged with their "brothers": "Look at Hitler," he said. "Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, bin Laden." The Family possessed a weapon those leaders lacked: the "total Jesus" of a brotherhood in Christ.

"That's what you get with a covenant," said Doug Coe. "Jesus plus nothing."<sup>23</sup>

THE REGIMEN AT Ivanwald was so precise it was relaxing: no swearing, no drinking, no sex, no self. Watch out for magazines and don't waste time on newspapers and never watch TV. Eat meat, study the Gospels, play basketball; God loves a man who can sink a three-pointer. *Pray to be broken*. "O Heavenly Father. Dear Jesus. Help me be humble. Let me do Your will." Every morning began with a prayer, some days with outsiders—a former Ivanwald brother, now a businessman, or another executive who used tales of high finance to illuminate our lessons from scripture, which he supplemented with xeroxed midrash from *Fortune*—and Fridays with the women of Potomac Point. But most days it was just us boys, bleary-eyed, gulping coffee and sugared cereal as Bengt and Jeff C. laid out lines of Holy Word across the table like strategy.

The dining room had once been a deck, but the boys had walled

it in and roofed it over and unrolled a red Persian carpet, transforming the space into a sort of monastic meeting hall, with two long tables end to end, ringed by a dozen chairs and two benches. The first day I visited Ivanwald, Bengt cleared a space for me at the head of the table and sat to my right. Beside him, Wayne slumped in his chair, his eyes hidden by a cowboy hat. Across from him sat Beau, an Atlantan with the build and athletic intensity of a wrestler, still wearing the boxers and T-shirt he'd slept in. Bengt alone looked sharp, his hair combed, golf shirt tucked tightly into pleated chinos.

Bengt asked Gannon to read our text for that morning, Psalm 139: "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me." The very first line made Bengt smile; this was, in his view, an awesome thing for God to have done.

Bengt's manners and naive charm preceded him in every encounter. He was kind to his brothers and excellent with small children, tall and strong and competent with any tool, deadly whenever he got hold of the ball—any ball; all sports seemed to Bengt just a step more challenging than breathing. His eyes were deep and kind of sad, but he liked to laugh, and when he did he sounded like a friendly donkey, an Eyore for whom things were suddenly not so bad. When you told him a story, he'd respond, "*Goll-y!*" just to be nice. When genuinely surprised, he'd exclaim, "*Good ni-ight!*" Sometimes it was hard to remember that he was a self-professed revolutionary. He asked Gannon to keep reading, and then leaned back and listened.

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there."

Bengt raised a hand. "That's great, dude. Let's talk about that." The room fell silent as Bengt stared into his Bible, running his finger up and down the gilded edge of the page. "Guys," he said. "What—how does that make you feel?"

"Known," said Gannon, almost in a whisper.

Bengt nodded. He was looking for something else, but he didn't know where it was. "What does it make you think of?"

"Jesus?" said Beau.

Bengt stroked his chin. “Yeah . . . Let me read you a little more.” He read in a monotone, accelerating as he went, as if he could persuade us through a sheer heap of words. “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb,” he concluded. His lips curled into a half smile. “Man! I mean, that’s intense, right? ‘In my mother’s womb’—God’s right in there with you.” He grinned. “It’s like,” he said, “it’s like, you *can’t* run. Doesn’t matter where you turn, ’cause Jesus is gonna be there, just waiting for you.”

Beau’s eyes cleared, and Gannon nodded. “Yeah, brother,” Bengt said, an eyebrow arched. “Jesus is *smart*. He’s gonna get you.”

Gannon shook his head. “Oh, he’s already got me.”

“Me, too,” Beau chimed. Then each man clasped his hands into one fist and pressed it against his forehead or his chin and prayed, eyes closed and Jesus all over his skin.

THE SWEETEST WORDS of devotion I heard at Ivanwald came from the one man there who thought Jesus had a message more complicated than “Obey.” Riley was the son of a Republican businessman from Wisconsin, but he sounded like a Spaniard who’d learned his English in Sweden. He’d “spent time overseas,” he explained, and the accent had just rubbed off. Nobody believed him—he was clearly the most pretentious follower of Jesus since Saul changed his name to Paul and declared himself a Christian—but nobody scorned him for his airs. Riley wore his dirty brown hair long and tied in a braided ponytail, and if it was cool outside he favored a Guatemalan-style poncho. He didn’t share the views of the other brothers; in fact, he stayed only long enough to attend a demonstration in Washington against Plan Colombia, a nearly \$5-billion military aid package for that country’s right-wing regime and U.S. defense contractors that began in 1999.

The Saturday of the demonstration, Riley slipped out before dawn, and I woke up early to attend a three-hour prayer meeting at the Cedars with some elder brethren: a Republican political couple from Oregon, an old stalwart of the movement who had for many years presided over a Family retreat in Bermuda called Willowbank,



and John Nakamura, a businessman who that year was volunteering as host of the Cedars. We met in a room appointed with statues of bald eagles and photos of friends of the Family: there was Richard Nixon, scowling over the sofa, and there was Jimmy Carter, the first openly evangelical chief executive, flashing his toothy smile in a frame on the coffee table.<sup>24</sup> We got on our knees and held hands, and together we prayed, some of us rocking, some of us approaching the gift of tongues, Jesus-Jesus-Jesus, praying with Nakamura's guidance for Dick Cheney's ailing heart and for Bush, "who has said he knows the Lord." Roy Cook, one of Doug Coe's oldest friends, prayed for Jesus to "turn the evil" in the hearts of journalists, who "tell stories that go against the work Jesus is doing at the Cedars." Then we began praying about the demonstration Riley was attending. We prayed that the "stratagems of evil and wickedness"—that'd be Riley—would be washed from the streets by God's rain.

