



Goldie Hawn at the Good Karma Café *Lynn Downey*

I was sitting at a table in the Good Karma Café wondering what it was like to be a cockroach.

The Karma was one of those leftover hippie places that seemed to fill San Francisco in the 1970s, even as the hippies left the city for country communes. Only the broken ones still wandered the Haight-Ashbury in that summer of 1978.

All the cafés were pretty much the same: wood paneling, rickety oak tables covered with decoupage in various stages of peeling, ferns and spider plants in dusty macramé hangers, curtains made from Indian bedspreads. The smells varied from cardamom and patchouli to tobacco and sweat. Some people try to revive this look in organic restaurants every few years but they never get it right. Everything is just a little too ... shiny.

Anyway, as I wobbled in my chair a cockroach crawled out of the empty coffee cup on the uncleared table next to mine. I watched him move around and then heard the screened entrance door squeak and slam. Looking up I saw Keith, who walked over to my table and sat down without being asked. His foot pinned my long skirt to the floor, and I pulled on it until he let it go.

I stifled my annoyance as he waved to get the waitress's attention. Gesturing at the cockroach I asked, "So, what would it be like, being one of those?"

"What, you mean like Kafka?" Keith's Ivy League education made one of its rare appearances.

"No, I mean ... well ... if you died could you come back as a cockroach?"

"I don't think it works that way," he said.

"But what if I ... left, what would happen in my next life?"

"Left?"

"Yeah, left the church."

Keith stared at me like I'd started speaking Urdu or something.

"But Sheila, you can't leave. It's forbidden, it's going against God and the work."

"I know. But you can't tell me you've never thought about it."

"Well, of course I haven't. Why would I?"

I stared back and realized I'd revealed my feelings to the wrong person. I knew Keith wouldn't go running to Don and tell him I was having blasphemous thoughts, but I'd forgotten how devoted he was to the church.

"Never mind," I said. "I'm just having an off day."

"Are you spending your free afternoon eating?" he asked.

"No, I thought I'd see a movie after getting something to drink."

He tried not to make a face but it didn't work.

"You know we're not supposed to go to films."

"Yeah, but I'm going anyway."

I could see him struggling not to lecture me.



"Well, what are you going to see?"

"*Foul Play*. It's set here in San Francisco. Goldie Hawn is in it."

"I'm not familiar with her work."

"Didn't you ever watch *Laugh-In* when you were a kid?"

"No."

"Didn't you see *Cactus Flower* or *Shampoo*?"

"No, sorry."

"Oh. Well, they made the movie here in town last year. I wonder why we never saw any of the trucks or cameras?"

"We have more important things to do than watch movies being made, you

know."

I didn't have an answer for that.

Luckily the waitress came by with my spearmint tea, along with a huge oatmeal cookie that tilted the saucer in her hand. The raisins looked like bugs.

Keith raised his eyebrows at the cookie.

"Well, I didn't ask for it, it just came with the tea," I said.

He asked the server for chamomile tea, "but no cookie, please." I marveled at how he could be so pious and so un-smug at the same time. He took the Sunday fasting rule seriously.

"What do you think happens to the people who've left the church?" I decided to ask him.

Keith thought for a moment. "Well, they seem to be doing OK on the outside. But I don't think they're happy."

He said this with the conviction that apostates should suffer in some way for deserting God, if only emotionally.

We sipped our tea silently for a few minutes, then Keith got up. He left fifty cents on the table and said, "I'm going back to the church to meditate. Have a nice afternoon."

I watched him pass by the front windows and walk back up Dolores Street. When I was sure he was gone

I ordered more tea and reached for the cookie. As I grabbed it a passing waiter jostled my arm and the cookie crashed to the floor. I looked around to make sure no one saw me and leaned over to pick it up. I brushed off the dust and whatever else had been on the floor, tore off a section and crammed it into my mouth.

The Church of Righteous Enlightenment was founded by Don Meadows, who'd made a fortune running a sweatshop south of Market Street. It had been my home for two years, ever since I'd dropped out of my senior year of college to devote myself to what I thought was God, but lately seemed more like a deity in the image of Don, who ran the weekly services and ran us ragged as he also kept us hungry and sleep-deprived. The gay men just a few blocks away on Castro Street were finding their voices, but ours were only used for prayer and chanting.

I think this contrast could only happen in San Francisco, because the city is like a crucible that burns away the expected and the everyday. Individual lives and collective memories are remolded in that fire. Stockbrokers become surfers. College professors sell jewelry at street corners. And in 1976 I jumped into that fire myself, a girl from the suburbs north of the Golden Gate Bridge, too young to be a hippie, but just the right age to fall into the decade people were calling The New Age.

