

ILLUSTRATION BY ANITA KUNZ

I'LL BE DAMNED

VACUUM CLEANER SALESMAN-TURNED-CULT LEADER
STEWART TRAILL—WHOSE FOLLOWERS
RECRUIT YOUR KIDS ON SOUTH STREET—SAYS I'M IN
BIG TROUBLE. BUT THOSE FLEEING HIS "CHURCH"
HAVE BET THEIR SOULS HE'S WRONG

BY SABRINA RUBIN

His

beard is the tip-off. It's an overgrown bush that engulfs half his thin face and tumbles down his chest in long, snarled tufts. Standing on the sidewalk beneath the lighted coffeehouse sign, dressed in a dirty hooded sweatshirt and glasses, he could be mistaken for an aging hippie—a folksinger, perhaps. But one look at that huge, unruly beard, and I know otherwise.

"Are you here for the Better Way?" he asks, gesturing to the telltale yellow flyer in my hand. His beard spreads in a welcoming smile. Through the plate-glass window of the Better Way Cafe, I can see his disheveled colleagues milling about, the men bearded and bespectacled like himself, the women in waist-length hair. They've come out of the woodwork to be here, leaving the confines of their \$1.5 million compound that occupies a square block of Southwest Philadelphia to do God's work: luring kids off South Street and into their coffee shop.

They appear here most weekends, though only at night. Their days are reserved for other holy pursuits, working for little or no pay selling cameras and antiques, installing wood floors, and cleaning carpets for their 22-year-old company, Christian Brothers—which earned them a parody on *Seinfeld* as the "Carpet Cleaning Cult." Of course, these members are probably unaware of the spoof, since they're forbidden to watch television. Such earthly concerns are of little importance to the Church of Bible Understanding; all that matters is making millions for Jesus and saving young, able souls—which is why South Street, a favorite teen hangout, has become a prime hunting ground. That's how I ended up at the coffee shop: I'm the newest recruit.

Inside the Better Way Cafe, a half-block south of Bainbridge on 4th, two high-school girls in Adidas gear and blue eyeliner are getting indoctrinated. They look confused. They've been invited in for coffee but have instead found themselves in this hole-in-the-wall with a hot plate no one seems to know how to work. "You're in big, big trouble," they're being told by Alicia, a pretty girl with flowing hair. "Can't you see that sin is killing you?" The newcomers eye each other warily. They came to South Street to have some fun, maybe to meet some boys, and aren't in the mood for a lecture. Alicia looks to fellow member Celeste, who shifts to the topic that reels 'em in every time: the cult's three orphanages in Haiti, housing almost 200 kids. "Alicia and I spend a lot of time there, caring for the children," Celeste says, pointing to a photo collage on the wall.

In the collage's bottom row is a tiny picture of their leader, Stewart Traill, a bearded old man with windswept gray hair. His long white beard is the same knotty mass as the doorman's, same as those of the other men here. Twenty years ago, when Brother Stewart used to strut around in fatigues and a utility belt fitted with pouches for tiny Bibles, all the men followed suit, too. Nowadays, however, Brother Stewart is more partial to khakis and loafers with his drab olive shirts.

"Where do you go to school?" one potential recruit interrupts.

"I graduated already," Celeste answers. COBU kids are home-schooled, and Celeste and Alicia are the children of long-time members. Alicia swoops in: "Where are you guys from?"

"Jersey."

"We're having a Bible study in Trenton tomorrow. Will you be there?" The girls exchange another look: *Time to go*. They head for the door, but not before they've signed the guest register. "Stay in touch! God bless you!" Alicia and



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Celeste call. Then they put on their jackets to go out "sweeping" the streets again.

I'm guided to a seat between the bushy-bearded doorman and the woman who first recruited me, outside of Blockbuster Video, when she'd held out a flyer and invited me to a discussion about "truth." The duo is mildly disappointed to discover I'm 26—I'm young-looking, with a dimpled smile, and they had hoped I was in their target range of 23 and under—but they are happy to talk, anyway. They wouldn't be so pleased if they knew the reason for my visit: I'm infiltrating the cult in order to investigate it, having already done a good deal of research. But while my preparation has left me unsurprised at how easy it is to join the cult—as simple as walking in the front door—I've never understood how hard it is to get out. Until now. The two members speak in a constant patter, so I can't cut in without feeling rude. They tease me for having so many questions, admonish me twice for not appreciating the "simplicity" of their explanations. Each time I press for their organization's name or ask about its clergy, they're vague, answering, "We're more like a group of friends, not a conventional religious group"—and then plunge back into their spiel.

They reassure me that being Jewish is considered a strength in their group, since I don't have any "Christian clutter" to get rid of. I smirk at that one but am impressed by the obvious depth of their sincerity, their eagerness to rescue me. I'd come in half-expecting a group of zombies, but instead found a perversely touching display of caring. As a result, though I become antsy to leave, I don't want to appear impolite by interrupting. When I do try to rise from my seat, they pull out the big guns: "Don't you know you're going to die soon?" the man asks sternly. "You are going to *drop... dead*." He fixes me with a curious stare I'll come to recognize as borrowed, like the beard, from Stewart Traill.

I finally extricate myself—with the woman calling after me, "Pray for me, and I'll pray for you!"—feeling spacey and slow. I'm stunned to realize that I've been sitting there for an hour and a half.

It's hard to isolate just which aspect of the Church of Bible Understanding is the scariest. Is it the zest for recruiting teens on South Street? Is it the total subservience to a man who has claimed to be the incarnation of the prophet Elijah? The fact its members have been living quietly nearby all these years? Maybe it's their compound that's so creepy: eight brick buildings on a fenced-in square block at 58th and Thomas. The shabby campus has never lived up to its purpose of centralizing key cult members, since most have been dispatched to New York for business reasons. But it's still the cult's heart: home to a handful of faithful and to the pastor's used-camera business, S&G Photographics; site of weekend-long marathons known as "Big Meetings"; and official home of leader Stewart Traill and his wife, Gayle, who live in custom-designed quarters with remote-control drapes, his-and-hers bathrooms and a library—all the little touches

that make compound life so homey.

Of course, no one in the cult uses the word “compound.” They call the place the “church property,” just as they say “help and heat” when they mean “berate.” Life in the Church of Bible Understanding (COBU) is a society unto itself, with its own lingo, norms and rules, so all-encompassing that when people finally do manage to escape—usually by running away in the dead of night, leaving their meager possessions behind—they find re-assimilation in the world exceedingly difficult. “It was like I’d invented another personality while I was there, and I had to rediscover who I was,” says Maureen Griffo, a gentle 42-year-old with big, startled eyes, who spent her 20s in COBU. “Plus, I had to relearn regular social skills. Cultural reference points—I had no idea. I didn’t even know who Mel Gibson was. I was like a Martian.”

Delaware County-based “exit counselor” David Clark says that of all the cults he’s worked with, COBU’s members are among the toughest to cure. “It takes an extraordinarily long time for them to learn to separate Stewart Traill from themselves,” Clark declares. “The deep loyalty Stewart’s able to get out of them, despite the level of abuse he puts them through, is quite remarkable.” As a result, COBU’s recidivism rate is far higher than that of most cults, with members often returning years after they’ve left. Even those who come to terms with their COBU pasts continue to fear Stewart Traill—like former member William West, who, although he left 10 years ago, says, “If I saw Stewart today, I’d just faint dead away.”

Stewart Traill is COBU, a master manipulator who keeps his followers under his potent spell. They don’t see him much nowadays, since he spends a good deal of his time tending to the cult’s new fellowship in Fort Lauderdale, flying up and down the coast in his four private planes, and working closely with the cult’s younger members, girls ages 18 to 22. But though he has been largely reduced to a voice over the phone dispatching daily orders, his absence has only further mythologized him. He has become COBU’s Wizard of Oz, manning the controls from behind the curtain, inspiring fear and reverence.

Not a bad gig for a former vacuum-cleaner repairman from Allentown. In his pre-cult life, Stewart Traill was a college dropout with a dead-end job, living on the brink of poverty with a wife and five kids. Now he’s got a devoted following; a younger, prettier wife; country-club condos; and a multimillion-dollar empire he cultivated without lifting a finger, having shed all vestiges of his past—everything, that is, except the vacuums.