That night the brothers had their weekly house meeting. There was serious business. While I'd been praying at the Cedars, Riley had been arrested at the demonstration. Released after several hours, he hunkered down on Ivanwald's floor cross-legged and unraveled a tale of crowds and cops, handcuffs, and what he believed to be gentle heroism. He'd ridden in a police van with an old man, impossibly frail, soaked from the rain. "I asked him if he knew Jesus," Riley said, "and this old man smiled. So I asked him why he had done this thing, let himself be put into jail, and do you know what he said?" The brothers did not. "He said, 'For me it is a form of prayer.'" After the police let Riley go, he took the metro to Arlington and walked to Ivanwald in a driving rain. "At first I was not happy. But then I thought about what that old man said, and the rain began to change, or maybe I did. As I walked home to you brothers, the rain felt like a baptism."

The brothers were quiet. Finally, Jeff C. spoke up from across the room. "Thank you, brother." Murmurs rippled around the circle. Nervous laughter followed. Beau said, "Riley, can we pray for you?" and Riley said yes. Beau then asked Riley if he would lead us in this prayer. He would. So we closed our eyes and prayed with Riley for

the old man soaked to the bone and then for the police and for an end to Plan Colombia, at which point the men's prayers sputtered into confusion; wasn't military aid between one God-led government and another a good thing? The brothers were relieved when Riley announced he was going back to Wisconsin. He walked into the pouring rain with his backpack and his sleeping bag. It was a mile and a half to the station. Nobody offered him a ride.

After Riley left, the brothers stood up and started moving furniture. "Okay," Jeff C. said, clapping his hands. "You ready, brothers?" I looked around. My brothers were blank-faced or smirking, clearing a space on the floor. "Jeff," Jeff C. said to me, "Andrew"—the other new man, a balding Australian who said he'd come to Ivanwald at the recommendation of a conservative Australian politician named Bruce Baird—"you guys are going to arm wrestle. Think of it," he said, putting a finger on his chin and mocking a pose of thoughtfulness, "as a test of your manhood."

He instructed us to lie down on our bellies. We lay like snakes facing each other and rose up on torsos, gripping hands, awaiting the signal.

"Fumble!" someone shouted. "Fumble! Fumble!"

I twisted around to find out what they meant, but not in time—all I saw was a blur of T-shirts and legs flying at me, and then the first man hit, slapping me back to the floor and flattening my lungs into empty airbags. Then the second man landed, and the third, and someone shouted, "Get his arms!" Did they think I was a stratagem of wickedness? Had they decided that the evil in my journalist's heart could not be overcome even by Jesus? I swung my one free fist and felt it collide with a stomach that remained unmoved because it was being pressed down by the weight of two, three more men, each of them flailing away at my ribs. I felt my face redden and my ears fill with a roar, and if I'd had any breath left, I would have screamed. But then I heard the brothers laughing, and in between blows I felt hands slapping my ass and ruffling my hair, and I understood what was happening. This was scripture in action, the verses we all memorized together (failure to do so meant sleeping in the cold basement): Ecclesiastes

4:9, “Two are better than one”; Philippians 2:2, “fulfill ye my joy that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” The brothers were of one mind and thirteen bodies, crushing Christ into me, and there was nothing I could do but to give in to their love. They wanted to welcome me. To brotherhood, to Jesus, to the Family. I gasped. A man near the bottom of the pile on top of me squeaked. “I can’t breathe,” someone above me whispered. One more man fell on top of us, jumping from the couch onto the tower. The Australian, who’d somehow escaped full fumble, gave it a push. It tumbled, I was free, and Jeff C. offered me his hand. Ecclesiastes 4:10: “If one falls down, his friend can help him up.”

“Congratulations, brother,” he said. “You’re one of us.”

A FEW WEEKS into my stay, David Coe, Doug’s son, dropped by Ivanwald. My brothers and I assembled in the living room, where David had draped his tall frame over a burgundy leather recliner like a frat boy, one leg hanging over a padded arm.

“You guys,” David said, “are here to learn how to rule the world.” He was in his late forties, with dark, gray-flecked hair, an olive complexion, teeth like a slab of white marble, dark eyes so big they didn’t need to move to take in the room. We sat around him in a rough circle, on couches and chairs, as the afternoon light slanted through the wooden blinds onto a wall adorned with a giant tapestry of the Last Supper. Rafael, a wealthy Ecuadoran, had a hard time with English, and he didn’t understand what David had said. He stared, lips parted in puzzlement. David seemed to like that. He stared back, holding Raf’s gaze like it was a pretty thing he’d found on the ground. “You have very intense eyes,” David said.

“Thank you,” Raf mumbled.

“Hey,” David said, “let’s talk about the Old Testament.” His voice was like a river that’s smooth on the surface but swirling beneath. “Who”—he paused—“would you say are its good guys?”

“Noah,” suggested Ruggi, a shaggy-haired guy from Kentucky with a silver loop on the upper ridge of his right ear.

“Moses,” offered Josh, a lean man from Atlanta more interested in serving Jesus than his father’s small empire of shower door manufacturing.

“David,” Beau volunteered.

“King David,” David Coe said. “That’s a good one. David. Hey. What would you say made King David a good guy?” He giggled, not from nervousness but from barely containable delight.

“Faith?” Beau said. “His faith was so strong?”

“Yeah.” David nodded as if he hadn’t heard that before. “Hey, you know what’s interesting about King David?” From the blank stares of the others, I could see that they did not. Many didn’t even carry a full Bible, preferring a slim volume of New Testament Gospels and Epistles and Old Testament Psalms, respected but seldom read. Others had the whole book, but the gold gilt on the pages of the first two-thirds remained undisturbed. “King David,” David Coe went on, “liked to do really, really bad things.” He chuckled. “Here’s this guy who slept with another man’s wife—Bathsheba, right?—and then basically murdered her husband. And this guy is one of our heroes.” David shook his head. “I mean, Jiminy Christmas, God likes this guy! What,” he said, “*is that* all about?”

