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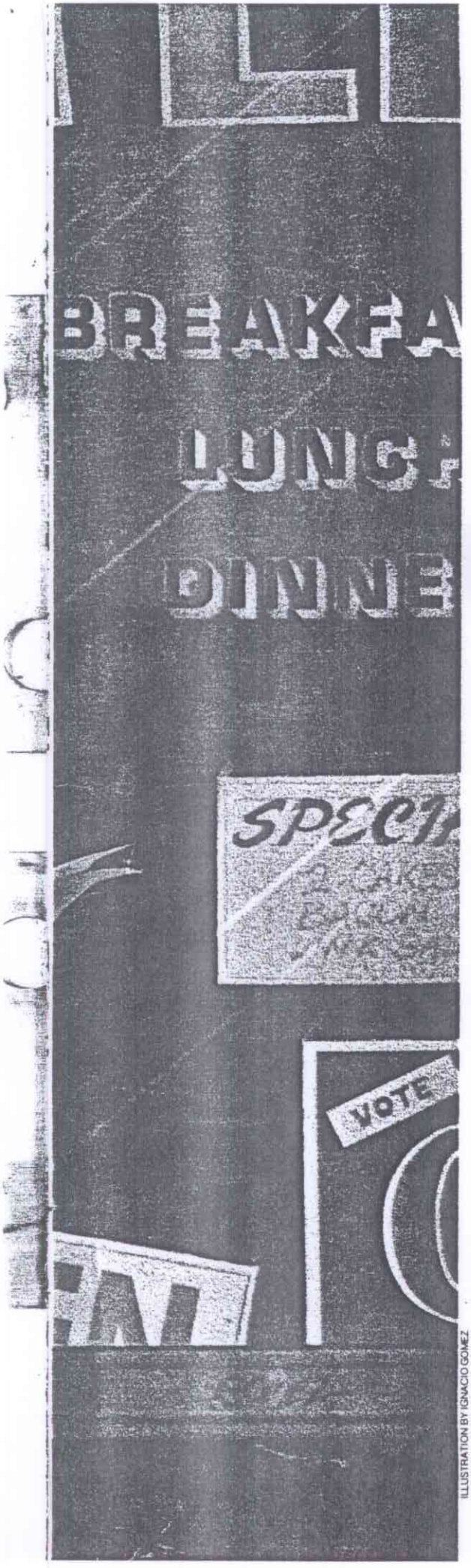

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MEMOIRS OF A CIA PSYCHOLOGIST

With the help of handwriting analysis, a test called the Psychological Assessment System and 30,000 personality files, Jim Keehner spent seven years screening CIA agents and recruits. He's now on the agency's "useless person" list

By Maureen Orth

The young CIA case officers looked intently at their instructor. He was holding up a lemon. "I want you to take this lemon," he said, "and never let it leave you for the next three or four days. Smell it, touch it. Tell me your feelings about it. Get to know your lemon like you've never known another lemon in your life. This is an order."

The instructor was teaching "Personality Theory." He was a CIA psychologist, an expert called upon to train fresh clandestine operators in some of the secret arts of intelligence work. The lemon exercise was supposed to measure and improve their sensitivity, and the trainees were required to turn in written "contact" reports several days later. It was the usual mix. Some had developed meaningful relationships with their fruits. They rhapsodized for three pages about their lemons and had no trouble picking them out from a bowl of dozens. One nonconformist, however, merely drew a big picture of his lemon and labeled it with a question mark. Still, the instructor, Jim Keehner, was pleased. "I was trying to get them in contact with their feelings," he explained. "Feelings had been left out of their previous training, which is all cognitive."

In 1968 the CIA hired Jim Keehner as a specialist in the agency's ongoing effort to increase the psychological skills and awareness of its employees. A CIA case officer's prime duty is to recruit "agents" among foreign citizens around the world, and the agency has a vital interest in any method—no matter how far out—that promises to reveal weaknesses, vulnerabilities and psychic pressure points in possible recruits.

The CIA, in fact, has become one of the world's foremost laboratories for unusual psychological techniques. Keehner's office in the agency's Technical Service Division had a mandate to test anything—from hallucinogenic drugs to computerized handwriting analysis—that would help case officers manipulate their agents or other unsuspecting potential agents. Keehner's mission was to teach other CIA officers how to bring agents under control. Ironically, the negative nature of his work loosened his own self-control and brought him to the point of a complete breakdown. Still bearing the marks of his shattering experience, Keehner hesitantly agreed to provide a portrait of the agency's psychological operations.

