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In Serene Setting in California, A Suicide Investigation Unfolds

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From the moment Deputy Robert Brunk of the San Diego County Sheriff's office pulled up to the big house on the hill on Wednesday afternoon, he knew something was wrong. The drapes were pulled, the windows were closed and the outdoor lights were burning in the sunshine.

And as Deputy Brunk -- responding to an anonymous 911 call about a possible group suicide -- approached a side door, he sensed the unmistakable stench of death. Dreading his instincts and hoping against hope, he radioed his partner, Laura Gacek, and waited.

Together, the deputies moved through a silent hallway, a kitchen and a breakfast room, seeing nothing amiss. Then, in the central hall, they saw the first body on a cot, then 2 more, then 4 more, until they stopped at 10. They notified their commanders, put on surgical masks and gloves and went methodically through the seven-bedroom house, counting 39 bodies in all.

"It was one of the most bizarre things you'd ever expect to see," Deputy Gacek recalled on Friday with the dead-eyed aplomb of Frances McDormand in "Fargo."

"It was," Deputy Brunk said, "a very calm, serene setting ----"

"Surreal," Deputy Gacek said.

Surreal only begins to sum up the story that has unfolded in the 72 hours since the deputies opened the door of 18241 Colina Norte, with 35 of the bodies publicly identified as of today. It is a tale of lost souls, of cult

members estranged from their families and living a monastic, nomadic life that took some of them through a 20-year odyssey across the American West before they came to this Southern California paradise to die. Others had joined in the last year.

But for the members of the Heaven's Gate cult who swallowed vodka and barbiturates or smothered themselves with plastic bags in meticulous stages starting as long as a week ago, death was nothing to be feared. Instead, according to the testimony they left, glowing like some ultra-modern illuminated manuscript on a home page on the Internet, it was the first step in a millennial flight to the heavenly "Level Above Human."

Their desired transport was sleek: a spaceship trailing in the wake of the Hale-Bopp comet that was so visible in the clear desert skies here when they started taking their lives. But their preparations were simple: rolls of quarters and \$5 bills stuffed in the patch pockets of their black tunic-style shirts and flight-bags of belongings laid out beside them.

The group's lodgings in the sprawling Spanish-style house they rented -- in a semi-rural area of eucalyptus trees and hillside scrub made lush by winter rain -- contained a map of the world, studded with colored pins that detectives said appeared to mark their desired destinations on Earth, as well as pictures of alien figures suggesting their outerworldly ambitions.

About one-third of the 18 men who died were castrated, in enforced adherence to the celibate life style the group espoused. But these monks supported their existence not by making wine or honey but by designing commercial home pages on the World Wide Web. Their clients included a local polo club and a British automobile parts dealer, and by all accounts, they did their work well.

"They were genuinely very nice people and very talented," Tom Goodspeed, the general manager of the San Diego Polo Club, told reporters this week. "But we used to joke in the beginning that they were beamed down from somewhere."

Some of those who knew them best, including former group members and the family members who had not heard from them in years, were not shocked by their final fate.

By late this morning, the parents of only one of the dead, Erika Ernst, arrived at the coroner's office in a motor home with license plates from Alberta, Canada, apparently to make arrangements to claim her body, and left an hour later. Officials have told families there was no reason to come and that local morticians can handle the task.

About 12 hours after Deputies Brunk and Gacek made their discovery, detectives from the sheriff's office were in a Beverly Hills police station, interviewing the man who made the anonymous call about the deaths.

Richard Ford, a former member of the cult initially described only by the pseudonym Rio, had left it to work for a company that makes home pages for the Internet. After receiving two videotaped messages from his former colleagues on Tuesday announcing their intentions, he drove here the next day with his new employer, then alerted the authorities, who came calling on him in the middle of the night.

"He didn't cry or anything," Lieut. Gerald L. Lipscomb, head of homicide for the San Diego Sheriff's office, recalled in an interview. "He said, 'You know, I feel badly for those people, but I'm not surprised.' "

Under the leadership of Marshall Herff Applewhite, a onetime Episcopalian choirmaster who also sang with the Houston Grand Opera, the cult had moved around the country for two decades. The reasons for arriving in this particular place remain unclear, but the authorities speculated that it might have been a prime viewing spot for the comet's brush past Earth.

What is clear is that the cult owed its tenancy in a palatial estate out of keeping with its philosophy to the financial trouble of the home's owner, Sam Koutchesfahani, an Iranian entrepreneur from a wealthy family who was in trouble with the law.

