

The Church of Man Ascendant

Written for **Secrets & Lies** by **Daniel Bayn**

The tragedy at Waco, Texas, heralded a decade of apocalypse cults. Heaven's Gate and Aum Shinri Kyo grabbed headlines through murder or suicide, but few remember the victimized children of the Church of Man Ascendant.

Just a few months before Waco, in December of 1992, a member of the congregation turned themselves in to Arizona police. Her name was Kelly Cane and she claimed to have killed her own children. Her hands were still covered in their blood.

The county sheriff opened an investigation and, less than 48 hours later, a SWAT team was storming the Church's rural compound. Most of the congregation barricaded themselves inside the chapel and committed suicide. Their leader, Doctor Thaddeus Baptiste, hanged himself above the altar.

Children were found in cages, strapped to their beds, or under heavy sedation. An 11 year old boy attacked and killed two SWAT officers before he could be retrained. All exhibited clear signs of mental and physical abuse.

The three surviving adults were arrested. All were convicted and sentenced to terms of at least twenty years. Kelly Cane was found innocent by reason of insanity and committed to an institution. She claims there are two members who escaped capture, but her information is not considered reliable.

The children received treatment for their injuries and were placed in foster homes. Their records have been sealed.

Thaddeus Baptiste

"Doctor" Baptiste never earned a degree of any kind, but he did attend college for two years. Among other required coursework, he studied psychology and philosophy, which he would later twist into a caricature of religion.

After dropping out of college, he volunteered as a Sunday school teacher at a non-denominational church in California. He befriended some of the parents and began counseling them on child rearing techniques. Eventually, the church caught wind of his unorthodox beliefs and asked him to leave the congregation. He did... but he took three families with him

In 1987, they pooled their resources and purchased a farm in northern Arizona. The cult grew steadily over the next five years. Exact numbers are hard to come by, as they kept no records and the only person to identify herself after leaving was Kelly Cane. If there are other members at large, they maintain a strict code of silence.

Thaddeus preached a peculiar interpretation of Genesis. When God exiled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, it was for eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. More specifically: The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thaddeus claimed that this knowledge is the origin of both sin and free will.

The only way for a human being to ascend into Heaven, he said, was to have no knowledge of morality. It was obviously too late for the adults; Thaddeus never offered to absolve their sins. What he did offer was a way to get their children into Heaven. In fact, he offered them two ways.

Based on physical evidence and their own accounts, some of the children appear to have been punished entirely at random. They were beaten, deprived of food, and locked in cages with neither cause nor

warning. Court records indicate that these children suffered severe anxiety disorders and major depression.

Other children were rewarded for their every act, no matter how violent or depraved. Kelly Cane's two daughters fell into this group. She claims that the entire congregation watched them kill and eat one of the younger children. That night, she cut both their throats and fled the compound.

Two days later, the Church was no more.

The Mason Family

After his wife died in childbirth, Abraham Mason brought his newborn daughter with him to the Church. For three years, Shelley could do no wrong. Abraham catered to her every whim, congratulated her every deed. If she wasn't born a narcissistic sociopath, the Church turned her into one.

Abraham served ten of his twenty years before being released on parole. He is now 44 and his daughter is 19. She recently appeared on a reality TV show and is widely considered next year's pop superstar. He lives in a half-way house and works at a gas station.

Shelley's publicist, Lenore Pestrige, works hard to keep the whole "child abuse cult" thing under wraps. She had her client's name legally changed to "Shellie Bell" and worked with a private attorney to have Abraham's criminal record sealed. She's not above hiring thugs to intimidate troublesome investigators, either.

Shelley has been approached by Roger Maize (see below), but she has no interest in "that religion crap." Lenore is the only other person who knows about this, which is exactly how she wants it.

The Johnston Family

Roger and Harriet Johnston were two of Baptiste's original converts. They sold their home and moved to Arizona with him in 1987. Their six year old son, Clayton, had been one of Baptiste's Sunday school students.

In 1990, Harriet left the Church and took her son with her. Unfortunately, his violent behavior quickly brought him to the attention of Child Services. When Roger found out about this, he kidnapped Clayton and brought him back to Arizona. The cult then launched a campaign of terror against Harriet.

In 1991, Harriet disappeared. Her association with the cult is known only to her immediate family; she never told the police or Child Services anything about it. She changed her last name to "Keyes" and moved to a small town in Colorado.