I first met Don at a reception organized by my boyfriend Scott's parents for some of the many "enlightened" men (there never seemed to be women) who bounced regularly through the Bay Area looking for followers and money. He wasn't much taller than I was, too skinny for his age, probably mid-forties, with a face that seemed carved over his bones. He was older than the usual spiritual lecturers who held court all over town, and as he wandered around, he didn't smile at anyone he talked to.

Scott introduced us when he arrived, and after Don's tour of the room he caught up with me at the refreshment table. He didn't make small talk, just put his face into mine and asked, "Can you see the entire inner workings of my body, my blood pulsing, my heart beating?" Startled, and at twenty-one taught to always answer a question posed by an elder, I stammered, "Uh ... no." His eyes seemed to scrape me raw as he looked me up and down.

"Then you'll never be fully realized. You need training. Come to my church this Sunday."

He turned and marched away. I looked for Scott and told him what Don had said. "Hey, that's amazing. His Church of Righteous Enlightenment is on Dolores Street in the city. Let's go on Sunday. Mom and Dad want to go, too."

"Sure," I said. I was always ready for a new spiritual experience, something I did not share with my parents, who preferred to see the good grades I was getting at college rather than hearing about my extra-curricular activities.

A year later sixteen of us were sleeping on the floor of the lower flat in Don's Edwardian-era building near Mission Dolores in San Francisco, men and women in separate rooms (celibacy for all, no matter that some of us had come in as couples). We'd turned from being weekly attendees at services to turning our lives over to what Don called "the work." According to "The Righteous Spirit" that he channeled as a medium every Sunday, this meant that we had to live together, to give up our selves, our possessions, and our free will in order to save the world from coming spiritual destruction.

Don's family formed the church's leadership: his wife Maria, nephew Bill, and his wife Carrie. At a crisis time in his life, when most men divorced their wives and bought shiny red cars, Don had a vision that he needed to start a church, to listen to the guidance of The Righteous Spirit, and gather followers to send positive vibrations into the universe to save it. This meant chanting "Om" over and over in increasing volume and repetitions to create the right vibrations. His liturgy was nominally Christian, but with a sprinkling of enough Eastern philosophy to bring in the Birkenstock crowd. All of this was rounded out with a belief in reincarnation, strict

vegetarianism punctuated by a weekly fast, and practicing psychic healing, which involved more laying on of hands than some of us women were comfortable with.

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The philosophy and the communal ideal appealed to me: a college senior who never went to church as a child, uneasy about entering the adult world despite wanting to become a librarian, and in love with a guy who had taken me to lectures about everything from spirit channeling to past lives to tarot card reading. When I told my parents I was leaving college to live in a commune dedicated to spiritual healing they were so shocked they couldn't muster up the questions that might have changed my mind. When I walked out of their house, I didn't hear my mother's anguished tears.

Don told us we needed to support the church with our labor as well as our prayers. So, the girls sold flowers to startled men in suits on Market Street, and the guys renovated foul old buildings in rundown parts of the city. After a couple of months Don pulled the women off flower detail and taught us the home renovation tasks that the men were doing. Then, when he ran out of buildings, he bought two produce stores: one in the Spanish-speaking Mission district near our flat, and another in the Excelsior neighborhood across the city. We

worked twelve hours a day, watched more people come to the twice-weekly services, and filled our days with spiritual, as well as physical rigor.

We also started looking and feeling healthier once we'd been planted in the produce stores. Don felt that suffering for one's spiritual life began in the stomach, and though he enjoyed the woozy feeling of being chronically underfed, the rest of us found it heavy going. We were always hungry, but once we spent our days surrounded by fresh produce, bags of nuts, and loaves of lumpy, whole grain bread, our faces began to fill out and we had more stamina for the sometimes all-night prayer vigils. Don didn't seem to notice; he thought his example was enough to keep us in line.

There were a lot of groups like ours sprinkled throughout the city. I asked Don about them once. "They aren't doing the right kind of work," he said. "They are just a waste of everyone's time."

I took him at his word. I had to. If someone questioned his teachings or authority his face would turn red, he would pound on the nearest surface or stand on a chair and scream, "*I am the leader!*" But then he would take us all out for ice cream or some other treat the next day, which was confusing, but we didn't think about it too hard.

