

# ESCAPE FROM THE SECT

When five-year-old Karen Winder's family fled life in a closed religious community, they were denounced and disowned by those they left behind. Here she tells of the thrill, and loneliness, of venturing out into the unknown

SNAP. CRACKLE. POP. For most people, the first time they tasted Rice Bubbles isn't a particularly prominent childhood memory. However, if you had never tasted anything out of a packet before, if your breakfasts had only ever consisted of porridge made from oats from your property, that crackle in the mouth might be a rather important memory for you as well.

It is just after Christmas in Queenstown, 1979. I'm amid city streets still adorned by decorations. I have never experienced Christmas before – nor birthdays, or any other celebrations for that matter. It feels like I have been spirited away to another country – I am experiencing culture shock.

My first breakfast in Queenstown is so overwhelming. Seeing milk being poured onto those Rice Bubbles out of a foil-topped bottle baffles me; it's not the concept of milk on cereal, but the concept that milk doesn't come directly from the cow next door. At just five years old, I start to realise that there is a big wide world outside of what I have always known.

As we walk the streets of this alpine town, Mum and Dad keep trying to explain to me that I can't just go up to people and talk to them, and that I can't trust everyone I meet. I don't understand what they mean. Every single person I have ever met until now has been somebody I've known for my whole life.

My first taste of Rice Bubbles wasn't just my first taste of a sugary kids' cereal; it was one of my first tastes of the real world outside of a protected community. I grew up in a religious commune, Springbank Christian Community, near Cust in Canterbury. After years in the community, my dad decided its increasing exclusivity was becoming too frightening. That's when he took us out into what I now know as normal society.

"You're making the biggest mistake of your life," yell the girls through the fence back at Springbank, girls I know as my relatives. As they scream, looking at me in disgust, I don't understand why they hate me so much.

"You're going to hell," they yell. "You're evil!"

I'll never forget the immediate hatred that came with Dad's decision. Those girls, my friends, loathed me. Not because of who I was, but because one man, the leader of the community, told them to detest me.

Dad had taken us to Queenstown on a 'holiday' but it was really a chance for us to become a family and start to assimilate ourselves into the outside world. We had to return to Springbank for four weeks to organise our departure, upon which we discovered the community's leader had already begun the process of our disownment.

He controlled everyone in the community. Once my family had voiced our desire to leave, we became sinners not just to him, but to all of them.

My parents had been part of Springbank from its inception 10 years previously and we were one of



TOP: Karen (right) and her sister. The dress code in the community ruled that girls wear skirts to the ground and long sleeves. Showing flesh was a no-no. ABOVE: When they left Springbank, Karen's parents had five children under 10 and another on the way. This portrait, close to the perimeter fence, was taken the month they left.

the first families to leave. Dad, who had watched the community become progressively regimented, had wanted to leave for two years. Mum was always too scared. She was too afraid to break away from her family and the life she'd known for so long. It wasn't until she saw those girls screaming at me, until she saw the disgust in her family's eyes, that she knew she was making the right decision. She realised, for the first time, that the community's love was not unconditional. They only loved us if we followed their rules.

Once we left the community, we would never be allowed to visit. We would give up every single person we'd ever known. We wouldn't be allowed to speak to them on the street, nor would we ever be visited by them. We would be totally excommunicated.

Our new life in the outside world meant that for the first time we were allowed to make decisions for



ourselves. This took my parents some time to come to terms with. For so many years, the leader of the community had told them what to think, what to wear, what to do with each hour of their day. I look back now and liken that situation to a woman being abused by her husband; only when she gets out does she realise how bad it really was.

In 1982, I saw my granddad – one of the family members who had disowned us – at the Rangiora Market Day. I ran up to him, with open arms, so excited to see him. He pretended that he didn't know me. At the time, I didn't think that he was an evil man. I, just a naive child of eight, thought he genuinely did not remember me. The belief that an adult could fully reject a child like that was something my young mind could not begin to comprehend.

Being one of the initial families to leave the community, my family was alone in our new life. We were in normal society, but never felt part of it. We never had anyone to go to, to ask questions of. I spent my later childhood years feeling lost and out of place. The kids at school knew I was different. They asked me questions I didn't know the answers to: Why did I wear longer dresses when the rest of the girls wore shorts? Why did I never get a haircut? Progressively, I did start to feel like a normal kid. My skirt lengths got shorter, and so did Mum's. I learned how to ask for things, how to challenge decisions, how to voice my opinion.

My parents eventually found people to trust whom they could get advice from, people who weren't going to control them. They lightened up on the rules that governed their lives and ours, and started to give us more freedom to make our own decisions.

Slowly, I became the 'normal' person I am today. I'm a part-time office administrator at a school, a full-time mum to four kids, and have been married for 13 years.

Over the years I've helped many other families integrate into life outside of the community and it's good to know that nobody has had to go through the same adjustments that our family did. I've helped them go shopping, and learn how to use money. I've helped people learn how to make an entire meal, not just one part of a communal cooking effort. I've introduced them to making their own decisions, and to surviving without an all-powerful leader.

I have also entered adult life with a sensitivity to those who don't fit into the stereotypical box that society calls 'normal'. I have gone on to teach my kids about tolerance, and to always look for the inner qualities of people. Above all, my early experiences have taught me to make sure of one thing: That my children understand my love for them is total. And unconditional. ■

Karen's family's story is part of *Fleur Beale's Sins of the Father: The Long Shadow of a Religious Cult* (Longacre, \$29.99).



ABOVE: Karen says she now places a high value on freedom of choice and is proud of the lives she and her family have made for themselves in the 'outside' world. Karen is pictured with husband Martin, a property valuer, and their children. From left: Joshua, 10; Alisha, five; Michael, three; and Rachael, eight.

## Life in the 'Cooperites'

The reclusive Springbank Christian Community that Karen began life in was established in 1968. Founder Neville Cooper set up the community with a desire to create his own Christian utopia on earth. Formerly situated in Springbank in Canterbury, it moved to the West Coast's Haupiri Valley – and changed its name to Gloriavale Christian Community – when it grew too big for its original property. The community – referred to by outsiders as the 'Cooperites' – holds very conservative moral values. Neville Cooper, who has changed his name to Hopeful Christian, is said to emphasise sexual purity, honesty, religious faith and living without sin. The children from Gloriavale are brought up believing that the world outside the community is immoral. In the 90s, Hopeful Christian was charged with several counts of sexual assault against young members of the sect. After two trials and numerous appeals he was convicted on three counts and sentenced to five years. He was released early for good behaviour and returned to lead the community. Gloriavale has more than 400 members, more than half of whom are children. While it holds public open days every two years, the community shuns those who have left, cutting off contact with their families.