Keehner was in the living room of his Georgetown apartment, giving me the CIA's specially designed personality test. According to Keehner, the results of this test would tell him my basic genetic formula: whether I was born an extrovert or an introvert, whether I was moral or amoral, whether I'd be more loyal to a person or a cause, even what sort of torture would be most effective against me.

I tried hard to duplicate the geometric designs on the paper Keehner showed me. I had to construct the designs using pieces of a plastic building block. A clock on the table next to us clicked away, but I was oblivious. "Time!" Keehner called. I managed to complete every design, but it took me too long. I flunked. Keehner seemed overjoyed. "Oh, you're an F," he said. "I knew you were an F. They're sensitive, creative and clumsy." I was taking the test so that Keehner might trust me. We had met for the first time only a few hours before, and most of the time Keehner was uncomfortable and nervous. "Would a Catholic talk to the Devil?" he asked. "That's what the CIA thinks of talking to the press."

But I scored very high on trustworthiness, and that seemed to ease his concern. He was also unscientifically biased in my favor because I had the same "basic personality formula" as his former fiancée. He began to relax, but only a little.

To Jim Keehner, relaxing means sitting in the window of a "safe house" chain-smoking cigarettes and wondering who is watching from outside. He also checks for the three-agent team (ABC "surveillance patterns") when he's walking down the street, and fears that anything written about him and the CIA will be subject to instant sabotage by his former superiors. His natural wit is almost drowned in a terminal case of paranoia, perhaps because he is aware that he is an official outcast, a name on the CIA's "useless person" list.

It wasn't always so. A small, thin, 36-year-old Kentuckian, Keehner spent six years traveling the world for the CIA with a packet of suicide pills in his pocket. He never forgot the motto of his office: "Every man has his price." His job was to find the weakest part of a foreign agent's character, his "squeaky board," and then tell the CIA how to step on it. He tested European bankers, Near Eastern journalists, Vietnamese farmers, a Buddhist monk and an African hashish smuggler. He told them he was testing their aptitude, but he was really charting how their minds worked.

"We liked some people with low intelligence who would follow orders," Keehner said. "Then there were some mean ones, the killers. But basically I tested nondescript middle-class people who did it for the money."

Back at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, Keehner reported his findings and taught the case officers how to take advantage of them. He also tested the case officers themselves, seeking out their weaknesses so that the agency would know how vulnerable they were to enemy spies.

In addition to his direct testing, Keehner assessed many potential agents indirectly, without the benefit of interviews or tests. He used the information the CIA collects every year on thousands of unsuspecting foreigners. No matter how loyal these people might be to their country, the CIA considers them potential traitors and labels them either "susceptible" or "vulnerable." Today the agency still spends millions to study them, tap their phones and bug their bedrooms in an effort to lure them or force them to become agents. It is not a pretty business, and Keehner had to plot how to bring these targets to the breaking point.

"No American who works for the CIA is a spy," said Keehner. "A spy is a foreign agent who commits treason"

"I was sent to deal with the most negative aspects of the human condition," he said. "It was planned destructiveness. First, you'd check to see if you could destroy a man's marriage. If you could, then that would be enough to put a lot of stress on the individual, to break him down. Then you might start a rumor campaign against him. Harass him constantly. Bump his car in traffic. A lot of it is ridiculous, but it may have a cumulative effect."

The CIA recruited Jim Keehner under deep cover. He was excited when a high-powered Washington outfit called Psychological Assessments Associates wanted to interview him. PAA, with offices in Washington and abroad, is the cover for the agency's psychologists. Its recruiters impressed Keehner by telling him that if he got the job he would travel the world testing the aptitudes of business executives for high-level positions. It was August of 1964.

During the next nine months, Keehner considered studying for the priesthood while Psychological Assessments checked him out for a top secret security clearance. Then the company contacted him in Kentucky, where he was working in the mental ward of a hospital, and invited him to interview further for what he thought was a glamorous job with a private psychological firm. "They called me in," he remembers, "and said, 'This is the CIA. Do you want to go on or do you want to stop?' It's a funny feeling when they tell you—frightening, yet thrilling and shocking." He barely hesitated before saying yes. Visions of dashing spooks danced in his head.