“Is it because he tried?” asked Bengt. “He wanted to do the right thing?” Bengt knew the Bible, Old Testament and New, better than any of the others, but he offered his answer with a question mark on the end. Bengt was dutiful in checking his worst sin, his fierce pride, and he frequently turned his certainties into questions.

“That’s nice, Bengt,” David said. “But it isn’t the answer. Anyone else?”

“Because he was chosen,” I said. For the first time David looked my way.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “Chosen. Interesting set of rules, isn’t it?” He turned to Beau. “Beau, let’s say I hear you raped three little girls. And now here you are at Ivanwald. What would I think of you, Beau?”

Beau, given to bellowing Ivanwald’s daily call to sports like a bull elephant, shrank into the cushions. “Probably that I’m pretty bad?”

“No, Beau.” David’s voice was kind. “I wouldn’t.” He drew Beau

back into the circle with a stare that seemed to have its own gravitational pull. Beau nodded, brow furrowed, as if in the presence of something profound. “Because,” David continued, “I’m not here to judge you. That’s not my job. I’m here for only one thing. Do you know what that is?”

Understanding blossomed in Beau’s eyes. “Jesus?” he said. David smiled and winked. “Hey,” he said. “Did you guys see *Toy Story*?” Half the room had. “Remember how there was a toy cowboy, Woody? And then the boy who owns Woody gets a new toy, a spaceman? Only the toy spaceman thinks he’s real. Thinks he’s a real spaceman, and he’s got to figure out what he’s doing on this strange planet. So what does Woody say to him? He says, ‘You’re just a toy.’” David sat quietly, waiting for us to absorb this. “Just a toy. We’re not really spacemen. We’re just toys. Created for God. For His pleasure, nothing else. Just a toy. Period.”

He walked to the National Geographic map of the world mounted on the wall. “You guys know about Genghis Khan?” he asked. “Genghis was a man with a vision. He conquered”—David stood on the couch under the map, tracing, with his hand, half the northern hemisphere—“nearly everything. He devastated nearly everything. His enemies? He beheaded them.” David swiped a finger across his throat. “Dop, dop, dop, dop.”

Genghis Khan’s genius, David went on, lay in his understanding that there could be only one king. When Genghis entered a defeated city, he would call in the local headman. Conversion to the Khan’s cause was not an option, as Genghis was uninterested in halfhearted deputies. Instead, said David, Genghis would have the man stuffed into a crate, and over the crate’s surface would be spread a tablecloth, on which a wonderful meal would be arrayed.

“And then, while the man suffocated, Genghis ate, and he didn’t even hear the man’s screams.” David stood on the couch, a finger in the air. “Do you know what that means?”

To their credit, my brothers did not. Perhaps on account of my earlier insight, David turned to me. “I think so,” I said. “Out with the old, in with the new.”

Yes, he nodded. “Christ’s parable of the wineskins. You can’t pour new into old.” One day, he continued, some monks from Europe show up in Genghis Khan’s court. Genghis welcomes them in the name of God. Says that in truth, they worship the same great Lord. Then why, the monks ask, must he conquer the world? “I don’t ask,” says Genghis. “I submit.”

David returned to his chair. “We elect our leaders,” he said. “Jesus elects his.”

He reached over and squeezed the arm of Pavel. “Isn’t that great?” David said. “That’s the way everything in life happens. If you’re a person known to be around Jesus, you can go and do anything. And that’s who you guys are. When you leave here, you’re not only going to know the value of Jesus, you’re going to know the people who rule the world. It’s about vision. Get your vision straight, then relate. Talk to the people who rule the world, and help *them* obey. Obey Him. If I obey Him myself, I help others do the same. You know why? Because I become a warning. *We* become a warning. We warn everybody that the future king is coming. Not just of this country or that but of the world.” Then he pointed at the map, toward the Khan’s vast, reclaimable empire.

THAT NIGHT, I slipped out of the house at close to eleven, padded around the pool of light cast by the streetlamp, and began making my way up the grassy hill of the park across the road. I had my cell phone with me, and behind the big oak tree at the top I hoped I could call a friend undetected. David Coe’s lesson had been more than I could take without a dose of ordinary conversation, the kind that doesn’t involve “warnings” and decapitations. But halfway up the slope a voice shot through the dark and hit me like a hardball: “Halt! Who goes there?”

Ten yards to my right stood Jeff C., lit by a pale yellow full moon.

“Secret orders, man,” I said. “Going to have to kill you.” The joke was as lame as Jeff C.’s, and neither of us laughed. I walked slowly in

his direction, debating whether I should tell him I was out there for meditation or for exercise. Phone calls—contact with the outside world—was allowed but discouraged for new brothers. A late-night run, I decided. Endurance was something the brothers respected, endurance and strength and coordination, honing your body with exercise just as you hone your soul with prayer. Cardiovascular health was especially important if you wanted to have a heart for spiritual war.

But that night, Jeff C. had a heart for contemplation. “Look at the old fort,” he said, gesturing down the hill at Ivanwald. “Guys come here and get *changed*. I think of all the guys that have gone through here over the years, and I wonder, How many of ’em come back? How many of ’em end up staying at the mansion?”

Along with Bengt, Jeff C. was a house leader, but if you asked him what he did for a living, he would cock his head, half smile, crinkle his sapphire-blue eyes like a natural-born southern lawyer—which is what his father was—and say, “Well, I work for the revolution.” He’d studied rhetoric at Chapel Hill, and he loved making declarations that begged a conversation mainly because he’d laced them with subtle, nagging aggression.