In its 28-year history, COBU has proven amazingly adaptive, taking on whatever form the era inspired. In the ’70s, it was an exuberant “Jesus Freak” cult. In the ’80s, it was characterized by excess and abuse. In the ’90s, COBU has been savvy and deliberately low-key, characterized by quiet

industry and unmatched prosperity. Though most former members believe COBU once had as many as 3,000 adherents, the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* cites a membership of 10,000 at the cult’s peak. Today, the number of committed COBUers is more likely in the hundreds, but they’ve never been so solid. With its core diehards, astonishing cash flow, and new fellowships cropping up from Baltimore to Texas, COBU could be poised to enter its most eventful phase yet.

But there’s the flip side: *Because* the cult is so adaptable, it is perhaps inevitable that in the commotion over the millennium, COBU’s rhetoric has turned to the topic of death. The group’s newest mantras are “Death in Christ is far more interesting than anything this life can offer” and “You’re gonna die anyway, why not die constructively?” Night after night, Traill asks his followers to rate their “gladness-to-depart quotient”—that is, how welcoming they are of their own deaths. And former COBU members can’t help but recall how, 10 years ago, under Traill’s orders, they stockpiled barrels of

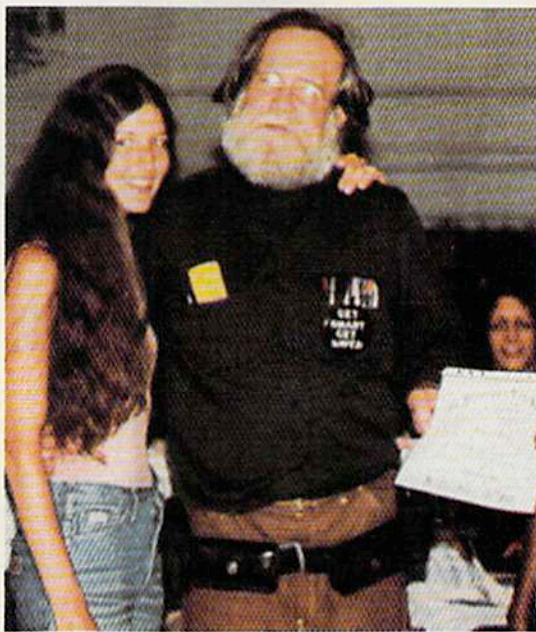
gunpowder in Philadelphia-area warehouses. “That’s scary stuff,” says former member Mike Montoya. “If it’s still there, Stewart could very easily blow a couple of neighborhoods to kingdom come.”

“COBU is a very radical group,” says Rick Ross, an Arizona-based cult expert. “Only the most extreme groups are as separatist as COBU. We can’t comprehend how totalistic an environment it can be—they’re molded by their leader in such a way that they’re not really touched by reality. And when the leader tells them the outside world is evil and the only purity is within their group, they seem willing to accept that, because they have no second opinion.”

Most ex-members can’t imagine Stewart Traill ordering COBU members to commit suicide or violent acts, but only because

they see the cult’s present incarnation as his personal gold mine. “Why would he kill off his labor force?” asks Beth Davies, who was a member for 12 years. “They’re making him a very rich man.” But few doubt that should he want to—motivated by paranoia or panic—Traill has the power to turn COBU into a national tragedy.

“I think Stewart is too in the money to ruin it for himself, but I do worry about that,” says Maureen Griffo. Sitting at the kitchen table in her cramped Brooklyn apartment, where a sign on the front door reads NO JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES PLEASE, she purses her lips and looks at the tabletop. Griffo left COBU 13 years ago and, after much therapy, seems better-adjusted than many ex-members. “There’s been another group with the same kind of dynamic as COBU, and that’s Heaven’s Gate,” she continues. “If Stewart were so inclined, he could make them do whatever he wants. So, sure, I can easily see him ordering a mass suicide.” She looks up with a wry grin. “Over a cell phone, at poolside, of course.”



Lying Down With the Lambs: COBU founder Stewart Traill and his follower-turned-wife, Gayle, in an early 1980s photo.

Two weeks after my COBU encounter on South Street, I dial a phone number printed on my copy of the group's one-page formula for heavenly success, the "Escape Recipe." It rings in the compound, the cluster of low brick dormitories and administrative buildings that used to be a Baptist orphanage in the depressed neighborhood of Cobbs Creek. I tell the woman who answers the phone that I want to learn more.

"You've been thinking it over, huh? Yeah, something really got to you," she says knowingly. I can hear young children in the background. She tells me her name is Sara Weiss. I've heard plenty about Sara from former members: She's been in COBU for more than 20 years and is a probable lifer. Once the promising daughter of a well-off Northern New Jersey family, Sara now works for S&G Photographics, the mail-order used-camera business whose profits go directly to Stewart as his "pastor's salary." The S and G stand for Stewart and Gayle. The S&G crew hits the road every weekend, selling its wares at camera shows throughout the country, sometimes sleeping in a van and washing up in gas station bathrooms to save money.

Over the phone, Sara points out similarities between us: She was Jewish, too, when she joined COBU, and just a bit younger than me. "My friends were only worried about getting married, things like that," she tells me, "but I found another calling." I jot down notes, but my mind is wandering. It so happens I'm engaged to be married, something that's prompted me to think a great deal about religion lately, in part because my fiancé is significantly less invested in matters of faith than I tend to be. There's a certain irony in my evaluating religion at this point in my life, since it turns out such family issues are what prompted Stewart Traill to rethink his own faith and start his cult.

Sara tells me there won't be a meeting in Philadelphia for another few weeks, but that COBU holds a Bible meeting every Monday night at its Christian Brothers headquarters in Manhattan. If Monday at 8 p.m. seems an odd time to go to church, it's because to COBU, Sunday is a workday, same as every day. A COBU sister will later instruct me that they have no Sabbath day to keep holy because Brother Stewart has decreed there's no biblical basis for it. My citation of the Fourth Commandment does little to convince her otherwise.

Sara offers me a ride to the meeting, which I decline, but I promise to show up. Then she lectures me on my sinfulness and impending death for 20 minutes, for good measure.

Maureen Griffio had never heard of Stewart Traill when she joined his flock in 1975, at age 19. A friend had called her, gushing about the cool kids her brother had met at the Granite Run Mall. They were long-haired and idealistic, wore red buttons that said GET SMART GET SAVED, and called themselves the Forever Family. She was going to their communal home in Upper Darby for a Bible study—did Maureen want to come? Griffio, a soft-spoken young woman from Parkside, agreed to come along. The house was dirty and cramped, with a dozen or so inhabitants, but Griffio liked the idea of all these hip kids living together, calling each other "brother" and "sister." Griffio had been having family problems and was searching for a way out. Two months later, she moved in—and stayed 10 years.

At first, it was groovy. She worked her regular office job,

then returned to a houseful of exuberant people. Their underlying belief was (and still is) that the truly religious don't delude themselves into creating ties with the secular world; rather, they commune with Jesus all the time. Griffio loved her new lifestyle: pooling money for rent and food, sharing a room with two other girls—it was like having a slumber party every night. The group forbade drinking, drugs and premarital sex, which seemed a welcome discipline in the hard-partying '70s, and the Forever Family was ballooning: Though only four years old, it had gone from five members to nearly a thousand.

The Forever Family had started as a tiny Allentown sect caught up in the "Jesus Freak" wave of religious fervor that marked the early '70s. In 1971, four young Christians began



Follow the Leader: Traill, at center, holds forth at a '70s gathering of the Church of Bible Understanding, which had some 3,000 members at its peak.

attending Bible studies given by Stewart Traill, who had his own, figurative way of interpreting the Good Book. At 35, Traill was some 15 years older than his acolytes, and he radiated the wisdom of life experience. Soon the group was inviting friends to meetings and proselytizing on the streets. Traill's recruitment efforts were more drastic: He'd fall screaming to the floor in public places to attract attention, then look up and ask, "Do you have Jesus in your life?" It was wacky enough to work. Within months, the group had some 100 members and storefronts in Allentown, Bethlehem, Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. Three years later, Traill dispatched members to Cleveland, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Syracuse. There was a consequent uproar in each city, with distraught families storming fellowship houses to reclaim their "kidnapped" children. The Scranton house was firebombed.