One thing puzzled Keehner about the CIA's final interviews, however. "They never once asked me about the Vietnam War," he said. Neither did they probe his views of morality, not in seven screening interviews and not when he took the CIA's standard lie-detector test. No one from the agency questioned Keehner about American involvement in Vietnam, then at its peak. The oversight proved to be significant.

Keehner's intensive training in the clandestine ways of the CIA surprised him. "I was intrigued with spies," he said. "But as soon as I got to training I learned that no American who works for the CIA is a spy. Never. A spy is a foreign agent who commits treason and gives information against his government. In the CIA we act as his helpers and get information for our country. Never call an American a spy." The need for secrecy was drilled into him over and over again. He had to sign a contract binding him not to reveal his work to anyone.

After training, Keehner reported to the Washington office of PAA, where he set out to learn the rudiments of the remarkable test he would soon administer round the world. Keehner's boss, John Gittinger (now retired), scored a major breakthrough in measuring personality development about 25 years ago. Gittinger took the standard IQ test—the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale—and converted it to a highly sophisticated tool that can predict behavior based on personality types. The elaborate Psychological Assessment System (PAS) uses a series of letters to categorize individual personality traits: "internalizers" and "externalizers" (I and E),

those who see the forest (F, flexibles) and those who see the trees (R, regulated), those who adapt easily (A) and those who don't (U). PAS hypothesizes that everyone is born with a fixed personality formula that is often modified in early childhood and adolescence but never entirely altered.

Because of the test's complexity and its bias toward genetic destiny, it has not been especially popular in the scientific community. However, some psychologists who work extensively with the PAS readily concede that it can be effective for the CIA's purposes. "If I were getting into the torture business," says Denver clinical psychologist Keith Davis, "I'd think of the PAS. I use it in a psychological program aimed at helping patients. But people skilled in subtle manipulation can use it for negative purposes."

"I can be very sneaky myself about predicting behavior and personality formulas," says Dr. Charles Krauskopf of the University of Missouri Psychology Department. "We should be thinking about this the same way we're thinking about nuclear problems and bioengineering. It's not something that will hide under the carpet."

Keehner thinks the public ought to know about many of the techniques the CIA uses. "One of the tragedies is that most CIA research in the basic sciences is never made available to the American public who paid for it," he says. "My boss, for example, was a nonacademic who carried half his work around in his head."

Gittinger finally had a monograph of his Psychological Assessment System published in *The Journal of Clinical Psychology* in April of 1973. Today the system is being used in several American universities and hospitals as an aid in vocational guidance, marriage counseling, correlating personality type with psychosomatic illness and teaching mental patients how to play up their strengths. Keehner believes that most people working with the test have no idea of its use by the CIA. And certainly nobody now using the PAS outside the agency has access to the 30,000 personality formulas the CIA has accumulated over the years.

The CIA even goes so far as to dub the personalities of entire countries with the magic PAS initials. The U.S., for example, is ERA—"a masculine stereotype"—externally oriented, regulated in behavior and adaptable. The country that most resembles the U.S. is none other than the U.S.S.R. "The Russians are EFUs," says Keehner, "like us, but unadaptable. They follow authority blindly." China, on the other hand, is IRU (internalized, regulated, unadaptable), just like former-President Nixon. "I've never met an IRU I've liked," says Keehner.

In fact, nobody in Keehner's office could stand to watch Nixon on television. Out of 15 psychologists in Keehner's office, 14 voted for McGovern, not because they loved McGovern but because they had all indirectly assessed Nixon. Our former leader fared very poorly. Trained to spot lying, the CIA psychologists concluded that Nixon lied in public most of the time.

In addition to testing, Keehner's office often whipped up psychological studies of world leaders. Foreign presidents and their aides had their handwriting scrutinized for signs of psychic imbalance. Keehner worked on the files of many foreign officials, but the assessments on the really big enchiladas were left to his bosses. Keehner happened to see Fidel Castro's assessment, and it noted he had sex with his pants on.

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Keehner thought the CIA charter strictly forbade the agency to assess American citizens, so he was surprised when the news broke that the agency had compiled a psychological profile on Daniel Ellsberg because of what Keehner calls a "bureaucratic screw up." "I guess the Plumbers broke into that office to get Ellsberg's psychiatric files for the shrinks," he said. "We could have done it without them. I asked my boss if he would have assessed Ellsberg, and he told me that we probably would have done it if the White House had asked us to."

