

# Why I fled Scientology

Tom Cruise calls his religion “extraordinary,” but 26-year-old Astra Woodcraft, who grew up in the Church’s inner circle, has a different story to tell—about bizarre beliefs, oppressive rules and how she finally broke free to start her life over.

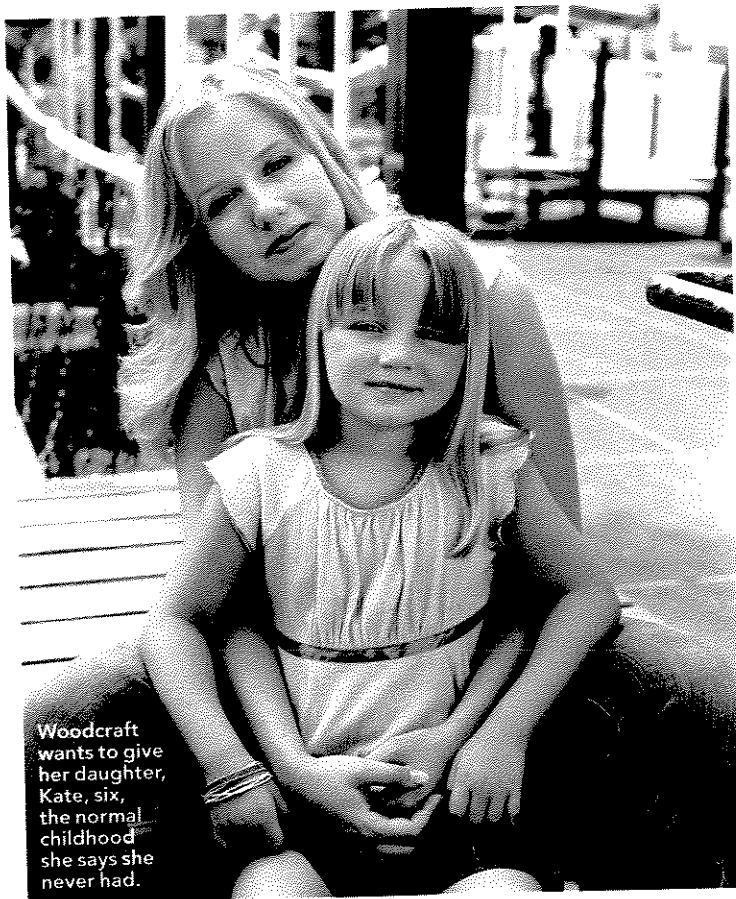
**O**n a chilly February evening in 1998, I strode quickly through Los Angeles International Airport, clutching a Virgin Atlantic ticket for London in one hand and a duffel bag stuffed with my clothes in the other. I was drenched, having splashed across the parking lot in the rain, and frightened. I scanned every face, hoping I wouldn’t see anyone I recognized, and looked over my shoulder every few steps. As I got near the security line, I thought with relief: I’ve made it. Then I heard a familiar voice call, “Astra!” My heart stopped. It was my older brother, Matt, and another man I knew; like me, they were both members of the Sea Org, the religious order and management corps of the Church of Scientology. I assumed they were there for only one reason: to keep me from running away.

I ducked into the ladies’ room and locked myself in a stall. Matt barged into the bathroom, stood on the toilet of an adjacent stall and peered down at me. “Astra,” he said. “You need to come out. I have Mom on the phone.” Mom, too, was a member of the Sea Org. Guilt flooded me, because I remembered my own experiences in the Sea Org—the times I’d been sent to the airport to track down defectors, and how I’d been punished if they weren’t found. I didn’t want Matt to get in trouble, but I wasn’t going back.

My escape plan had unfolded early the previous day on one of my rare mornings off from my work. I woke up feeling nauseated and terrified. My husband and fellow Sea Org (or SO) member, Jason Merrill, and I, both worked at Scientology’s Los Angeles offices, and we lived nearby in an apartment complex for married SO members. After Jason had dressed and left for his job, I quickly threw my clothes into a laundry bag and acted as if I were going to the Laundromat. Instead, I drove to my father’s house a few miles away. Dad, who was divorced from Mom, had once been an active Scientologist but had gradually grown disenchanted with the religion. He’d be my safe haven for the night. I knew I could appear at his house and borrow \$100 for my trip—and he wouldn’t tell anyone I’d been there.

But I didn’t share with Dad my biggest secret: I was pregnant. If my supervisors found out, I felt sure they’d discourage me from having the baby; I’d heard that SO members were pressured not to have children because caring for kids takes time and attention away from their mission, which is to spread Scientology around the world. [For the Church’s response to Woodcraft’s claims, see the box on page 283.]

Matt finally left the ladies’ room; he probably feared the airport cops would get a call about a man lurking in the restroom. I waited a few minutes, ran to the gate and boarded the plane. As we lifted off, I was sobbing at the sheer emotion of having cut myself off in one fell swoop from my husband, mother and brother—and a group to which I’d pledged eternal loyalty. Ten hours later I land-



Woodcraft wants to give her daughter, Kate, six, the normal childhood she says she never had.

ed in London, where my aunt and uncle lived. I still believed in Scientology and thought that *I* was the one who’d failed the church. Only when I had time to reflect on my last 13 years did I understand what a strange and scary world I’d been living in.

## What’s Katie going through?

If you’ve heard about Scientology lately, it’s probably because of all the attention focused on outspoken Scientologist Tom Cruise and his fiancée, Katie Holmes. News reports say Katie, who was raised a Catholic, is taking classes in this self-help movement founded in 1954 by the late science fiction novelist L. Ron Hubbard, and she may even be converting. But whatever her link to Scientology, it’s unlikely Katie will go through any of the traumas I suffered.

First of all, she’s a movie star, and I know from the time I spent helping at Scientology’s Celebrity Centre International—where high-profile members get instruction in the religion—that famous people get special treatment and aren’t pressured to take as many classes as regular members are.

And she certainly won’t be subjected to the stifling reg-