“Maybe you’ll come back to the Cedars one day,” he said. He squeezed my shoulder. “C’mon, brother,” he said, his fingers digging in and guiding me down the hill. “You can make your calls tomorrow.”

The next morning, Jeff C. and I were up early, lacing our sneakers for a run down by the river. Sitting on the porch, he asked me why my Bible was a King James. I said I liked the passion of the language. “Yeah,” Jeff C. said—he always agreed with everything, at first. Then he looked up from his sneakers as if something had just occurred to him. “You know, I’m not sure it’s about passion.”

“No?” I said.

“No, I think it’s about Jesus.”

“Not the Old Testament,” I said.

“Well,” said Jeff C., “you take Psalms, for example, every one of them, the way to read it is like it’s just another piece of Jesus.” He stared at me, half smiling, head cocked.

“Which part,” I asked, “would you say is in Psalm 137?” Jeff C.’s lip twitched, his eyes shifted. “You know,” I said, “‘O Daughter of Babylon?’” He arched his left eyebrow. “‘O Daughter of Babylon,’” I recited, “‘who art to be destroyed, happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us, happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.’ Which part of Jesus is that?”

Jeff C. smiled fully and nodded. “Brother,” he said, clapping a hand on my knee. “I’m not sure. But I’m pretty sure He’ll let you know when it’s time.” Then he stood up and ran, waving over his shoulder as he went. He knew he was too fast for me.

WE WERE AT Ivanwald, a Family associate named Terry instructed, to study “the fundamentals, as opposed to the fancy plays,” by which he meant “discipline,” as opposed to “sissy stuff,” an authoritarian faith, not a questioning one. Terry—golf-shirted and twitchy, drumming his fingers on our dining room table—was one of the many middle-aged men in the cul-de-sac who seemed to have no other job than to dispense wisdom. We should pray to be “nothing.” We were there to “soften our hearts to authority.” Democracy, we were told, was “rebelliousness.” We instituted a rule that every man must wipe the toilet bowl after he pisses, not for cleanliness but to crush his “inner rebel.”

Jeff C. crushed his by abstaining from “shady” R-rated movies, lest they provoke lusty dreams. He was a beautiful man, but he was indifferent to the effect he had on the opposite sex. The Potomac Point girls brought him cookies; the wives of the Family’s older men asked him to visit. One night, when the guys went on a swing-dancing date with the Potomac Pointers, more worldly women flocked to Jeff C., begging to be dipped and twirled. The feeling was not mutual. “I just don’t like girls as much as guys,” he told me one day while we painted a new coat of “Gettysburg Gray” onto Ivanwald. He was speaking not of sex or of romance but of brotherhood. “I like”—he paused, his brush suspended midstroke—“*competence.*”

He wasn’t gay. He wasn’t, technically, anything. He was twenty-



five, but he was a virgin. He had kissed a girl once, and the experience had not moved his heart like Jesus did every day. He asked me once what sex with a woman was like, “emotionally,” but before I could even think of how to answer, he silenced me. Sex for him was pure and nonexistent in the natural order of things, a myth, elusive and sweet. Jeff C. didn’t need to sully it with details for it to be true.

He ran nearly every day, often alone, down by the Potomac. On the basketball court anger sometimes overcame him: “*Shoot the ball!*” he would snap at Rogelio, a shy eighteen-year-old from Paraguay, one of several internationals and the youngest brother. But later Jeff C. would turn his lapse into a lesson, citing scripture, a verse we were to memorize or else be banished, by Jeff C. himself, to a night in the basement. Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 26–27: “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

Jeff C.’s pride surfaced in unexpected ways. Once, together in the kitchen after lunch, I mentioned that I’d seen the Reverend Al Green perform, up in Massachusetts, no less. This bothered Jeff C. He was a southerner and I was not, and he did not like this news of Yankee privilege. Also, he was certain I considered him racist, because that’s what he believed all New Yorkers thought about all North Carolinians. He wanted me to know that as a southern white man, he was blacker than me. “I got an Alabama blacksnake in my pants,” he said. He was not just black, he was a black *man*. “Brother, you’re nothing but a white boy.”

“Agreed,” I said, hoping to calm him down.

But he could not be soothed. He left the room and returned with a box and put in a CD and cranked up Al Green. He started to groove. His hands balled into fists, his blue eyes wide. He began singing, a honey falsetto. “Here I a-a-m . . .” He grabbed his crotch and shook his head like a rag, wrenched his shirt up and ran his hand over his hard stomach, going deeper and deeper into Green. Then he froze, dropped back to his ordinary voice as if he was narrating. “In college, I used to work in this pizza parlor,” he said. “It was a buncha,

I dunno, *junkies*. Heroin.” He grinned. “But, man, they *loved* Al Green. We had a poster of him. He was, he was—man! Shirtless, leather pants. *Low* leather pants.” Jeff C. tugged his waistband down. “Hips cocked.” He slid across the floor and grabbed my waist so tight I could feel his pulse beating. Then he moonwalked away and snapped his knees together with his feet spread wide, hands in the air, testifying, baring his smooth, flat torso.

THE SPIRITUAL BONDS among Family members were, Doug Coe reminded us, expressions of *love*, though he used the term not merely to connote affection. Love in the Family was the love that “conquers,” the love that “consumes.” It was the love of competition, the love that “breaks a man down”; the love without which one was “a nothing,” “a minus,” “a zero.” But with it one was a “plus,” a “warrior,” a man. The love, a Family elder once explained to me, that Jesus himself proclaimed when he said, “I came not to bring peace but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother.” The senior brother who quoted Christ’s sword at me did not mean anything so blunt as an actual blade but rather the divisiveness of a faith that scorns earthly affections that come between Jesus and his soldiers. The word *heart* was similarly unmoored in the Family’s vocabulary, made weirdly functional, an expression of a quality or skill. A leader, for instance, was said to have a “heart for the Lord”; a man lower down in rank might have a “heart for His Word,” a “heart for laborers” (not the working class but missionaries), or, like my brothers and me, the men-in-training, a “heart for spiritual war.”