Keehner's office did assess Commander Lloyd Bucher when the Navy spy ship the *Pueblo* was captured by the North Koreans. "We were very involved in trying to figure out how the North Koreans might affect the crew psychologically," said Keehner. "Bucher should never have been commander of that ship. He was an orphan, you know. He wouldn't intentionally give away anything. But he was not equipped to handle any aspect of the situation he was in."

The CIA assessed Sirhan Sirhan when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, and concluded he was insane. Keehner says he knows of no official assessment of Lee Harvey Oswald, but he says that CIA psychological experts studied Oswald on their own and concluded he was incapable of killing the President by himself. (One of the CIA employees who worked on the Oswald material confirmed both the study and the conclusion.) The agency also analyzed letters from American POWs in North Vietnam to see if their handwriting showed the effects of torture. It did, and some of the prisoners were judged to be hallucinating.

The CIA takes handwriting analysis quite seriously. According to Keehner, the agency's sophisticated methods can work wonders with a simple handwriting sample, to the point of detecting certain diseases before they are subject to medical diagnosis. Every New Year's Day, all the CIA agents in the Soviet Union forward their New Year's cards from Russian friends to CIA headquarters so that the handwriting can be analyzed and filed away.

The agency even spent a half million dollars to build a machine to graph handwriting by computer. It was supposed to cut down analysis time from eight or nine hours to four. But the machine never functioned properly. A staunch believer in handwriting analysis, Keehner says, "If you take the test and we see your writing, there's no way we can be wrong about you."

The CIA denies it, but Keehner says it still uses sexual ruses to entrap collaborators. In 1969 Keehner went to New York to give the "aptitude test" to an American nurse who had volunteered for unofficial night duty. "We wanted her to sleep with this Russian," he explained. "Either the Russian would fall in love with her and defect, or we'd blackmail him. I had to see if she could sleep with him over a period of time and not get involved emotionally. Boy, was she tough."

Keehner became disgusted with entrapment techniques, however, especially after watching a film of an agent in bed with a "recruitment target." CIA case officers, many of whom Keehner says "got their jollies" from such assignments, made the film with a hidden camera. Keehner was not only repulsed by the practice but also found it quite inef-

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fective. "You don't really recruit agents with sexual blackmail," he says. "That's why I couldn't even take reading the files after a while. I was sickened at seeing people take pleasure in other people's inadequacies. First of all, I thought it was just dumb. For all the money going out, nothing ever came back. We don't recruit that many people. Most of our agents are walk-ins, people who are easy to buy anyway."

Psychologist Ann Herndon, a former CIA colleague who quit to go into private practice, corroborated Keehner's view of the CIA's ineffectiveness in using blackmail as a recruiting technique. "I never once saw anyone recruited in the work I did," she said. "I saw 70 to 80 cases a month. We haven't yet recruited our first Mainland Chinese, and there are at least 100 people working full-time on it."

"It's pretty much of a game," Keehner said. "People took pleasure in the gamesmanship. Everybody was looking for a promotion."

Every morning at 8:30, when Jim Keehner reported for work, he passed the inscription in the marble wall of the CIA's main lobby: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make ye free" (John 7:32). Eventually, the words began to grate on his nerves. He saw it as a symbol of the hypocrisy he felt surrounded by. Also, he became more and more disturbed by the moral implications of his daily work, which was centered around the PAS testing system. Keehner occasionally wondered what would happen if the government decided to test everyone and run their genetic formulas next to their social security numbers on a giant computer. "There are horrible possibilities," he said. "It's social engineering and we don't know yet if people can beat the test."

His disaffection with the agency first began over the issue of the Vietnam War. His office was divided over the war, with the younger psychologists opposing and the older ones endorsing American policy to keep communism from spreading another inch. Keehner also disapproved of the military cast that came over the agency during its Vietnam operations. "The agency was always swarming with colonels from the Pentagon," he says. "I couldn't stand the waste of money being poured into Vietnam.

"My job was becoming more disgusting to me every day. But I was overwhelmed by the CIA. The first year is confusion. The second is bewilderment. The third it just kind of dawns on you what's happening." Keehner, ever a staunch Catholic, poured out his doubts twice a month in the confessional to no avail. "Masturbation was a mortal sin," he says. "But when I talked about sexual blackmail and manipulating people, the priest said it was a grey area."