After the first year we often woke up to find that one or two church members had disappeared during the night, so quiet we hadn't heard a squeaking door or footfall outside the window. One of them was Scott, who hadn't said goodbye to me or anyone else. I told myself I wasn't hurt. Maddy left too, which was hard because she was the one girl I could really talk to. But at least she told me what she was planning, though I tried to talk her out of it. She said she would try to keep in touch, but if she ever wrote to me, I never got the letters. We were pretty sure that Don went through our mail.

The ones who left were condemned for being spiritually weak. We reveled in the glow of what we had sacrificed to stay.

Our existence had meaning.

For a while.

Don and Maria lived in the flat above us, and one evening in the early summer of 1978 we heard our front door open. Don's unannounced visits had been more frequent lately and always involved extra meditation for infractions we didn't remember doing. What now?

He marched into our living room and stood in the doorway. He was dressed in the white pants and shirt he wore only for church services, and his gaunt face was set in bone. Something was up.

"Downstairs," he said, and the seven of us scuttled behind him down the stairway to the basement hall.

There had been a meditation class earlier that evening, so the chairs were already in a half-circle. We all sat, hands in our laps as Don took his place before us.

"I have some news about Eileen," he said. Eileen was a lost soul in her early thirties who'd recently been divorced and came to the weekly services for comfort.

"Her daughter Sally drowned at a swimming party this afternoon." Don said this without emotion, and cut off our expressions of shock.

Then he said, "There's still time."

He was almost smiling.

"Time?" asked Connor.

"Yes. Time enough to bring her back to life. Eileen is counting on us."

We all tried to keep our faces calm, but I was suddenly nauseated. I believed in the power of our collective positive vibrations, that

when we chanted we could heal the world, but I knew that no one could raise the dead.

"Center yourselves," Don snapped. We all took deep breaths and closed our eyes.

"We must chant the "Om," he said. "Our voices will reach Sally and pull her back."

He sat in the last empty chair and closed his eyes. Everyone else began to chant, though not as robustly as usual. I opened my mouth but could only manage a few bleats.

"Get out of your heads!" Don yelled, and we jumped. "If you don't do the best work you've ever done, she dies."

I tried to chant but my voice wouldn't cooperate. And then, for the first time since joining the church, I said no.

"I can't do this."

Everyone opened their eyes and stared at me, but I was looking at Don.

"I know. I felt your resistance, Sheila."

I hated it that he knew me so well. Or made me think he did.

"I don't believe we can bring Sally back to life," I said.

"Then leave the circle. Your negative vibrations will hinder the work."

Don closed his eyes, and before murmuring the next round of Oms said, "Go."

It was a command, but I didn't need it. I bolted upstairs and went to bed, wrapping my quilt around my ears so I couldn't hear the chanting. I tried not to think about Eileen who came to church twice a week and seemed to get so much from it. She'd placed her faith in Don instead of God. Tomorrow her grief would be doubled.

The next day was Sunday, and just before services Don came downstairs to our floor. He stood in the open doorway to the flat as he peeled an orange.

"Sally's body was put into cold storage at the morgue, so it was too late for our work to take hold. If Eileen had brought the body directly to us, we could have accomplished our task. Our work was very powerful last night."

He said this last while looking at me.

"I'll tell her this morning. It's time for the service. Get down to the chapel." He finished the orange and threw the peel into the street.

We never saw Eileen again.

Questioning Don's belief that we could revive a dead child was like a small earthquake in my faith: not enough to do any damage, but still unsettling if you weren't used to it.

I shared produce store duties with Jenny, the only other girl still left at the church, though we weren't friends. During a lull in customers on Monday, I asked her what she thought about Eileen, and about Sally.

"Oh, I know. It was so sad," she said.

"Yes, but ... what did you think about Don saying we could, you know, bring Sally back to life?"

"I felt so badly for him."

"What? You mean Eileen, right?"

"No, Don. How he must have like felt such a failure. How awful to have to tell her what happened."

"But ... I mean, did you really think we could do it?"

"Of course, but you heard what he said. We just didn't get a chance to do our work." Her eyes had been scanning the store as she talked, but now she focused on me. "I was surprised at what you said."

I thought fast. Anything that came out of my mouth would probably get back to Don.

"I know, I was ... um ... just feeling weak."

Jenny smiled. "That's OK. We all feel that way sometimes. But we can't let it keep us from our mission."

I was relieved when a gaggle of kids came through the door and she turned away to help them.

I don't know if Jenny said anything to Don about our conversation, but the message during the service the next Wednesday night seemed to be aimed right at me.

