

I was brought up in the exclusive brethren

"Jim Taylor Jr's edicts became increasingly bizarre - Sisters had to wear their hair hanging down their backs, covered in a headscarf; all adult Brethren must be married - and then he started to go to bed with married Sisters"

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Growing up in the Exclusive Brethren meant missing out on a lot of things other children took for granted. It meant no TV, radio or recorded music, no pets, parties, school outings, plays or sports, no cinema, novels, magazines, no make-up or haircuts, and strict clothing rules. I was used to living a life different from those of my friends.

Even so, it struck me as strange, one morning when I was eight, that Mum wasn't trying to get me ready for school. Instead she was frantically stuffing clothes into cases. She told me I was going away. Downstairs I saw my elderly grandmother wringing her hands and protesting, but she was ignored as I was pushed through the front door and my hand taken by one of the Brethren from our local Meeting. He led me to a van in which were several other Brethren, including one of my uncles.

After what seemed like hours, we arrived at the suburban home of the Brother, his three spinster sisters, bachelor brother and ancient mother. I was taken down to the basement, which was to be my home for the foreseeable future.

I felt anxious - where was Mum? She would be along later. Where was Dad? He was unclean; I should not wish to be with him. Later, as I was tucked up on an old settee, I tried not to cry. One of the sisters read me Bible stories to help me fall asleep.

A few days later Mum arrived. She told me that the Brethren were rescuing me because Dad had left them after a disagreement over doctrine. The "Ministry" from the latest leader, Jim Taylor Jr in the US, stated Brethren could no longer eat or drink with outsiders. Dad thought it wrong that he could not share even a cup of tea with his elderly widowed mother, who lived with us but belonged to a milder sect. When he stood up in the Meeting and said he disagreed, he was excommunicated.

As the weeks passed, I missed my father dreadfully. Unknown to me, he had made me a ward of court, so the family became uneasy at giving us refuge and eventually Mum took me home. I can remember Dad returning early from work, bringing a punnet of strawberries to welcome me back. I sat on his lap and sobbed.

The nightmare was not over, though. For the next decade, life carried on much as before, but with one big difference: Mum would not eat or sleep with Dad and would barely speak to him. I was often used as an intermediary, with each trying to persuade me the other was wrong. My best friend comforted me when I was desperate with worry that my mother would die during her "fasts", when she didn't eat for days in the hope that the Lord would answer her prayers and bring Dad back to the path of righteousness.

My "worldly, unclean" schoolfriends were very sympathetic and tried to bridge the gaps in my experience by carefully recounting theirs. Sometimes I secretly watched TV or listened to records with them on the way home from school. Once they daringly arranged for me to see a film - *To Kill A Mockingbird* - at the local cinema during school hours.

Meanwhile Jim Taylor Jr's edicts became increasingly bizarre - Sisters had to wear their hair hanging down their backs, covered in a headscarf; all adult Brethren must be married - and then he started to go to bed with married Sisters, supposedly showing how pure he was. Eventually, in 1970, at a Meeting in Aberdeen, he appeared drunk and stated that his word was of such consequence that the Bible was no longer necessary - a bombshell that caused a number of clearer-sighted Brethren to protest and break away.

By this time, it was too late for me to care. I was in my late teens and, to the horror of my family, left for university shortly afterwards. There I ate chips and curry for the first time, openly read newspapers and novels, drank wine, wore "normal" clothes, listened to pop music and cut my hair. Being unclean was delicious.

My mother may have disapproved but she, too, left the Taylorites then, joining instead the same sect as my father and grandmother. She is still alive, still strictly religious, but she does not shut me out of her life.

In the cult I left behind, Taylor died an alcoholic. Another "Universal Leader" stepped into his shoes, and the Brethren now even run their own schools. My heart bleeds for those children.