It took a while for Keehner to rebel. But he found solace in attending sensitivity training sessions generously financed by the CIA. Touchie-feelie techniques were some of the many methods the agency explored for possible use in psychological assessments. They were still alive after the CIA had abandoned hypnosis, LSD, truth serums and palm-reading. (ESP, says Keehner, is "still up in the air.") Both of Keehner's bosses attended early sensitivity training groups and found them interesting. They approved of his request to train as a sensitivity group leader, under cover of course.

Keehner soon found himself an enthusiastic devotee of group grope. He thought sensitivity sessions not only personally satisfying but also a possible means of reforming the agency. On Mondays he went to Gestalt. On Tuesdays he saw his psychiatrist. On Wednesdays and Fridays he did yoga. On Thursdays he rested. "I was really coming into touch with my feelings for the first time. I started strongly vocalizing my objections to the war at the office. I stopped wearing a tie to work and that was against regulations."

Out of 15 CIA psychologists, 14 voted for McGovern. Trained to spot lying, they concluded that Nixon lied in public most of the time

Rebeling was an entirely new concept to Keehner. He had managed to grow up and go through 14 years of Catholic education without once disobeying his parents or his teachers. No doubt those qualities made him an ideal candidate for the CIA, but the agency obviously forgot to assess the effects of contemporary self-help therapy.

In 1971 Keehner was assigned a tour of duty in Southeast Asia. He refused to go. One boss told him to "go over anyway and sabotage it from the field." Keehner still said no. He never got another promotion.

Outside the office, however, Keehner was still cautious. He saw his psychiatrist once a week for an entire year undercover because he felt announcing where he worked would breach CIA security. Instead, Keehner painted such a rosy picture of his job at Psychological Assessments that his psychiatrist asked if PAA had any job openings. "I thought I could just talk about my personal problems and set my work aside," Keehner said. "But the more I got into it, the worse it got. I felt like I was on a sinking ship."

A year later, after Keehner developed a severe eye infection, the CIA's powerful Medical Division put him on "medical hold," restricting his duties. He was relieved that he no longer had to go abroad for assessments, though he was still expected to work on files in the office. He asked instead if he could train incoming CIA recruits, and his request was granted.

In his new training position, Keehner enjoyed creative freedom. One day in class it gave him great satisfaction to play the record *Hair* and send the refrain blasting through camp: "Right here in niggertown we've got a dirty little war." Then he had the recruits march around the room to feel the music and to have a little human interaction. The older instructors were amazed. His classes were always monitored after that. Next, he requisitioned 40 lemons from Supply—the first and last such request—and had the recruits get to know their lemons. Keehner was not asked back to CIA training camp.

"Ninety-five percent of the people who took my course gave it an excellent in their evaluations," Keehner says. "I hoped the course would make them face the reality of what they were doing and make them think about the theory that 'every man has his price.' Later some of them said it helped them to get closer to people so they could recruit agents better."

Undaunted, he next came up with the idea of running week-long sensitivity groups for CIA employees as part of their in-agency training. The CIA gave its approval, but only after Keehner had had a little chat with William Colby, who was then director of Clandestine Services. "Don't let the press know we're running these groups." Colby warned. "*Time* or *Newsweek* will get a hold of this and make it sound like we're doing something crazy."

Tension is such an occupational hazard at the CIA that the agency is unusually tolerant of activities designed to relieve its employees' anxiety. But it insists that these activities take place "in house" for reasons of security and control. Keehner's new project became an officially authorized outlet for the pent-up emotions of the case officers. Ultimately, Keehner's prolonged exposure to sensitivity training caused him to slip his own psychic moorings. But he was happy with his new work at the onset because he felt he was helping people again.

Everyone who came to Keehner's "Human Interaction Lab" had to take the PAS test first, and also have his handwriting analyzed. Keehner didn't want anyone who seemed unstable to go through such an intense experience. Besides, it wouldn't do to have too many Fs and not enough Rs in a group. "When I had all Fs once I thought I'd go crazy," Keehner says. "Everyone was so sensitive to everyone else's feelings that nobody would talk for days.

"There are some very warm people in the CIA, but they block off their feelings. Most of them are Rs and they compartmentalize their own work in their minds. They can do horrible things all day and then go home and forget about it. It was amazing to see how well they functioned considering the amount of tension their tests displayed."