The hostility, however, only galvanized the group, and Maureen Griffio felt part of a growing community of kids who had all the answers. In 1975, hers was one of nearly a hundred fellowship houses; in the Delaware Valley alone, the Forever Family had homes at 18th and Pine and in Upper Darby, Ardmore, Levittown and Wilmington, and it soon opened outposts at 44th and Sansom, in Bristol and in Camden.

But as the Forever Family swelled, it was changing. Each house was given a strict recruitment quota. Scouting the local mall on weekends wasn't going to cut it anymore, and the young members spent hours "witnessing" each night. Finances changed, too. Suddenly, it wasn't enough simply to contribute

to the house fund. Members were ordered to turn over their paychecks and in return received \$10 weekly allowances. "I did think that was strange," Griffo acknowledges. "But I was happy there, so I let it go." Also, with so many fledgling fellowships needing start-up help, members were constantly reassigned to new homes. In her first year, Maureen lived in Upper Darby, Ardmore, Easton, Camden, New York and Montreal. Existence became chaotic; members were disoriented, tired, and without the resources to leave. But no one questioned the orders. After all, they came from Brother Stewart.

"From the time I moved in, I'd heard everyone talking about him, this larger-than-life character," Griffo recalls. The cult's rapid expansion meant that Stewart Traill was able to make fewer visits to each region. A solution was developed: "Big Meetings," two- and three-day Bible extravaganzas held in rented roller rinks, catering halls and theaters. Hundreds of devotees would flock to Big Meetings in buses and vans, and on January 1, 1976, Maureen Griffo was among them, at a King of Prussia gathering. It began the way all Brother Stewart's meetings did: without Brother Stewart. "It was like waiting for the Rolling Stones to come onstage," says another former member, Tom Pierron. "The way he'd make us wait, then come rushing in and then rush back out when he was done—it always seemed like we could just get a precious piece of him."

Traill would finally arrive with a burst of activity. A line of brothers rushed in carrying file boxes and milk crates full of paperwork—important-looking props that were never used. Hot on their heels was Brother Stewart himself, six-foot-four, with long dark hair, a wild beard and glasses, dressed in his uniform of welder's pants, yellow Converse sneakers and a utility belt with Bible pouches, carrying a suitcase-phone like some messianic James Bond. Maureen Griffo looked around the room at the young men in peach-fuzz beards and utility belts of their own and disliked Stewart immediately. But she learned to fear him almost as quickly upon witnessing his method of "Bible study": putting people on the spot, tearing apart their answers, shaming them. He ordered followers to spill their guts, then used their confessions against them. The group was anxious to hear about Traill's past as well, but he waved them off, promising to give his "testimony" the day 3,000 showed up at a meeting. They came dangerously close in April of that year, with 2,700 at a Metuchen, New Jersey, fieldhouse, but never hit the magic number, so Stewart Traill remained a mystery.

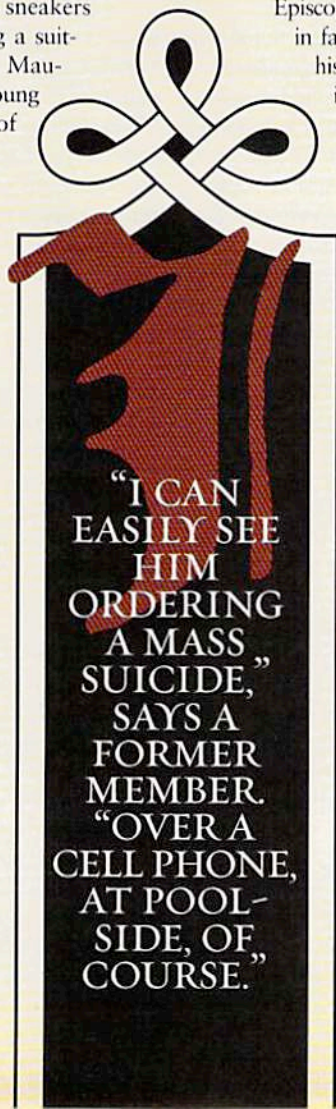
A look at his past reveals why, perhaps, their leader didn't want to reveal himself. Growing up in Bethlehem, Stewart Tanner Traill was an outcast. Bright, with a zeal for science and debate, he seemed to relish being bizarre. His Fountain Hill High School yearbook noted: "Even in the ninth grade...Traill put to use his fantastic ideas. One day he was seen with a paper bag on a string around his neck. When questioned as to its purpose, he simply replied that it would save him a trip to the wastepaper basket should a teacher ask him to deposit his gum." As a senior, Stewart decided to build a cyclotron, an atom-

smasher—in 1953, all the rage in scientific circles. He went to the Lehigh University physics department for guidance. "The sheer fact that as a high school student, he'd seek us out at Lehigh—well, we thought he must be a tremendous person," recalls emeritus professor Raymond Emrich. "We thought he'd become a great physicist." Traill started on his cyclotron, getting US Steel and General Electric to donate parts and consulting with the faculty at Princeton. Traill would later tell COBU that while at Princeton, he spent part of his day following his idol, Albert Einstein.

Upon high school graduation, it seemed natural for Traill to continue at Lehigh. But the situation there quickly soured. He couldn't be bothered with his mentors' suggestions and struggled with the cyclotron on his own, then abandoned it altogether. (Years later, Traill would tell followers not only that he had built it, but that it had won prizes.) He dropped out of school and spurned professors who tried steering him back, hinting that he was too smart to sit through their basic material. They realized, though, that despite his mastery of physics terms, Traill had little knowledge of science. His father, Donald, had been accused of the same sort of bluff: Despite his self-assured air, two graduate degrees and an assistant professorship at Muhlenberg College, he was suspected of having limited command of his field.

Stewart Traill soon found himself a line of work: fixing broken vacuums and selling them to Allentown-area dealers. In 1959, he married a meek young woman named Shirley Rudy who let domineering Stewart call all the shots, including picking out her clothes. They lived in cheap apartments and, for three months, in an abandoned school bus. Stewart had been raised Episcopalian, but religion played no part in his life now; in fact, he'd refused to allow any reference to God at his wedding. His transformation from staunch atheist to cult leader, as Traill later told it, had to do with becoming a father. He decided to investigate different religions for the sake of his children and ultimately decided Christianity wasn't such a bad option—except that no Christians were following the Bible correctly. In no time, Stewart Traill was preaching on Greenwich Village street corners. Then he made his triumphant return to Allentown.

Shirley Traill was willing to put up with the religious fixation but wasn't happy that her husband was spending all his time with a bunch of teenagers while she was home taking care of their five children. Stewart was insulting her in front of his followers and making her wear micro-minis and plunging necklines to meetings. Sometimes, Shirley later told a reporter, he wouldn't let her go to the bathroom without his permission, telling her it was an important form of discipline. He never ate supper at home, instead hanging out in diners with Forever Family members. When Shirley wasn't around, say former members, Stewart once sat an attractive devotee in his lap, later telling her his wife wasn't satisfying him. Shirley was losing it. At a diner one night, Stewart insulted her in front of his young crew, and she dumped a bowl of sugar over his head. Then she was spotted dining with another man. Stewart leaped at his chance: He accused Shirley of



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adultery, and in 1975, they separated.