Spiritual war was a struggle to be fought everywhere, at all times. Through witnessing and activism and proselytizing and the passage of laws—or, rather, the “discovery” of laws already written for us by God—and, most of all, through prayer. The brothers prayed after sports and before every meal, over Froot Loops in the morning and steaks at night. At the beginning of each workday, or before we went out on a “date”—chastely accompanying a group of Potomac

Point sisters to a suitable movie, or an evening of swing dancing—we prayed. Our prayers were contradictions: We prayed because God was “awesome,” because we were “nothing,” and because the only thing we were good for was His praise. But we also prayed because we wanted things, like, say, a BMW, or divine guidance for our leaders, or a sunny day on which to paint the house. “Prayer,” Andrew the Australian told me, “is everything you need.” A gentle sentiment, at first blush, seemingly uncontroversial. But consider what Andrew did *not* think one needed: “rights,” a word I put in quote marks because he did. “Rights,” the Family taught, are the product of an arrogant mind—an infringement on God’s sovereignty.

The more I learned about the Family, the more difficulty I had in classifying its theology. It is Protestant, to be sure, though there are Catholic members. Its leadership regards with disdain not only the mainline denominations, but also evangelicals they consider “lukewarm.” And yet they distance themselves from the bullying of televangelists and moral scolds as well, in part because of theological differences (Jesus, they believe, instructs them to cultivate the powerful regardless of their doctrinal purity) and in part based on style (the Family believes in a subtler evangelism). “They take the same approach to religion that Ronald Reagan took to economics,” says a Senate staffer named Neil MacBride, a political liberal with conservative evangelical convictions that put him at odds with the Family’s unorthodox fundamentalism. “Reach the elite, and the blessings will trickle down to the underlings.”

Based on the almost-ecumenical face it presents at the National Prayer Breakfast—that of a Jesus to whom the Family welcomes non-Christians to pray—the Family might be considered *neo-evangelical*. Neo-evangelicals distance themselves from populist fundamentalism, which they consider a “folk”—read: white trash—religion, given to unseemly displays of emotion and tied too closely to cultural traditions. Whereas populist fundamentalists are strident and hectoring, neo-evangelicals pride themselves on flexibility. Unlike many *pre-millennialists* who, awaiting Christ’s imminent return, merely do their best to stay out of trouble and to keep their eyes shut in prayer,

neo-evangelicals are willing to engage the world in the hope that they can neaten things up in time for His arrival. They hew to Calvin's belief that worldly power can help shape a holy community, but they resist any kind of ethics or man-made morality, which they dismiss as *legalism* and consider almost a sin in itself.

But at Ivanwald, or in a prayer cell at the Cedars, or in conversations with world leaders, the Family's beliefs appear closer to a more marginal set of theologies sometimes gathered under the umbrella term of *dominionism*, characterized for me by William Martin, a religious historian at Rice University and Billy Graham's official biographer, as the "intellectual heart of the Christian Right." Dominionist theologies hold the Bible to be a guide to every decision, high and low, from whom God wants you to marry to whether God thinks you should buy a new lawn mower. Unlike neo-evangelicals, who concern themselves chiefly with getting good with Jesus, dominionists want to reconstruct early Christian society, which they believe was ruled by God alone. They view themselves as the new chosen and claim a Christian doctrine of covenantalism, meaning covenants not only between God and humanity but at every level of society, replacing the rule of law and its secular contracts. Since these covenants are signed, as it were, in the Blood of the Lamb, they are written in ink invisible to nonbelievers.

ONE NIGHT I asked Josh Drexler, a brother from Atlanta who was hoping to do mission work overseas, if I could look at some materials the Family had given him. "Man, I'd love to share them with you," he said, and retrieved from his bureau drawer two folders full of documents. While my brothers slept, I sat at the end of Ivanwald's long, oak dining table and copied passages from them into my notebook.

In a document titled "Our Common Agreement as a Core Group," members of the Family are instructed to form a *core group*, or a *cell*, which is defined as "a publicly invisible but privately identifiable group of companions." The cell has "veto rights" over each member's life,

and everyone pledges to monitor the others for deviations from Christ's will. A document called "Thoughts on a Core Group" explains that "Communists use cells as their basic structure. The mafia operates like this, and the basic unit of the Marine Corps is the four man squad. Hitler, Lenin, and many others understood the power of a small core of people."

Jesus, continues the document, does not relate to all souls equally. "He had levels of relationships much like concentric rings." The masses were the outermost fringe; next were the hundreds who saw Jesus after he rose from the dead, and then came a ring of seventy, and so on until one reached the "inner circle." "It's quite obvious," the document concludes, "that he revealed more of himself to these." Later, I'd learn that the Family had drawn up blueprints for an underground chapel-cum-bunker beneath the Cedars, its altar designed on this concentric model of access to Christ's love. At its heart would stand Doug Coe, said by the brothers to be as close to Jesus as the disciple John. That's why Coe could walk into any politician's office, went their thinking; Jesus held the doors to power open.

Another document sets forth self-examination questions:

"4. Do I give only verbal assent to the policies of the Family or am I a partner in seeking the mind of the Lord?" The Family is aware that politicians and businessmen use it for strictly worldly ends, but it constantly pushes even its most cynical members toward sincerity. The Family does not ask them to stop seeking power or raking in profits; rather, it wants them to believe that they do so not for their own gain but for God's.