Group participants ranged in age from 20 to 60. They were mostly middle-level employees. "The big officers wouldn't come because they heard stories of how people broke down and cried," said Keehner. "They'd encourage the younger employees to come, though." Keehner wanted his charges to let it all hang out. They crawled around the floor making animal sounds. They went on "trust walks": one person with his eyes open had to lead another person with his eyes closed through the woods. They stood in the middle of the room and waved in the breeze pretending they were flowers. "I played music," Keehner said, "and told them to go to their favorite place in the room and imagine they were coming up out of the earth. They moved like corn blowing in the wind.

"I remember this one lawyer who had been passed over for promotion. All of a sudden he started to cry and cry. He said he felt isolated from all the other flowers in the room. His one fantasy was that he was a daisy and that he was going to die all alone. A couple of days later he brought me a colorful poster. It said, 'Thank God someone is crazy enough to care for a daisy.'"

While leading groups, Keehner avoided assessments as much as possible. But one day Keehner's boss called him into his office. "He said I wasn't giving the case officers in the field enough support, not getting in and telling them how to manipulate and destroy. I said, 'No, it makes me sick to my stomach.' He said, 'It bothers all of us but we don't articulate it.'"

Meanwhile, Keehner continued to experiment on his own with new kinds of encounter groups. His experience with Primal Scream therapy, however, proved to be a nightmare and precipitated his eventual downfall with the CIA.

Primal Scream requires its participants to stay nude in a swimming pool for six hours. Keehner began feeling uneasy when someone put the "Agnus Dei" on the pool loudspeakers. After all, the music came right from the Mass, and it occurred to Keehner that Mass was probably where he should be at this hour, not naked in a swimming pool with a bunch of people in varying stages of freaking out.

"There are some very warm people in the CIA, but they block off their feelings. They can do horrible things and then go home and forget about it"

At first he tried to concentrate on helping others, holding back on his own feelings—a mistake. Finally, a leader started pressing on his neck and Keehner started screaming. "Then he started pushing on my genitals," Keehner explained. "Well, boy, I let out a scream. I don't know if it was a Primal Scream or not. That's what *they* called it."

Within 24 hours of his Primal Scream, Keehner was so anxiety-ridden he had to take three kinds of tranquilizers. He was unable to work. Then he had a case of appendicitis and stayed home for six weeks. When he got back to work he refused to do any more assessments. Keehner went to see John Gittinger. "Why did you ever recruit me?" he asked. Keehner realized he was "out of pattern," a poor boy from Kentucky compared to most of the Ivy League types in the agency. "I don't know," Gittinger replied.

Keehner continued his human interaction labs, but not assessments. One day it was leaked to him he had been put on the "useless person" list. He was furious. Why hadn't he been told in advance? he wanted to know. He planned a confrontation.

Keehner waited until he was at a staff lunch with all the other psychologists, including the head of the entire Technical Services Division. He began to attack from a lotus position, shoeless in the middle of the floor. "I want to talk about the dirty SOBs who work in this place," he said. "I want to tell each and every one of you what I think of you."

"You could have heard a pin drop," says Ann Herndon. "The tension was so thick. No conflict ever comes out in the open there. Everything is kept undercover. Everyone was horrified. Jim began to make waves. That was the last thing they wanted. Everyone was supposed to be like everyone else."

Keehner officially left the CIA about a month later. "The CIA never fires anyone," he says. "They're afraid of vindictiveness." The agency gave him a $15,000 contract to continue running his sensitivity groups for a year. He was also promised a second year's contract in writing. Then, early in the summer of '74, Keehner's contract was abruptly canceled, and he no longer had any job with the CIA.

He protested the action in a memo to William Colby, then head of the agency. Three days later he was accused of a security violation, a serious offense at the CIA. The security violation was typing his memo at home. Yet Keehner had typed it at headquarters and could prove it. Nevertheless, he was told to turn in his badge immediately. The fighting was over. Keehner and the CIA were finally through.

Looking back on his nightmare, Keehner says he was just an ordinary small-town boy who arrived at the CIA looking for action and adventure. Instead he found the horrific, the absurd, the monstrous and the trivial. George Orwell kept bumping into Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice. The resulting trauma has been tough to shake.

Finished telling his story, Jim Keehner stood up and went over to the window. "See that guy over there across the street," he whispered. "He could be part of an ABC surveillance pattern. On the other hand, he looks just like my Gestalt leader."●

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