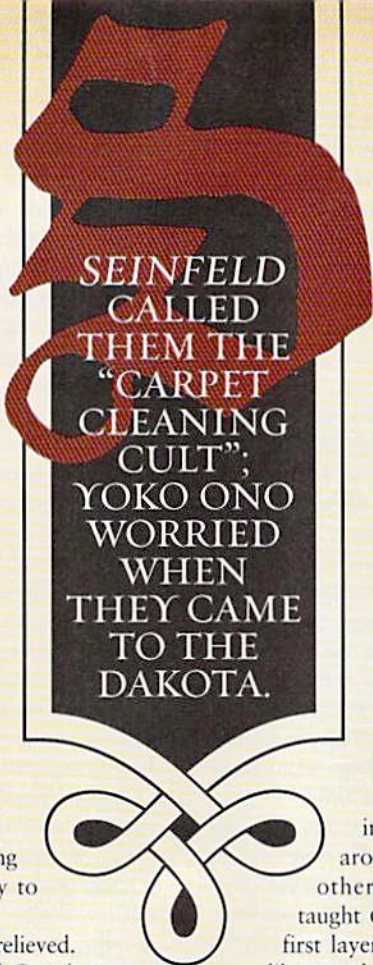
The divorce wasn't the only legal paperwork Stewart Traill had been busying himself with, and at 1976's Big Meeting, on New Year's Day—the day Maureen Griffo saw Traill for the first time—he had an announcement to make. He'd decided to change the name of the group to something more serious, a name befitting an official religion—since he and his followers were about to be granted tax-exempt status. He'd laid the groundwork for this moment two years earlier, when he'd registered the group as a Pennsylvania corporation. (One month afterward, he'd bought his first corporate airplane, a four-passenger Piper Cherokee.) He proposed the name "The Church of Bible Understanding." Later that year, Traill ordered many fellowship houses to consolidate in Manhattan. His followers were straying from the teachings, he explained, and needed "group training." Ex-members would eventually realize there was a kernel of truth to Stewart's explanation: With the flock scattered, houses were developing their own personalities and, worse, their own leaders. Herding everyone together was the most efficient way to keep the cult under his spell.

At the time, though, Maureen Griffo was relieved. Her most recent home had been an unheated Camden warehouse with no showers, shared with 20 others. But the New York digs were even worse: a bunch of filthy, rat-infested Bleeker Street lofts. Griffo was now living with 170 COBUers in a place with two toilets, one sink, and no heat or hot water. They bathed at public showers on the Bowery. At night, each was allotted a floor space as big as a sleeping bag. One loft's ceiling caved in. Another had no electricity, and residents used lanterns for light. Some members had young children but were denied permission to buy a refrigerator for the babies' milk and medicines: "Jesus never had it this good," Stewart said blithely.

"Living there was a shock to most of us, having been raised in the suburbs," says Griffo. "I feel like he did that on purpose. Like what Jim Jones did—the way he brought them to the jungle and separated them from everything they knew, so they had to rely on each other." Finally, a medical clinic noticed a bewildering number of sick children coming from a handful of addresses and called the department of health. Between health and fire code violations, three COBU lofts were shut down, evicting 227 members. Of course, Stewart wasn't around for that—he was living in the suburb of Teaneck, New Jersey.

In October 1976, Stewart and Shirley Traill's divorce became final—and because Stewart had successfully divorced his wife on the grounds of adultery, he gained custody of their five children, ages five through 15. Six weeks later, he married his 20-year-old secretary, Gayle Gillespie, before 200 followers in the ballroom of New York's Diplomat Hotel. The 40-year-old, grizzled-looking groom wore his Bible belt. The tall, slim bride wore a white gown.

Wander down the darkened street, address in hand. This block of Hell's Kitchen at 46th Street and 12th Avenue is a desolate row of warehouses with beat-up trucks and vans parked along the curbs, their doors



marked with COBU or CBU in black stick-on letters. I find what I'm looking for, a single glass door with a wooden sign that says CHRISTIAN BROTHERS. I'm buzzed in after giving my name and climb a flight of narrow stairs. A couple of long-haired women in jeans welcome me at the top—"Greetings in Jesus!"—and usher me into their office space in the front of the building. It's a dingy, chaotic place, a jumble of desks, chairs, cubicle walls and milk crates. I'd been told to show up at 8 p.m., but the meeting won't actually start till 11 because of the chaos here, what with people heading in and out, the phone ringing, the men "sweeping" Times Square, and the out-of-towners running late.

I'm seated at a desk with two women, but others continually rotate into our circle to read a verse or say a few words, which proves disorienting yet beguiling. I'm introduced around and generally fussed over like a guest of honor. "We have the same color eyes!" one member exclaims, and indeed we do: green, with a pineapple ring around the pupil. "You could be sisters!" the other women marvel. Meanwhile, I'm being taught COBU's belief in the three layers of sin. The first layer, I'm told, is gross wrongdoing: overt acts like murder or gossip. The second is "having it both ways"—considering oneself a Christian yet continuing to be "of this world." "You can't have two masters," a woman explains, pointing out the verse in the Book of Matthew. "You can't worship Jesus *and* money. That's why if you want to be a *true* Christian, you have to devote your life to God." Each lesson is put forth with relentless repetition, words and phrases reiterated until they develop a soothing, familiar rhythm, and after a while, I find myself nodding at the explanations. I ask about the third layer, but the women just smile and say they'll tell me later, after I've had a chance to consider my own sins.

Three hours have elapsed. The place is filling up with petite females and greasy-haired males. I happen to be seated closest to the buzzer and am placed in charge of the front door. "Already putting me to work?" I ask with a smile, and they laugh. The Philly contingent arrives, and the woman who first recruited me on South Street rushes over for a hug. The bushy-bearded man from the coffee shop is here, too, and even remembers my name. Sara Weiss, my telephone contact, turns out to be a tiny woman with glasses and salt-and-pepper hair. "I told you she'd come," she announces. "Thank you, Jesus," the group answers. I'm starting to feel at home, and they make it clear that I fit right in, as when the conversation turns to how they've started consulting Hebrew and Greek Bibles.

"I've learned a Hebrew word: *barah*," says Sara.

"Created," I murmur. There's a stunned silence. Then they start whooping with joy, as if I've done a magic trick.

"You can teach us all!" Sara exclaims above the hubbub. "Brother Stewart is going to *love* finding out about you!" I'm startled at the mention of Traill's name, but I also can't help myself: I experience a little bloom of pride.

About this same time, though, I also become aware of a familiar sliver of pain behind my right eye. It's the sign of something I

haven't felt in a long while: a migraine coming on. I used to get them all the time but haven't had one in years. *I can't believe it*, I think. I've been consciously telling myself I'm merely playacting tonight, but the needle behind my eye is an unmistakable distress signal. I press a finger to my brow bone to squelch the pain and realize I'm not going to be able to stay much longer.

Finally, the 40 or so members start heading to the back of the building, into Christian Brothers' chilly warehouse, for the meeting. I go with them. The room is lined with cluttered shelving, piled with vacuum-cleaner hoses, carpet swatches, bottles of solvent and wood planks. Metal folding chairs have been set up in two facing sections, and the men take their seats on one side, women on the other. After some verse recitation, someone yells, "Are we ready to pray?" "Yeah!!" everyone responds, and they all turn to face their seats, then kneel with their heads on their chairs. All at once, the room echoes with a cacophony of voices, everyone speaking, whispering, wailing: "Thank you Jesus, for your goodness!" "Strengthen me, Father!" The droning goes on for five minutes, and after a while I feel panicked to be sitting upright amidst these fervent, bowing bodies. The bushy-bearded man from the coffee shop is practically at my feet, pressing his forehead to the floor. "Thank you, Jesus, for sending us Sabrina tonight," he's saying. I'm gripped by a wave of nausea.

When the clamor dies down, I hurriedly excuse myself. Sara announces that she and a brother named Bob will drive me to Penn Station. The headache is starting to cloud my vision. I say okay. Bob and Sara get in the front of his car; I squeeze in back next to bags of used clothing—donations for Haiti. In the 16-block drive, Bob manages to make a wrong turn, buying Sara time for a few last thoughts.

"We never *did* tell you the third level of sin, did we?" she asks, turned to face me. The lights of Times Square dance across her glasses. "The third layer is the deepest. It's the one you'll probably have a hard time understanding." She pauses dramatically. "The third level of sin is the sin of self-confidence." Trusting your own judgment, she explains, is the ultimate in arrogance, because it means you're imposing your own, illusory controls on the world. "I trust in Jesus, and he's always made the right judgments for me. Let me tell you, whenever Sara makes judgments"—she slaps the heel of her hand against her forehead—"it just gets me into trouble."

On the train, I close my eyes, trying to stave off the migraine, and have vague, nightmarish visions of Jesus that will continue for several nights. I manage to hold

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on as far as 30th Street Station. Then I bolt for the bathroom and throw up.