"7. Do I agree with and practice the financial precepts of the Family?" These precepts do not require one to tithe to good works. Rather, the Family's two major financial principles concern appearances. To practice the precepts of the Family, one must declare one's own fortune—great or small—wholly a gift from Jesus. It's not yours, even if it is; you're not really rich, even if you are. This allows Family members to be like Jesus himself by giving freely to other Family members without regard for formality—a process that has the added advantage of being off the books.

“13. Am I willing to work without human recognition?” The Family’s commitment to secrecy—they call it privacy—demands a sort of political ascetism that they think of as humility. It is nothing of the sort; the Family renounces public accountability, not power.

Long-term goals are best summarized in a document called “Youth Corps Vision.” Another Family project, Youth Corps distributes pleasant brochures featuring endorsements from political leaders—among them Tsutomu Hata, a former prime minister of Japan, former secretary of state James Baker, and Yoweri Museveni, president of Uganda—and full of enthusiastic rhetoric about helping young people to learn the principles of leadership. The name Jesus is never mentioned.

But “Youth Corps Vision,” which is intended only for members of the Family (“it’s kinda secret,” Josh cautioned me), is more direct.

The Vision is to mobilize thousands of young people worldwide—committed to the principles, precepts, and person of Jesus Christ . . .

A group of highly dedicated *individuals who are united together* having a total commitment to use their lives to daily seek to mature into people who talk like Jesus, act like Jesus, think like Jesus. This group will have the responsibility to:

- see that the commitment and action is maintained to the overall vision;

- see that the finest and best invisible organization is developed and maintained at all levels of the work;

- even though the structure is hidden, see that the Family atmosphere is maintained, so that all people can feel a part of the Family.

Youth Corps, whose programs are often centered around Ivanwald-style houses, prepares the best of its recruits for positions of power in business and government abroad. Its programs are in operation in Russia, Ukraine, Romania, India, Pakistan, Uganda, Nepal, Bhutan, Ecuador, Honduras, Peru, and other countries. The

goal: “Two hundred national and international world leaders bound together relationally by a mutual love for God and the family.”

FROM TIME TO time, Bengt would walk down to the Cedars or next door to the house of Lee Rooker, a Department of Education official, or hop onto his bike or into his Volkswagen and drive over to—the brothers didn’t know where he went, just that he was missing. No one worried. They all knew Bengt was having leadership lessons. Bengt had been tapped to become a future father of the Family. Sometimes, though, he seemed skeptical about his patrimony.

One day not long after I’d arrived, Bengt and I drove into Washington to pick up a new brother at the bus station. I’d spent the day chipping and sanding green paint, and because there’d been no mask most of the time, I was still coughing up paint dust. “You’ll get used to it,” Bengt said.

“It’s fine,” I said. “This is what I’m here for.”

Bengt laughed. “Paint in your nose?”

“The work,” I said. “It’s a kind of prayer, right?”

Bengt glanced over at me. “Can be,” he said.

I pressed the point. “You do the work every day until it’s like praying. Isn’t that the idea?”

“It is,” Bengt said. “But you have to be careful. Even work can distract you.” We stopped at a red light. “Sometimes,” Bengt said. “Lately. Lately, I’ve been feeling like I’ve been losing the vision. Work is just work. Not because I don’t like it. Because I like it so much. I like what I’ve learned to do. I can let my head fill up with this whole world of details until there’s no room for God. I know He’s in there, but I’m not paying Him the attention He’s due.”

“What do you do then? Do you pray?”

“I’ve had my more nihilistic moments.” He paused, and we drove in silence, cruising through downtown D.C.’s deserted nighttime streets. Bengt turned right onto Rhode Island Avenue. “Yeah,” he said. “I pray. But sometimes it’s like putting pieces together. Trying to get this thing to work like it’s supposed to.”

“Which is . . . ?”

“I have enjoyed,” Bengt said, “in the past anyway, the complete absence of doubt.”

We pulled up to the bus depot, a squat, pale brick of a building tucked behind Union Station. We were a few minutes early, and we talked. Bus station hustlers drifted toward the car but kept their distance; addicts who couldn’t even stand watched us through cloudy eyes.

“That’s what prayer is?” I asked. “Absence?”

Bengt paused. “Yeah, I think it is.”

Bengt stared at a fat woman in a red halter top; she was slapping a skinny drunk on the shoulder. When his Redskins cap fell off, he looked as if he might cry.

“You go in,” Bengt said. “I’ll wait here.”

Most of the brothers didn’t know it, but Bengt was thinking of going to graduate school. He had chosen a university close enough to commute to from Ivanwald, and a course of study in the classics that would complement his understanding of Jesus and provide him with an advanced degree that could prove useful on a political résumé. Two weeks into my stay, he began working on his application. After dinner every night, he’d disappear into the little office beside his upstairs bunk room to write his essay on the house’s one computer. At breakfast Jeff C. would ask him how it was going, and he’d plow his fingers through his hair and sigh. Handing out work assignments for the day, he’d repeat himself needlessly.

One sweltering afternoon, he gave up writing and decided to chop down two magnolia trees in the front yard. All of Ivanwald’s neighbors agreed that they were a shady, symmetrical adornment of what, without them, would look like a parking lot, but Bengt couldn’t be stopped: the trees had to go. They had to die, and they had to be killed by his hand. With a long-blade Stihl chewing up magnolia, green leather muffs protecting his ears, his eyes hidden by goggles, Bengt relaxed for the first time in days. It took just a few hours to reduce the trees to a stack of five-foot lengths of branch. He put a



booted foot on the pile and pressed, listening to the wood crack, and he smiled. “I just love getting a job done,” he said.

“Bengt,” I said later that night, “I may be able to help with your essay.” Bengt looked confused. “Before I came here,” I said, “that sort of thing was my job.” Bengt smiled, clapped me on the shoulder—he’d just found the tool he needed.