For the last 10 months, according to his lawyer, Milton J. Silverman, Mr. Koutchesfahani has been cooperating with Federal prosecutors and working as an informer in a bribery investigation of local college officials. Last year, he pleaded guilty to tax evasion and fraud charges after admitting that he took up to \$350,000 from Middle Eastern students over six years, ending in 1995.

Prosecutors said he had used the money to bribe instructors at three San Diego area colleges to illegally enroll students and certify them as California residents.

Mr. Silverman said that Mr. Koutchesfahani owed \$150,000 in penalties arising from the case and that he expected to sell the house to help pay them. He was eager enough to sell that his real estate agent's glossy brochure said "seller will entertain offers between \$1.2 million and \$1.6 million," yet the house drew no buyers -- despite its tennis court, swimming pool, putting green, rose garden, elevator and citrus grove.

"An agent contacted Sam and said, 'We know someone you can rent the property to,' " Mr. Silverman recalled, adding that the group had rented a large house nearby and produced good references.

"It was true, for example, living arrangements were unusual," Mr. Silverman conceded. "There was between 20 and 40 people there. But you go back and read the Book of Acts and you look at the early Christian church, or you look at some of the other types of fundamentalist movements -- and I don't mean recent, I mean the Shakers -- those were their religious beliefs."

He added, "People seemed genuine, sincere -- they seemed loving."

Last October, the group installed itself in the house, filling it with folding tables, computer equipment, metal bunk beds and cheap plastic lawn chairs arranged in a semi-circle in one large room that appeared to have been used for meetings.

Stella Nixon, the house's former owner who sold it to Mr. Koutchesfahani several years ago, said she was appalled to see a coroner's videotape of the victims lying under purple shrouds, their Spartan attire and catch-as-catch-can furniture contrasting with the elaborate rose-colored swags and window treatments she had chosen for the bedrooms.

Mr. Silverman said the group paid its \$7,000 monthly rent in cash and eschewed Social Security numbers and banks. But the County Medical Examiner's office had a list with Social Security numbers for almost all of the group's members, and Cory VanKleeck, the manager of the Postal Annex mail service where the group maintained a box said members called four times on March 20, frantic to know whether a bank statement had arrived.

Lieutenant Lipscomb said detectives had not yet reviewed any bank or telephone records, or information on the computers in the house, which are to be analyzed next week with the F.B.I.

For all the attention that has descended on this quiet hamlet since midweek, and for all the work of detectives and medical examiners, some answers have come slowly. Indeed, the authorities here make it plain, whatever their personal fascination, their professional curiosity is limited, because no crime appears to have been committed.

"Our purpose is to close this case, and not get involved in any cult investigation," said Lieutenant Lipscomb of the sheriff's office.

"From the beginning, we approached this investigation as if it were a homicide, in terms of securing the evidence," he said. That concern, he added, as well as concerns about who owned the house, caused a delay of several hours after the deputies' cursory look while detectives obtained a search warrant.

As it turns out, Lieutenant Lipscomb said, "There's nothing in this investigation that would suggest anything but" mass suicide.

Identification of the bodies was easy, because each had a passport, driver's license, birth certificate or other documents nearby, and the county authorities who set up a special telephone line for families with missing members were flooded by more than 100 calls a half-hour at the start. The authorities have withheld the names of only the four whose families have not been notified.

The task of determining the cause of death fell to Dr. Blackbourne, a cheery, bearded man who was formerly the chief medical examiner of Massachusetts and the deputy chief for the District of Columbia, who helped handle the bodies from the crash of an Air Florida jet into the snowy Potomac River in 1982.

But this, too, was comparatively easy, because the members left scraps of recipes and instructions, including some in a spiral notebook that read: "Proc. # 1. (maybe dramamine) tea & toast, 1 hr. before alco. & med. (10 or 12) choc. Pudding (4 oz. And powder) more alcohol."

Autopsies have shown that all of the victims died after ingesting lethal doses or phenobarbital mixed with vodka, or of asphyxiation, with plastic bags around their heads or of a combination. A 72-year-old woman from Colorado, Jacqueline Opal Leonard, had severely swollen ankles, an apparent sign of congestive heart failure, Dr. Blackbourne said. A wheelchair stood near her bed.

Yet for all the mystery surrounding the members other-worldly motivation, officials said the facts of the deaths could hardly be simpler. Still, there was nothing at all ordinary about this week in Rancho Santa Fe, as Deputy Gacek made plain.

"We see so many different things in our line of work," she said, but added, "You never think you're going to show up for work and encounter something as major as this."

These New York Times reporters and photographers contributed to the coverage of the Heaven's Gate cult:

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