In 1977, COBU began a venture that would vault it into the big time—an idea that would fuse Stewart Traill's pre-COBU, Joe Allentown life with his current status as cult leader. He bought a steam machine and set some brothers loose on Manhattan in search of carpets to clean. When they came home at the end of the week with their pockets full of cash, Traill knew he was onto something. Within a few months, nearly all his male followers had quit their day jobs—which Stewart now called “working for Pharaoh”—to labor for COBU's new business, Christian Brothers. Some women worked for Christian Brothers as well, distributing flyers and soliciting by phone, but because the business was considered special, and therefore reserved only for men (whom COBU considers the superior gender), most “sisters” were encouraged to keep their regular jobs for the time being—especially those, like Maureen Griffio, who were making good money. In fact, Griffio was doing so well as an executive assistant at a real estate company that her weekly allowance was raised to the COBU salary cap of \$20.

Christian Brothers' prices were cheaper than most—possibly because there was no payroll to worry about—and the company was an instant hit, becoming regular cleaners for the Diamond District and foreign ambassadors, even despoiling the carpets in Mick Jagger's Central Park West hotel room (“Is this a religious organization?” Jagger asked while making out the check) and John Lennon's Dakota apartment, where Yoko reportedly kept sending John on errands to keep him away from the cult. She needn't have worried. For the first time, Stewart encouraged his flock to play down its religiosity. The strategy paid off: According to COBU's newsletter, *Lamb Ledger*, the group had previously been bringing in \$24,500 a week in outside paychecks and held \$28,000 in the bank. Christian Brothers quickly brought the cult's weekly income to \$38,000.

This prosperity was further proof that “group training” had been a success: The cult was fully under Traill's control. Members had little choice but to follow his orders now, since he'd established an effective means for self-policing, with members constantly rating each others' behavior according to a color code: black (abysmal), brown (bad), orange (average) or silver (good). Brother Stewart was in a category by himself, voted gold every time. The men

emulated Stewart, and the women wanted to be like Gayle, whom Stewart extolled as the compliant, slightly ditzy standard of womanhood. (Some became bulimic in their efforts to approximate her pencil-thin figure; Stewart egged them on by chastising them for their “gluttony.”) Stewart would dress Gayle in skintight leotards and jeans and stroke her chestnut hair during meetings, murmuring, “Look at the rewards of being faithful.” To 400 celibate 18- to 25-year-olds, this was a powerful incentive. No one dated in COBU, no one married, and most pre-existing marriages broke up—precisely the way Stewart wanted it, with COBU's devotion focused on him.

At this point, in 1977, the cult was reaching its largest membership, with close to 3,000 people at around 130 fellowship houses in 13 states and Canada. But over the next year, many of those houses would be funneled into Manhattan: What with group training and the emergence of Christian Brothers, the cult was functioning too beautifully to keep the faithful scattered.

It wasn't long before carpet-cleaning competitors, upset that Christian Brothers was claiming exemption from taxes and minimum wage laws, blew the whistle. The IRS ordered COBU to pay half a million dollars in owed taxes. But the setback barely slowed the cult down; after Traill consulted with an accountant-member, Christian Brothers simply restructured itself. From then on, all workers were considered independent contractors who “donated” their paychecks to the church. Christian Brothers continued undeterred, now driving a fleet of 150 old U.S. Postal Service trucks the cult bought at government auction.

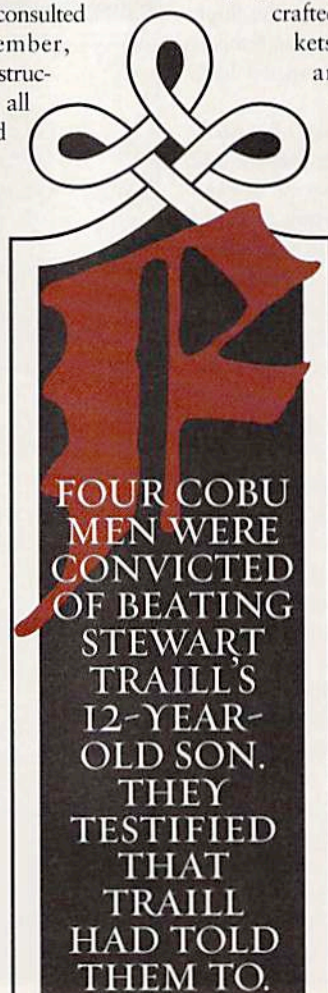
After the IRS crack-down, though, COBU moved in some new directions. First, the brotherhood learned about “tax avoidance.” “Not ‘evasion’—‘avoidance,’” former member John Dorety notes. “‘Evasion’ was a crime. ‘Avoidance’ was a necessity. Semantics, semantics.” Next, the group started a mission in Haiti, distributing food and clothing to mountain-dwellers. Stewart likely got the idea from *Marjoe*, a documentary he had shown the fellow-

ship two years earlier in which an evangelist reveals the tricks of the trade, explaining, “You raise dollars for... missionary projects, say, to go to Haiti. But they'll take in tens of thousands of dollars and maybe only spend a few thousand.” COBU eventually opened three orphanages in Haiti, transporting missionaries in the church plane—which was finally coming in handy for something other than Traill's personal use.

COBU's last consolidating act was to shift its base of operations out of the New York limelight to Philadelphia. Stewart told COBU he was tired of the “unfaithfulness” of the older members—meaning roughly those over 23—and had decided to isolate the younger, purer members and tend to their education himself. In October 1978, COBU purchased its new national headquarters, for \$75,000—a stone Victorian, a former home for the blind at 6713 Woodland Avenue. COBU wouldn't be the only cult in town for long—a few years later, MOVE moved in nearby. Stewart christened COBU's new headquarters “Lamb House”—“lamb” being his term for a young member of Jesus's flock. It became home to a hundred teenagers, who lived downstairs in the usual spartan conditions, eating food from industrial-size barrels, sleeping on foam mats or makeshift beds

crafted from milk crates and blankets. The boys cleaned carpets, and Traill's favorite girls worked for S&G Photographics. Evenings and weekends were spent in study sessions and proselytizing all over Center City: trolling 30th Street Station and the Gallery, waiting outside the Spectrum for concerts to let out, approaching people in parks and on the Frankford El.

S and G themselves moved into the second floor of the Lamb House, where the couple had a phone line to call downstairs. “Stewart had his own little kingdom upstairs,” remembers Teresa Forcina, then the Lamb House treasurer. “We had hardly any food, and of course we'd wear the same clothes for years, but Stewart was living a very different life under the same roof. Every time I see Red Cheek apple juice



in the supermarket I get a flashback, because Stewart would get the Red Cheek, and we'd have Generic Brand X." No one was allowed on the Traills' floor unless summoned, and those summoned were invariably in trouble; conferences were held with Stewart sitting grandly behind his desk and the lamb looking up from his or her seat on the floor. Stewart's volatility made living with the Traills a strain on young members, since there was always the risk he'd spontaneously brand you a "deceitful" soul and banish you to a house on Mifflin Street for "inferior lambs."

After a while, though, Stewart Traill moved on. In July 1982, COBU purchased a \$435,000 house in Princeton—a seven-bedroom, five-bath home with two acres of land and an in-ground swimming pool, two miles from Albert Einstein's old home. Stewart called the house a "church investment" and moved in with Gayle. Traill also decided to make the house S&G Photographic's headquarters and selected an S&G staff to live there: a half-dozen young girls, a group continually freshened with new employees, each one prettier than the next. He called them "Gayle Helpers." One such Helper was young Sara Weiss, a petite, pushy girl who had become a rather fearsome sister and a favorite of Stewart's. It was an honor to be chosen to live in Princeton, where the Gayle Helpers slept on the floor in the big, nearly empty house—the common areas had little furniture other than a living room couch and a lot of milk crates. No one was allowed anywhere in Stewart and Gayle's wing except for the study, furnished with custom-made shelving and a globe so big, they'd had to hoist it through a window to get it in.