A few days later, he gave me the essay. After I’d done some editing, we sat down in the office one night after dinner to talk it over. The room was barely big enough for the two of us; we sat with our legs crossed in opposite directions so as not to knock knees. “All right, dude,” Bengt said. “Lay it on me. I’m ready.” He leaned forward to peek at the pages. When he saw the amount of ink I’d added, he guffawed, slapped his knee, frowned, crossed his arms over his chest. “I can take it, boy,” he said.

And he could; we marched through the text line by line, dissecting run-ons and shuffling clauses and chain-sawing irrelevant phrases. When we were done with the line-edit, we began moving whole sections, crafting from Bengt’s collage of his life a chronological intellectual autobiography. *My formal education has been a progression from confusion and despair to hope*, the essay began. Its story hewed to the familiar fundamentalist arc of lost and found: every man and woman a sinner, fallen but nonetheless redeemed. And yet Bengt’s sins were not of the flesh but of the mind. In college he had abandoned his boyhood ambition of becoming a doctor to study philosophy: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Hegel. Raised in the faith, he saw his ideas about God crumble before the disciplined rage of the philosophers. “I cut and ran,” he told me. To Africa, where by day he worked on ships and in clinics, and by night read Dostoyevsky and the Bible, its darkest and most seductive passages: Lamentations, Job, the Song of Songs. These authors were alike, his essay observed. *They wrote about [suffering] like a companion.*

I looked up. “A double,” I said, remembering Dostoyevsky’s alter egos.

Bengt nodded. “You know how you can stare at something for a

long time and not see it the way it really is? That's what scripture had been to me." Through Dostoyevsky he began to see the Old Testament for what it is: relentless in its horror, its God a fire, a whirlwind, a plague. Even worse is its Man: a rapist, a murderer, a wretched thief, a fool.

"But," said Bengt, "that's not how it ends."

Bengt meant Jesus. I thought of the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*: the saintly Alyosha, leading a pack of boys away from a funeral to feast on pancakes, everyone clapping hands and proclaiming eternal brotherhood. In Africa, Bengt had seen people who were diseased, starving, trapped by war, but who seemed nonetheless to experience joy. Bengt recalled listening to a group of starving men play the drums. "Doubt," he said, "is just a prelude to joy."

I had heard this before from mainstream Christians, but I suspected Bengt meant it differently. A line in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* reminded me of him: Shatov, a nationalist, asks Stavrogin, the coldhearted radical whom he had revered, "Wasn't it you who said that even if it was proved to you mathematically that the Truth was outside Christ, you would prefer to remain with Christ outside the Truth?"

"Exactly," Bengt said. In Africa he had seen the trappings of Christianity fall away. All that remained was Christ. "You can't argue with absolute power," Bengt said.

I put the essay down. Bengt nudged it back into my hands. "I want to know what you think of my ending." He had written about a passage from the Gospel of John in which John, with two travelers, encounters Jesus on the road. John hints at Christ's importance, so the two men travel with him. "Then Jesus turns around and asks the two men one question," Bengt had written. "'What do you want?' he asks." The question, Bengt thought, might mean, "Why are you following me?" or "What is it that you are doing?" But Bengt had decided that what Christ was asking was "What do you desire?"

The word was important to him. "That's what it's about," he said. "*Desire.*" The way he said the word made it sound almost angry. He shifted in his chair. "Think about it: 'What do you desire?'"

“God?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the answer?” I asked.

“He’s the question,” was Bengt’s retort. Downstairs, most of the men had gone to sleep; from the living room we could hear someone quietly picking a guitar.

“Bengt,” I said, “I don’t understand.”

“You know,” he said, “I don’t either. That’s what I’ve kind of come to realize. The thing is, I don’t need to. I can just trust in the Lord for my directions. He’ll tell me what I need to know.”

“A voice?” I said, surprised.

“A prayer,” he answered. The voice he heard was his own, his prayers, transformed by his inverted theology into revelation. What he wanted was what God wanted.

“Absence?” I said, realizing that what he’d meant by the absence of doubt was the absence of self-awareness, the absence of an understanding of his thoughts as distinct from God’s and thus always subject to—doubt. But I did not say this. Instead, I just repeated myself. “Absence,” I said, without a question mark.

“Totally, brother.”

He half smiled, satisfied with this alchemy of logic by which doubt became the essence of a dogma. God was just what Bengt desired Him to be, even as Bengt was, in the face of God, “nothing.” Not for aesthetics alone, I realized, did Bengt and the Family reject the label *Christian*. Their faith and their practice seemed closer to a perverted sort of Buddhism, their Christ everywhere and nowhere at once, His commands phrased as questions, His will as palpable as one’s own desires. And what the Family desired, from Abraham Ver-eide to Doug Coe to Bengt, was power, worldly power, with which Christ’s kingdom could be built, cell by cell.

WHENEVER A SUFFICIENTLY large crop of God’s soldiers was bunked up at Ivanwald, Doug Coe made a point of stopping by for dinner. The brothers viewed his visit as far more important than that of any

senator or prime minister. The night he joined us, he wore a crisply pressed golf shirt and dark slacks, and his skin was well tanned. He brought a guest with him, an Albanian politician whose pale face and ill-fitting gray suit made Doug Coe seem all the more radiant. In his early seventies, Coe could have passed for fifty: His hair was dark, his cheeks taut. His smile was like a lantern.

“He hates the limelight,” Gannon had warned me. “It’s not about him, it’s about Jesus, so he doesn’t like people to know who he is.” But he knows who you are. When I reintroduced myself that night, he cut me short. “I remember you,” he said, and moved on to the next man.

“Where,” Coe asked Rogelio, “are you from, in Paraguay?”

“Asunción,” he said.