"Commitment," he began. Don's voice always started out softer than his usual tone during his time with The Righteous Spirit, but it could leap to hellfire level in the space of a breath.

"You have all made your commitment to God," the Spirit said. "It was not a negotiation. It was not a conversation."

He paused.

"It was a vow."

Everyone jumped as his voice filled the chapel.

"Do you think God is sitting around hoping you will live up to your promises? Do you think he walks the land calling softly for his lost sheep?"

Another pause.

"No! God stalks the land, a wolf looking for wounded sheep to devour for his pleasure!"

No one moved.

"You ... you who have dedicated your lives to our work, who have promised to serve God, will find yourselves as bloody sheep if you break your vow. Think on those who have abandoned our church. Look at the wreckage of their lives. Think on what awaits you."

He didn't speak again for a full minute. I thought about Maddy and some of the others who had left. I knew that Maddy was back in college because she'd dropped by the store one day about six months earlier when Jenny was out, and we had a quick talk. She told me Eric was working in a restaurant downtown, and Paul had gone back to Minneapolis and was running a shelter for runaway kids. That didn't sound like wreckage to me. Then I caught myself;

I disagreed with the Spirit like I'd disagreed with Don. What was happening to me?

When Don spoke again it was to end the service as usual, with quiet blessings and wishes for love and peace. I avoided his eyes as I walked up the stairs to serve refreshments to the collected visitors.

The following Sunday I had my tea and forbidden cookie at the Good Karma Café. We always had afternoons off after services had ended, though we were supposed to be doing uplifting things like meditating, walking, reading the Bible or the writings of gurus like T. Lobsang Rampa. Don said that books, music, and movies were worldly distractions, so he'd removed the radios from the church's car and van, made me get rid of my books, and refused to get a radio or television for our flat. Though he gave us a few dollars every week in case we needed emergency funds while on church business, he made it clear we weren't supposed to spend it on food or other worldly pleasures, especially on a Sabbath.

I left the café and walked up to Church Street to catch the "J" streetcar to Van Ness Avenue, then up another to the corner of Sutter and the Regency Theatre where *Foul Play* was showing. I handed over my \$1.75 (thank you, bargain matinee), spent another seventy-five cents on popcorn, and found a place in one of the fake velvet seats where I had a row to myself. Previews over, I settled in to watch the movie and to try and forget the uneasy feelings I'd had for over a week.

If you don't know the film, here's the story.

Goldie Hawn plays Gloria Mundy, a recently-divorced San Francisco librarian. A friend encourages her to take a chance on a new man instead of hiding behind her glasses while working at the public library. The man she chooses for her first bold move gets murdered, and Gloria herself becomes the murderer's next target.

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She drags herself out of her shell to triumph over killers, a car chase, and a struggle with an armed man above the stage of the War Memorial Opera House. She falls in love with Chevy Chase, a cop who helps her solve the crime—though she's quite able to manage on her own, armed with a deadly umbrella she uses like a nightstick.

As the movie unspooled, I dropped my bag of popcorn on the floor. I couldn't breathe. I felt dizzy, and tears splashed down my face. Had I been rational I would have realized what was happening. There's a reason that men like Don fear art and culture. It gives big ideas to the people they are trying to control. It can bust them open, shatter the rigid dogma beaten into their souls.

Foul Play had busted me open.

I don't remember getting on the streetcar after the movie was over, but once I stepped off the "J" and walked into Dolores Park toward the church, I realized where I was. I also knew I was not ready to go back to our flat. A scruffy man came up to me and asked if I wanted to have his children, but I ignored him and headed for a clean-looking bench a few yards away.

I plopped down and looked at the view of my home just down the hill and across the street. I seemed to be buzzing inside and I knew it had something to do with the movie, but my mind was a jumble. Then I heard someone say my name. I looked up and saw Maddy, smiling at me.

I jumped off the bench to hug her.

"It's so great to see you. What are you doing here?"

"I have a classmate up on Church Street. We study together every week. And I like to come by and spy on all of you now and then."

I laughed, then fell back onto the bench and started to cry. She sat down next to me and took off her backpack.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

"Oh, Maddy, I want to leave. I just want to leave. I don't want to be there anymore. I don't believe ... anymore. But I'm so scared."

"What happened?"

I told her about Don, about Sally and Eileen, and then I told her about the movie.

"Maddy, I felt like I was watching my own life on the screen. You know, I'd wanted to be a librarian, wanted to work in a place filled with books and have my own little apartment. That's what Goldie Hawn had. She had ... she had my life. It was like someone was showing me what I'd thrown away. And she was strong, even when she was afraid. I'm always afraid."