Life with the Traills "just wasn't natural," one former Gayle Helper remembers. "One man and all these women, living together." Stewart had developed a disconcerting habit of fondling Gayle in public and making out with her on the couch while the girls stood nearby; once, he grabbed his wife's crotch and told her, "Get ready for me." He was finding reasons to be alone with individual Gayle Helpers, asking their assistance in his basement darkroom. He took to calling one sister his "half-wife." In summer, he'd lounge with the girls by the pool. One winter, Stewart called the New York brothers to say he'd been en route to Haiti but had to make some sort of emergency landing in the Bahamas; he was stuck there with a handful of Helpers and wouldn't be back for a few days. He asked them to pray for him.

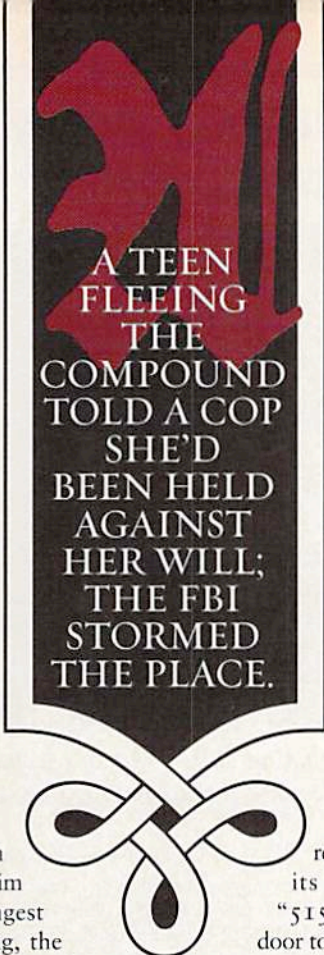
Gayle was growing short-tempered with her Helpers. She couldn't help but notice those long nights Stewart spent in the darkroom—nights, COBU members say, when he took liberties with his dotting devotees.

At least three women have claimed he groped them. "I felt so awful about it," says one, "so uncomfortable. I felt like crying. But I had resigned myself that this is what God wanted."

Meanwhile, the fellowship was imploding. The Haiti orphanages were being run by 20-year-olds with no child-care experience who, frustrated and overwhelmed, were dispensing terrible, sometimes brutal spankings. A disturbing theme emerged when, in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court, four COBU men were convicted of beating a 12-year-old Lamb House boy with a belt and a board, landing him in Children's Hospital in serious condition. The victim was Stewart Traill's youngest child, Donald. The beating, the defendants testified, had come at Stewart's request; he'd told them to "discipline" Donald for being "deceitful" after he'd been accused of shoplifting. "We didn't want to hit him with the board, but the belt had no effect," one defendant testified. "We stopped when the board broke." The judge sentenced each man to five years' probation but concluded they were "pawns" of Stewart's. Stewart Traill wasn't charged.

It wouldn't be COBU's last brush with the law. The cult had been sued in 1983 by Covenant House, the Manhattan youth crisis center run by the Catholic Church, which charged that members entered its facility posing as homeless kids, then left with two dozen runaways. To settle the suit, COBU had agreed not to house underage youths, but a 1985 police raid on one of COBU's Hell's Kitchen properties discovered 17 teens. The police report noted there was no working toilet; food was being stored on the filthy floor, and the kids were sleeping on milk-crate beds and working in the carpet-cleaning business for \$10 a week. One COBU member was arrested; the New York State Supreme Court enjoined COBU from housing kids under 18; Covenant House filed suit for \$1.5 million dollars.

In Philly, matters became downright surreal when the MOVE tragedy played itself out just blocks from Lamb House. The day after the bombing, TV camera crews were everywhere, and a news crew spotted John Dorety hauling wood outside the COBU



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AGAINST
HER WILL;
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property. "What're you doing?" newscaster Dennis Woltering called out.

"I'm building a bunker!" Dorety deadpanned.

And in New York, COBU life had reached an all-time low. Following Stewart's announcement that older members were "wayward sheep," his followers had sorted themselves by age. The most promising group, men ages 18 to 21, were crammed into the "Young Sheep House," a Brooklyn tenement where there was never enough food and no privacy. But they had it easy compared with the untouchables of COBU: 60 "older" members,

ages 24 to 30, who were relegated to a house called by its Hell's Kitchen address, "515"—a five-floor walkup next door to a garbage-carting truck yard

that attracted rats by the hundreds. Mice and cockroaches were also a problem, and everyone was sick; Maureen Griffio, who was living there, developed terrible asthma.

Griffio had never been so miserable. Now 28, she'd devoted a decade of her life to the group, squatting in dozens of places over the years, donating nearly \$100,000 in salary. But after all that, she had become a COBU outcast, having committed an unforgivable sin: Despite the group's objections, she'd dated a COBU brother. No one spoke to her anymore except to berate her. "It was a terrible existence," Griffio remembers. "And yet I didn't dare think about leaving. It seemed like there was no escape."

The residents of 515 begged Stewart to let them move. He finally relented, with a condition: They had to find their own housing, with the approval of COBU's governing board. The men asked to live in the Young Sheep House, a request that was instantly granted, and Stewart Traill went ahead and sold 515. But no COBU residence was willing to take in the "wayward Eves." As the move-out date approached, Griffio and the other women desperately sought accommodations that would be to the board's liking. Instead, they were evicted.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of 515, surrounded by their pitiful belongings, the 25 women were now homeless. They were too stunned to cry, unable to believe that COBU had actually abandoned them to the streets. A bunch of COBU men gathered to

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watch the spectacle. "Harlots!" they jeered. Maureen Griffo hung her head in shame, looking down at her possessions lying at her feet: just some clothes and books she had easily fit into a couple of milk crates and a single dresser drawer. She was so very far from where she'd started, 10 years earlier. She had one foot out the door.

Greetings in Jesus, Sabrina!"

Another Saturday night at the Better Way Cafe, where I'm no longer a stranger. Brother Bob, who drove me to Penn Station after the last meeting, is glad to see me. It's drizzly and chilly outside, and the cafe is empty but for four weary brothers. Bob invites me to sit and quizzes me on COBU theology. I recite the mumbo jumbo I've learned, peppering my responses with COBU jargon. "You're making progress," he concludes approvingly.

Bob's right, but he doesn't know the half of it. In more than four months of research, I've spoken to former COBU members, interviewed experts, and amassed piles of COBU paraphernalia: newsletters, booklets and tracts, as well as tapes and transcripts of Stewart's lectures. I've searched through newspaper archives and courthouses, collected corporate paperwork. Every file cabinet in my office is crammed with COBU stuff, and I'm starting to wonder if I've learned all there is to know about the Church of Bible Understanding.

"Will we see you at another meeting?" a brother asks eagerly. He lets me know they're shifting this week's Bible study from Monday to Tuesday night. It's going to be a special meeting, since their pastor will be there.

I try to act casual. "I'd like to meet your pastor."

"He said he'd *love* to meet you!" Brother Bob offers.

A jolt of electricity runs through me. "He said that about *me*?"

"Well, not you *personally*," Bob backpedals. "But he said he wants to handle new people who have a lot of questions." His eyes widen meaningfully. "That would definitely be you."

I accept his invitation. The meeting with Stewart Traill is just three days away.

Cobu's current phase, that of full-throttle capitalism, actually began with a fight Stewart had with his wife. On March 4, 1989, Stewart staged a meeting—one that would feature such a monumental revelation, he promised followers beforehand, that the universe was going to stand still. More than a hundred people

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gathered excitedly, tape recorders ready, in the auditorium of the newly purchased Southwest Philadelphia "church property."

"I'm not a phony," Stewart began when he finally arrived, over an hour late. "I'm not a Jim Jones, as they say. I'm not a false teacher. But I *am* a poor one." And then he announced his revelation: In his years as "pastor," he'd accidentally omitted a fundamental teaching, that of the concept of grace. How, he asked, could he have forgotten to talk about the crucial notion of God's loving kindness? His error had worn away at him, he explained, adversely affecting his behavior. "Poor Gayle had to bear the brunt of it," he added mournfully. "How do you think I'm doing, Gayle?"

"I'm not really sure," Gayle responded tonelessly.

