My Gay Middle Ages
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One time I was in this cult, and it was a very positive experience.

Of course, there were also many weird things about it.

For example, they had this belief that if you gave all your money to the cult, then that would change your karma.

And everyone worshipped this chubby Japanese businessman who was called the ‘Sensei.’

And, in many ways, it was demeaning and repressive and unbearable.

I knew perfectly well from the beginning that it was a cult, but that didn’t stop me.

No, sir, not for a second.

With my ex-boyfriend Drew, it was the same thing: I knew that he was a lying narcissist, and dumb as a brick.

Even after Drew lied to me and to all of my friends and said that he was nominated for a Grammy Award, I still kept persisting in trying to make a relationship with him work.
He was the person who got me involved with the cult.

I suppose it was his charming demeanor that won me over—his warm Jamaican smile and his psychopathic ability to manipulate me into doing anything he asked.

A few dates in with Drew, I woke up at his apartment, and he said he was going to start chanting.

He said he was a Buddhist, and that he chanted every morning.

He chanted this mantra over and over, sometimes for hours.

Chanting was supposed to change your karma.

Well, like most every young working-class white guy, back when I was a disgruntled adolescent, I had read the Beat poets, Kerouac and Ginsberg, and they turned me on to pot, and khakis, and Buddhism.

So chanting some mantra wasn’t a big stretch of the imagination for me to wrap my mind around.

I got right down there on the floor with Drew and started chanting it, over and over and over again.

Pretty soon, I was going to meetings, and it was a lot like A.A., only instead of everyone crying about how they had ruined their lives with alcohol, everyone was smiling and talking about how they were overcoming their bad karma.

The secret was, to chant this mantra.

And to donate money to the Sensei.

Usually, at the meetings, there were cookies, and sometimes whole buffets, so it wasn’t without its comforts.

As a medievalist, I thought it all made a certain amount of sense because of this medieval book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

The *Cloud* talks about how there’s a cloud between us and God.
The “cloud” prevents us from seeing Him.
But all we have to do is chant a mantra and the words will strike the cloud and make it dissipate.

So religious people in the Middle Ages were doing something pretty similar to what I and my Buddhist boyfriend were doing in Brooklyn.

You just pick one word, and you say it again and again.

_The Cloud of Unknowing_ recommends that you pick a word like “Love,” or “God.”

But you can also pick a word like “Bad.” It doesn’t matter what the word means, as long as you say it over and over.

Chanting a mantra is a kind of hypnotism, and it does make you feel good, no matter what the words are.

But that is precisely where I ran into trouble, because it turned out everyone in the cult honestly believed the nonsense that they were spewing, so I couldn’t keep pretending. It wouldn’t have been fair to them.

It turns out that this is an enduring problem of history—that, on the one hand, everything seems interesting: you read a weird book like *The Cloud of Unknowing* and you think it has such a cool title and it’s a marvelous idea, but where you go wrong, on the other hand, is when you forget that people actually believed this kooky shit, and it’s not just a story—it’s a religion.

You might enjoy that book like you enjoy a play, watching it for an hour and believing it, but then going home and knowing it’s not true.

But for some people, it’s real life.

And people like that—you probably shouldn’t live with them.

Which is why, one weekend, when Drew went on a trip to hear Sonic Youth, he must have picked up some bad karma,
because he came home and all his stuff was packed up in the lobby of our building and the locks had been mystically changed.

Sometimes you have to change your karma.

But the past is not something you always have to live with. You can visit the past whenever you want, but nobody expects you to believe in it or love it, especially when it turns out to have been a miserable place full of liars who also believed in bad ideas.