Maddy handed me a Kleenex and I blew my nose.

"I saw that movie. I see what you mean," Maddy said. "You even look a bit like her." She brushed my blonde bangs with her fingers for a moment.

"Weren't you worried about what would happen when you left the church?" I asked. "Don't you feel that you, well, let God down?"

Maddy snorted.

"No. I left because I finally realized that Don thought he was speaking for God, but he was only speaking for himself, his own need to run everyone else's life. I don't know how he got that way, but it's not right."

"And how are you doing, I mean how is your life going?"

Maddy beamed.

"Amazing! I'll get my degree in another year, then I'm going to New Mexico to teach. I work at the college bookstore, and I've got a few roommates to help save money, but I'm used to close quarters with a lot of people."

She laughed, and even I was able to chuckle. Then she got serious.

"Don't believe the crap that Don spreads about God punishing you for leaving the church, Sheila. The church is all about him. He's a bully, and the only wrath will be his because he lost another slave laborer."

I was shocked but only for a moment, and the buzzing in my head started to clear.

Maddy looked at her watch.

"Listen, I have to go. Here's my phone number and address." She took a notebook and pen from her backpack, tore out a sheet of paper and wrote on it, handing it to me.

"When you're ready, call me. I'm in touch with all the others. We'll help you get back into the world. The real world."

We stood up, and she pulled me into a fierce hug, which I returned.

"You are already strong," she said. "Take that and start living again."

Another squeeze, and she walked away, waving as she went.

Over the next three weeks I kept my eyes piously down during services, chanted as heartily as the most dedicated church members, and ate less than everyone else at meals. Don had been watching me ever since I'd defied him, but his scrutiny fell away the more I followed the rules. It helped that there was a problem about the church's taxes, and his anger was saved for the government instead of me.

Jenny and I traded checkout duties at the produce store. Whenever she was working in a part of the shop where she couldn't see what I was doing, I would take a customer's money without entering all of their items into the cash register. The extra cash went into the pocket of my jeans, and when I got back to the flat, I put it in the interior pocket of a winter jacket I kept in the closet of the room Jenny and I shared.

At noon on a cool August day, I told her I was going out to a local grocery store to get some extra loaves of bread since we'd run out of our own. She was managing a long line of customers at the cash desk, so she gave me a distracted nod. I took my purse, walked out the door and hopped onto a bus a block away. Forty minutes later I let myself into

our flat, trying to be as quiet as possible. Don was usually down in the chapel at lunchtime, which was below street level where no sound penetrated, and Maria was out of town. But I didn't want to take any chances.

I went into my room and opened the closet door. I had a large grocery bag with me, and as I stuffed it with clothes and shoes I heard footsteps coming up the stairs and a voice saying, "Who's there?"

Don's voice.

I put my coat on, making sure the cash was still in the pocket, picked up the bag, and went to the doorway.

"It's me, Don," I said.

He stopped short, a frown on his face.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at the store."

"I'm leaving the church."

He actually laughed.

"Don't be stupid, you know you can't leave. Put that stuff down and go back to work."

He turned away. He really thought I would just obey him.

"I'm not going back to work. I'm leaving. Goodbye."

I walked toward the front door but he swiveled and stood in front of me.

"Get out of my way," I said.

He began to sputter and then put his hand on my arm.

"Don't you touch me," I said. I didn't pull my arm away but stared into his face and waited for him to let me go. It only took a moment.

I veered around him, went down the steps and through the door. He began to scream at me that my life was over, I was deserting God, I would be punished forever. I turned back and looked at his gaunt face, now red with rage and frustration.

"No, Don. That's your fate."

I took the streetcar to Van Ness and Market Street and walked into Zim's diner. I ordered a hamburger and fries at the counter, and as I was waiting for my food I listened to the music that was playing over the PA system. It sounded familiar, and I smiled to myself when I finally placed the song. It was the theme from *Foul Play*, and it was called "Ready to Take a Chance Again." I savored my burger and fries then reached into my purse for a torn piece of paper.

The counter man put the bill next to my plate, and as I pulled money out of the pocket of my jacket I said, "Hey, do you guys have a pay phone?"

LYNN DOWNEY is a native California historian and writer, and has been obsessed with the West since childhood. Her books and articles explore topics such as blue jeans, dude ranching, and women's health. Lynn's LAURA story was inspired by what she experienced living in a San Francisco religious cult in the 1970s.