Stewart may have been speaking to the group, but he and Gayle were having a conversation all their own. The situation with the Gayle Helpers had recently reached a head. No one knows what confrontation Stewart and Gayle may have had in their wing of the Princeton house, but Stewart had hastily called a meeting of the Gayle Helpers and apologized for inadvertently "drawing" them to him, particularly one woman with whom, he admitted, he'd acted inappropriately—though he was quick to blame her manipulative, Eve-like spirit. (She is still a COBU member.) It was then that Stewart realized he'd totally forgotten to teach the concepts of mercy and kindness—exactly what he was seeking from his wife.

"I have repented," he told his minions, adding that he was going to "redo everything from the bottom up." The cult was startled by Stewart's pronouncement. Did he mean to tell them that *everything* they'd learned had been wrong? And if Stewart had been wrong about grace, what else had he missed? Traill may have noticed the general uneasiness, because three months later, he had another revelation. The group had always believed that upon joining COBU, one became "saved," given passage to heaven. But, Stewart announced, salvation is only possible when one is "sinless," a near-impossible feat achieved solely through his teachings. His conclusion went unspoken: *Thus, the need to stay in COBU the rest of your lives.* Already suffering from the squalid living conditions, the hard hours of work and meetings, the insufficient food, the nights proselytizing, the fellowship was fed up.

"He gave us grace, then took away our salvation. That was the turning point," an ex-member recalls. "We were outta there."

The ranks had been thinning since the Grace Meeting, but what followed now

was a sudden, desperate exodus. People were jumping the compound fences, escaping straight from work, going to the grocery store and never returning. Most abandoned their possessions; some creative types stuffed their belongings into trash bags and calmly left the house as if taking out the garbage. In the end, all that remained were the hard-core devotees. They were willing to believe anything, do anything, for Brother Stewart. They were people who had spent so much of their lives in COBU that the unknown world outside the cult was even scarier than what was inside—people like Sara Weiss. And they proved the perfect labor force for Traill's shift into capitalist overdrive.

COBU was already pretty prosperous. The cult owned three airplanes (with a fourth on the way), a smattering of New York City properties, and the Philadelphia compound, which had been bought for \$1.5 million (though valued at \$2.9 million). Christian Brothers was still going strong, as was S&G Photographics. A short-lived used-van business had, in its two years of existence, earned some \$850,000. When missionaries were sent down to Haiti, it was sometimes with \$15,000 stuffed in their pants. A brother doing woodwork at the compound one day found deposit slips totaling \$250,000. And in December 1989, COBU came into a windfall when Traill sold the Princeton house for \$750,000. Though he and Gayle moved into the Philadelphia compound, they also bought two condos in Pompano Beach, Florida, 10 miles north of Fort Lauderdale. The condos are next door to each other, a \$25,000 unit and a larger, \$105,000 one, in a lovely, upscale golf community on the fringes of the Palm Aire Country Club. And the Traills put these condos, unlike the other cult properties, in their own names—not COBU's.

In addition, COBU members had developed a thriving business selling anything they could get their hands on. Stewart had ordered followers to solicit tax-deductible donations for Haiti from large companies, taking whatever they could get—truckloads of expired soda, old cans of paint and glue, school desks, reel-to-reel tapes—and then selling the booty off. After a while, Stewart started sending the brethren to auctions, where they could acquire all manner of cheap stuff. "The challenge was figuring out a way to sell it," says Jeff Benninger, who was a member for 15 years. "We'd take anything, any kind of junk. His whole life, Stewart's been a junkman, going back to those vacuum cleaners. It was like working for Sanford and Son." So when, in the late '80s and early '90s, Stewart told COBU to buy military electronics, barrels of gunpowder and 35-gallon drums of magnesium by

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the truckload, the group shrugged it off as just another of his schemes. "We knew it was dangerous, but we didn't really think about it," says Benninger. The stash was stored in West Philadelphia, in warehouses off Baltimore Avenue and at 62nd and Cedar, where brothers were ordered to stand guard overnight. No one interviewed for this article knows what has become of the gunpowder, but S&G recently sprouted a side business, S&G Electronics, selling military electronics and accessories.

All of COBU's ventures, though, would pale in comparison with its most lucrative enterprise: the Manhattan-based Olde Good Things, an antiques company specializing in artifacts salvaged from buildings—columns, moldings, doors, iron gates, mantels and the like. Olde Good Things' near-instant prosperity has bewildered everyone in the architectural antiques business; still in its infancy, it earns an estimated \$5 million a year, boasts several New York City locations, and last year opened an 80,000-square-foot warehouse in Scranton where millions in merchandise is stored. Industry watchers say that if Olde Good Things' success continues, it could quickly become one of the nation's top firms. That success, however, is small surprise to those who know the inside story. "They have slave labor, and that's what this comes down to," says ex-COBU member John Dorety, who owns the Center City architectural antique store Dorety Antiques. "This is like Kathie Lee Gifford and her clothing! COBU has the manpower to cover each antique show *and* to salvage all the stuff. No other dealer can pull that off! The big question is, why aren't we *all* churches, and making more money? It's brilliant!" Olde Good Things can afford to charge substantially less than most firms and has enough money to outbid nearly everyone for jobs, scoring coveted operations like one of its latest projects, the dismantling of Temple University's Thomas Hall, a historic landmark off Broad Street.

COBU's no-holds-barred capitalism has helped many former members realize the group is, in fact, a cult, since it seems definitive proof that God is not Trill's top priority. "If I ever had any second thoughts about leaving, I certainly don't now," says former member Anne-Marie Hughes. Some have banded together to rescue those still trapped inside, forming an underground railroad. Beth Davies, from her apartment in Midland Park, New Jersey, has long been an organizer of the network, and Maureen Griffo is heavily involved as well; she recently helped a 17-year-old born into the cult become legally emancipated from his fami-

ly. She has also become an anti-cult crusader with a weekly support group on AOL.

"I've been there. I understand," says Griffo. "Helping people get out of cults, physically and mentally—I feel like it's a constructive use of what happened to me." She now works as a secretary at a New York hospital and, like many ex-members, is going to school. She is married to Internet marketer Joe Griffo, an ex-COBU member who escaped from the Young Sheep House in 1983 by walking out the door with his "laundry" in a duffel bag. Recently, while looking at photos from her parents' COBU days, the Griffos' 10-year-old daughter, Maria, told her mother soberly, "You know, Mom, you were really wasting your life."

Maureen Griffo considers herself lucky. Many former members are plagued by substance abuse or unstable finances, relationship troubles or family issues. Some ex-members have even gone on to start their own cults. But although Griffo is among the most stable, she continues to struggle with her COBU past. She still has frequent nightmares about Stewart Trill. One entire wall of the Griffos' apartment is occupied by Maureen's cult books, some piled into her old COBU milk crates, which she can't bring herself to get rid of. The dresser drawer she salvaged from 515 is now propped up as a bookshelf. She's kept it all: pamphlets, tracts, photos, letters, charts, flyers, even her red GET SMART GET SAVED button. Sometimes Joe asks why she holds onto all that junk. "It was 10 years of my life," Maureen tells him. "I've got nothing else to remember those 10 years by."

COBU has laid low over the past decade, which has passed almost without incident—except for a raid on the compound by the FBI in 1995. After a 16-year-old fleeing from the cult stopped a Philadelphia policeman, telling him she'd been held against her will, the FBI and local cops stormed the place, taking eight girls ages 14 to 17 into custody. Much to their surprise, the girls' parents were unfazed; they were all COBU members themselves. The children were returned to the compound, and the incident was quickly forgotten. The only lasting impact was a disruption to COBU's latest recruiting scheme—a thrift store called Kluttrbox, on South Street above Tower Books, selling Haitian products and donated clothing. It had worked beautifully—all you had to do was stand on the sidewalk and yell "Check us out!" and teens would flock inside. After the FBI raid, though, Kluttrbox's landlord rented the place to someone else.

Like most of COBU's setbacks, it proved only temporary. Before long, the cult quietly opened the Better Way Cafe. COBU's

expansion continues in the same confident manner that it has these past three decades. The group's optimism is evident in a letter it distributes to donors for tax-deduction purposes, which discusses progress abroad—distributing Beech-Nut baby food in the Haitian mountains, with the help of a donated U.S. Army pickup truck—and at home. "We have plans to start outreach centers in Atlanta, Chicago, Fort Lauderdale, and Texas," it reads cheerfully. "We have already sent 'pioneers' out to these areas to help pave the way."