Doug Coe smiled. “I’ve visited there many times.” He chewed for a while. “Asunción. A Latin leader was assassinated there twenty years ago. A Nicaraguan. Does anybody know who it was?”

I waited for someone to speak, but no one did. “Somoza,” I said. The dictator overthrown by the Sandinistas.

“Somoza,” Coe said, his eyes sweeping back to me. “An interesting man. I liked to visit him. A very bad man, behind his machine guns.” He smiled like he was going to laugh, but instead he moved his fork to his mouth. “And yet,” he said, a bite poised at the tip of his tongue, “he had a heart for the poor.” There was another long silence.

“Do you ever think about prayer?” he asked, but it wasn’t a question. Coe was preparing a parable.

There was a man he knew, he said, who didn’t really believe in prayer. So Doug Coe made him a bet. If this man would choose something and pray for it every day for forty-five days, he wagered God would make it so. It didn’t matter whether the man believed or whether he was a Christian. All that mattered was the fact of prayer. Every day. Forty-five days. He couldn’t lose, Coe told the man. If Jesus didn’t answer his prayers, Coe would pay him \$500.

“What should I pray for?” the man asked.

“What do you think God would like you to pray for?” Doug Coe asked him.

“I don’t know,” said the man. “How about Africa?”

“Good,” said Coe. “Pick a country.”

“Uganda,” the man said, because it was the only one he could remember.

“Fine,” Coe told him. “Every day, for forty-five days, pray for Uganda. ‘God, please help Uganda. God, please help Uganda.’”

On the thirty-second day, Coe told us, this man met a woman from Uganda. She worked with orphans. Come visit, she told the man, and so he did, that very weekend. And when he came home, he raised \$1 million in donated medicine for the orphans. “So you see,” Doug Coe told him, “God answered your prayers. You owe me five hundred dollars.”

There was more. After the man had returned to the United States, the president of Uganda called the man at his home and said, “I am making a new government. Will you help me make some decisions?”

“So,” Doug Coe told us, “my friend said to the president, ‘Why don’t you come and pray with me in America? I have a good group of friends—senators, congressmen—who I like to pray with, and they’d like to pray with you.’ And that president came to the Cedars, and he met Jesus. And his name is Yoweri Museveni, and he is now the president of all the presidents in Africa. And he is a good friend of the Family.”

“That’s awesome,” Beau said.

Coe had told this story many times before, I’d learn; it now appears recycled in evangelical sermons around the world, a bit of fundamentalist folklore. It’s false. Doug’s friend was not just an ordinary businessman but a well-connected former Ford administration official named Bob Hunter. He may have made a bet with Coe, but his trip was hardly as casual as Coe suggested; I later found two memos totaling eighteen pages that Hunter had submitted to Coe, “A Trip to East Africa—Fall 1986,” and “Re: Organizing the Invisible,” detailing his

meetings with Ugandan and Kenyan government officials (many of whom he already knew) and the possibility of recruiting each for the Family. Central to Hunter's mission was representing the interests of American political figures—Republican senator Chuck Grassley and Reagan's assistant secretary of state for Africa, Chester A. Crocker, among them—who might influence newly independent Uganda away from Africa's Left.<sup>25</sup> The following year, Museveni met with Ronald Reagan at the White House; he's served as an American proxy ever since. Once heralded as a democratic reformer, Museveni rules Uganda to this day, having suspended term limits, intimidated the press, and installed the kind of corrupt but stable regime Washington prefers in struggling nations.

"Yes," Coe told us, "it's good to have friends. Do you know what a difference a friend can make? A friend you can agree with?" He smiled. "Two or three agree, and they pray? They can do anything. *Agree. Agreement.* What's that mean?" Doug looked at me. "You're a writer. What does that mean?"

I remembered Paul's letter to the Philippians, which we had begun to memorize. *Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded.*

"Unity," I said. "*Agreement* means unity."

Doug Coe didn't smile. "Yes," he said. "*Total* unity. Two, or three, become one. Do you know," he asked, "that there's another word for that?"

No one spoke.

"It's called a *covenant*. Two, or three, agree? They can do anything. A covenant is . . . powerful. Can you think of anyone who made a covenant with his friends?"

We all knew the answer to this, having heard his name invoked numerous times in this context. Andrew from Australia, sitting beside Coe, cleared his throat: "Hitler."

"Yes," Doug Coe said. "Yes, Hitler made a covenant. The Mafia makes a covenant. It is such a very powerful thing. Two, or three, agree." He took another bite from his plate, planted his fork on its tines. "Well, guys," he said, "I gotta go."

As Doug Coe left, my brothers' hearts were beating hard: for the poor, for a covenant. "Awesome," Bengt said. We stood to clear our dishes.

ON ONE OF my last nights at Ivanwald, the neighborhood boys asked my brothers and me to play flashlight tag. There were six boys, ranging in age from maybe seven to eleven, all junior members of the Family. It was balmy, and the streetlight glittered against the blacktop, and hiding places beckoned from behind trees and in bushes. One of the boys began counting. My brothers, big and small, scattered. I lay flat on a hillside. From there I could track movement in the shadows and smell the mint leaves planted in the garden. A figure approached. I sprang up and ran, down the sidewalk and up through the garden, over a wall that my pursuer, a small boy, could hardly climb. But once he was over, he kept charging. Just as I was about to vanish into the trees, his flashlight caught me. "Jeff-I-see-you, you're It!" the boy cried. I stopped and turned. He kept the beam on me. I heard the slap of his sneakers as he ran across the driveway. "Okay, dude," he whispered. He clicked off the flashlight. Now I could see him. Little Stevie, whose drawing of a machine gun we'd posted in our bunk room. He handed the flashlight to me, spun around, started to run. Then he stopped and looked over his shoulder. "You're It now," he whispered and disappeared into the dark.