Roger Johnston was not in Arizona when SWAT came knocking. He was out trying to track down his wife. He now goes by the name "Roger Maize," though few even know he exists. He has no home, no job, and very little property. He spends his time keeping tabs on the surviving cultists, including Harriet, and trying to ensure his son's ascension into Heaven.

Clayton was adopted by a pair of child psychologists named Thomas and Sofia Armagost. Despite their best efforts, Clayton's mind remains a knotted mess of personality disorders. The fact that his birth father has been ministering to him in secret hasn't helped. When he's ready, Clayton will murder them all.

Victor Lytch

Young Victor was locked in a cage when his parents killed themselves and his four siblings. He was only four years old at the time and has no clear memories of them or the Church. However, he does remember Roger Maize.

Roger began visiting him when Victor was in the second grade. He'd recently been adopted and was responding well to psychiatric medication. Roger's religious bullshit flew right over Victor's head, but the visitations scared him out of his mind. The psychiatrists thought his medication wasn't working, so they kept trying new drugs and higher doses. The results were disappointing.

Victor is now 22 and a complete mess. He's got a pharmacist's expertise in psychoactive drugs and he goes to group therapy every single night. (He's a member of several different groups, none of them religious.) Under the wrong conditions, he could be a very dangerous man.

Elizabeth Gooch

When Clayton Johnston was abducted, his mother turned to this "cult deprogrammer" for help. Elizabeth doesn't hold a degree in psychology and she wasn't trained in CIA mind control techniques, but she does have a Private Investigator's license from the state of Oregon. And she's a people person.

Her official involvement with the Church of Man Ascendant only lasted a couple of weeks. After Harriet received her first wave of death threats, she took Elizabeth off the case. A year later, the Church was all over the news and Elizabeth's interest was rekindled. Call it professional curiosity.

She followed the court proceedings, conducted interviews with a few relatives, and learned everything she could about Thaddeus Baptiste's bizarre teachings. Then Waco happened and the world of cult deprogramming got very busy.

Roger Maize is well aware of Ms. Gooch and considers her a potential threat to his work. If her eye ever turns back towards the Church of Man Ascendant, he or his son will be at her door.

Kelly Cane

Sometimes, madness feeds on itself. Eighteen years ago, Kelly Cane was barely coherent enough to convince a judge to sign a search warrant. After nearly two decades of institutionalization, she's a raving lunatic.

Still, she may be able to offer investigators a few clues. First, she gets regular visits from Harriet Keyes, an "old friend from college." These are sympathy visits, nothing more, but investigators could use them to make contact with Harriet.

Second, Roger Maize occasionally sends Clayton to check on Kelly. The most recent of these visits disturbed her greatly; Clayton was escorted from the building and Kelly was put under heavy sedation. Anyone who wants to ask her about the incident had better tread lightly, or they'll get the same results as Clayton.

Finally, and consequently, Kelly knows Roger's new name. She knows he's in contact with Clayton and suspects he's in contact with Shellie Bell. She fears him more than the fires of hell.

Potential Crimes

When Clayton finally starts his killing spree, his adopted parents will be the first to die. Next, he'll try to poison Kelly Cane or eviscerate his mother. If Elizabeth gets involved, she'll also be on the chopping block. His big finale will be the headline-making murder of Shellie Bell. He may even turn on his father.

A team of police or FBI investigators would be a natural fit for this scenario, but reporters will also be on the case. Lenore Pestrige might hire private investigators to protect Shellie Bell, both from an attack and from any unwanted association with Clayton or the cult. Elizabeth Gooch could even assemble a team of freelancers to track down and “neutralize” the killer.

Alternatively, Elizabeth and/or Kelly could be out to rid the world of Thaddeus Baptise's wicked creations. In this case, Victor Lytch would be the first victim. He's the easiest to kill and the second easiest to find. Next, they'd go after Shellie Bell or try to track down Clayton Armagost. Eventually, they'll also want to take care of Roger Maize, but he's a hard man to find.

Finally, Elizabeth or Harriet might try to blackmail Shellie Bell. Lenore would hire the protagonists to identify and neutralize the blackmailer. Of course, digging up the Church's past will draw the attention of Roger Maize and his son, which could turn your protagonists into Clayton's first targets...

Suggested Means...

Criminal Profiler
Forensic Pathologist
Police Detective
Investigative Reporter
Photojournalist
Private Investigator
Cult Deprogrammer
Bounty Hunter
Psychiatrist

Suggested Motives...

Catch the killer!
Protect the innocent!
Advance your career!
Find the truth!
Destroy the cult!
Save the children!

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