Brother Stewart leans on his makeshift pulpit—a flimsy fold-out table—and surveys his followers in silence. There is no sound in the chilly Christian Brothers warehouse, no movement: no creaking of metal folding chairs, no throat-clearing, nothing but the profound stillness of 80 people holding their collective breath. Brother Stewart lets the silence ripen, intensify. This is old hat for him. In the past, when the mood struck him, Stewart sometimes held the fellowship in this sustained, mute terror for four hours straight; when at last he spoke, the sound of his voice was enough to move some members to tears. He has the grandfatherly features of a shopping-mall Santa: the heavily lined face of a sage, rimless glasses, a woolly beard that reaches to the middle of his broad chest. But his pale eyes have none of Saint Nick's twinkle; they glower from the depths of their sockets with a barely restrained prophet-like fury.

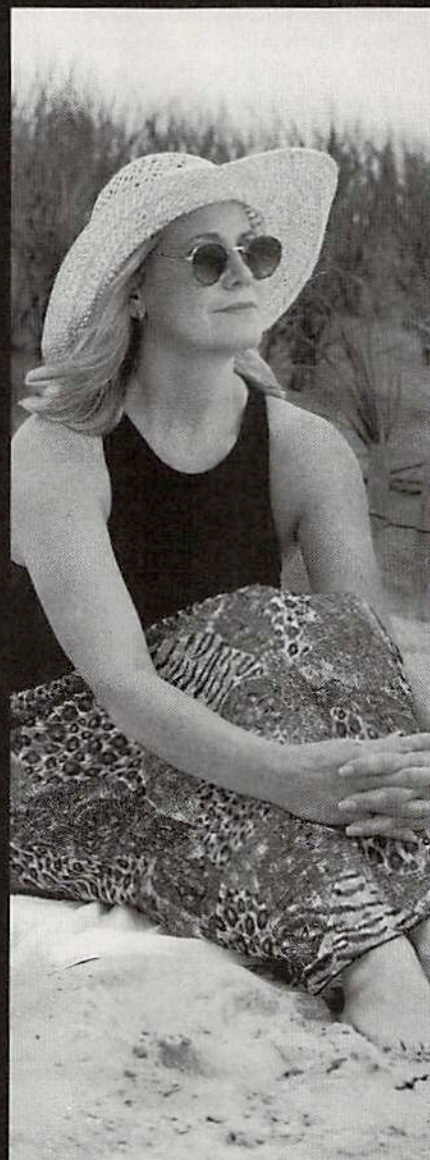
When those eyes sweep over mine, I instinctively look away. I've been honored with a front-row seat at this rare, one-night-only appearance. Sara Weiss, sitting further down the row, saved me the spot. I can hardly believe I'm here. Overwhelmed at the sight of silent, forbidding Stewart Traill, I am tingling with anticipation. It's the moment I've been waiting for—an audience with the Great and Powerful Oz.

Finally, he breaks the spell. "How do you think," Stewart says slowly, in the voice of a wise old man, "we can best please God tonight?" He looks around for a long beat, but no one is brave enough to risk an answer. "Love one another," he answers himself impatiently, shaking a disappointed hand. The people wag their heads at their stupidity and scribble into their notebooks: LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

"And knowing what you're doing," Stewart adds nastily.

KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE DOING, they write.

They are a forlorn-looking bunch, utterly exhausted as they sit in the chilly warehouse among the carpet supplies. Tonight's meeting began at 9 p.m. and will last for five



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I'LL BE DAMNED

hours; the members, who've already worked 14- or 16-hour days, are wiped out. But seeing Stewart makes it worth it, so they've come from all over: from their tenements in Brooklyn and Staten Island, from New Jersey, from the Philadelphia compound. "Tony!" Stewart bellows with a snap of his fingers. A flannel-clad man leaps to his feet. "Before you speak, Tony," Stewart growls, "remember, you're a has-been. Let that sink in."

Tony thinks it over. "I am a has-been," he concludes.

The format of tonight's meeting is exactly that of COBU 20 years ago. Brother Stewart lobs vague questions, which his flock then struggles to respond to in a way that's to his liking, tailoring their answers until he is satisfied. He speaks in a lingo of his own manufacture, using words that are vague and heavily loaded, none of which he bothers to define. "You've got to stop ... absolutizing," he says in his slow, mysterious way, and everyone rushes to write down the words of wisdom. I quietly ask a woman sitting next to me what, exactly, Stewart is referring to. She looks up from her sheet of paper, where she has written ABSOLUTIZING.

"I don't know," she answers blankly. But by night's end, the term has entered the group's vocabulary.

As the meeting goes on and the fellowship fades with weariness, Brother Stewart seems to gather strength. "Get to the point!" he scolds over and over. He reprimands a member: "Speak more clearly, so the new sister"—he means me—"can understand you!" He plunges into one of tonight's themes: abstaining from creature comforts. "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me!" Stewart thunders. His skin is ruddy from the Florida sun. "Deny myself. Which becomes a lighter and lighter burden. Didn't it seem hard at first?" he prompts.

"Yes!" everyone calls out. A man in a torn sweater stands to proclaim: "But I'm so thankful, it hardly feels like suffering!"

Brother Stewart suddenly takes note of a familiar face. "Shirley," he says softly, shaking an imploring hand into the women's side of the crowd. Seated somewhere behind me is Stewart's oldest daughter, Shirley Traill, whose presence tonight has surprised the group. Stewart doesn't see much of his kids anymore, except for those who have been in and out of COBU: Donald, the abuse victim, who reportedly did a stint in Bellevue and doesn't really talk much anymore; and Shirley. Perhaps she's having second thoughts about being

here tonight, because when the meeting finally ends at 2:30 a.m., Stewart barks, "Get Shirley! There she goes!" Shirley makes it halfway to the door but is intercepted by a sisterhood stampede.

I tell two women sitting nearby that I'm distressed at the group dynamic. "I felt that way when I first came to a meeting," one says sympathetically. "But we're all used to it. We know we're doing it because we care about one another." She hesitates, distracted by something behind me. I turn to see Stewart Traill summoning me with a regal wave.

"What did you think of the meeting?" he asks, packing up his index cards, his voice hoarse and friendly. He's a foot taller than me, but he looks hunched and elderly, vulnerable. *He's not scary after all*, I realize. I tell Traill it seemed he'd stuck to pretty basic lessons tonight, maybe for my sake; if he was catering to me, I appreciated it.

"Catering to you?" he asks with a tight smile. He looks at my two escorts, who stare back, terrified. "No, it's a good thing," he says, waving them off, and they relax. He turns to me again, his pale eyes fixing on my face and yet not quite focusing. "It's a very, very good thing," he says. "Yes. And what did you learn tonight? What do you think the point of all this is?"


I think back over all the drivel and choose one of tonight's phrases: "Overcoming the flesh?"

"That's part of it, yes, but what's the point?"

I try again. "Unity in the brotherhood?"

Brother Stewart shakes his head. "Which is part of—what?" I feel myself making a pained face and realize I'm falling into the same trap as everyone else, contorting my answers to fit his question. "Uh—oh, I know! Take up your cross—"

Stewart Traill smiles condescendingly, his face grooved with wrinkles. "Deny yourself," he says slowly and kindly, "take up your cross daily, and follow me."

It's late. I thank Stewart and make a beeline for the exit. I pause to wave goodbye to Sara Weiss, who is in the crowd engulfing Shirley Traill. A few weeks from now, I will tell Sara what my real purpose has been in COBU, and she will no longer return my phone calls, but now she waves back happily. I'm standing on the steps, calling out my farewells to the women who are shouting blessings at me, when Stewart comes barreling down the stairs, preceded by two brothers running to carry his bags out to his Oldsmobile. I flatten myself against the banister to let them pass. "What was your name? Sabrina?" Stewart Traill asks as he squeezes by me. "Sabrina, yes, yes," he says. "I won't forget that." 

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