



[Tara Westover](#)

Educated: A Memoir [Kindle Edition]

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The past is beautiful because one never realises an emotion at the time. It expands later, & thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF

I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.

—JOHN DEWEY

PROLOGUE

I'm standing on the red railway car that sits abandoned next to the barn. The wind soars, whipping my hair across my face and pushing a chill down the open neck of my shirt. The gales are strong this close to the mountain, as if the peak itself is exhaling. Down below, the valley is peaceful, undisturbed. Meanwhile our farm dances: the heavy conifer trees sway slowly, while the sagebrush and thistles quiver, bowing before every puff and pocket of air. Behind me a gentle hill slopes upward and stitches itself to the mountain base. If I look up, I can see the dark form of the Indian Princess.

The hill is paved with wild wheat. If the conifers and sagebrush are soloists, the wheat field is a corps de ballet, each stem following all the rest in bursts of movement, a million ballerinas bending, one after the other, as great gales dent their golden heads. The shape of that dent lasts only a moment, and is as close as anyone gets to seeing wind.

Turning toward our house on the hillside, I see movements of a different kind, tall shadows stiffly pushing through the currents. My brothers are awake, testing the weather. I imagine my mother at the stove, hovering

over bran pancakes. I picture my father hunched by the back door, lacing his steel-toed boots and threading his callused hands into welding gloves. On the highway below, the school bus rolls past without stopping.

I am only seven, but I understand that it is this fact, more than any other, that makes my family different: we don't go to school.

Dad worries that the Government will force us to go but it can't, because it doesn't know about us. Four of my parents' seven children don't have birth certificates. We have no medical records because we were born at home and have never seen a doctor or nurse.* We have no school records because we've never set foot in a classroom. When I am nine, I will be issued a Delayed Certificate of Birth, but at this moment, according to the state of Idaho and the federal government, I do not exist.

Of course I *did* exist. I had grown up preparing for the Days of Abomination, watching for the sun to darken, for the moon to drip as if with blood. I spent my summers bottling peaches and my winters rotating supplies. When the World of Men failed, my family would continue on, unaffected.

I had been educated in the rhythms of the mountain, rhythms in which change was never fundamental, only cyclical. The same sun appeared each morning, swept over the valley and dropped behind the peak. The snows that fell in winter always melted in the spring. Our lives were a cycle—the cycle of the day, the cycle of the seasons—circles of perpetual change that, when complete, meant nothing had changed at all. I believed my family was a part of this immortal pattern, that we were, in some sense, eternal. But eternity belonged only to the mountain.

There's a story my father used to tell about the peak. She was a grand old thing, a cathedral of a mountain. The range had other mountains, taller, more imposing, but Buck's Peak was the most finely crafted. Its base spanned a mile, its dark form swelling out of the earth and rising into a flawless spire. From a distance, you could see the impression of a woman's body on the mountain face: her legs formed of huge ravines, her hair a spray of pines fanning over the northern ridge. Her stance was commanding, one leg thrust forward in a powerful movement, more stride than step.

My father called her the Indian Princess. She emerged each year when the snows began to melt, facing south, watching the buffalo return to the valley. Dad said the nomadic Indians had watched for her appearance as a sign of spring, a signal the mountain was thawing, winter was over, and it was time to come home.

All my father's stories were about our mountain, our valley, our jagged little patch of Idaho. He never told me what to do if I left the mountain, if I crossed oceans and continents and found myself in strange terrain, where I could no longer search the horizon for the Princess. He never told me how I'd know when it was time to come home.

* Except for my sister Audrey, who broke both an arm and a leg when she was young. She was taken to get a cast.

Chapter 1

Choose the Good

My strongest memory is not a memory. It's something I imagined, then came to remember as if it had happened. The memory was formed when I was five, just before I turned six, from a story my father told in such detail that I and my brothers and sisters each conjured our own cinematic version, with gunfire and shouts. Mine had crickets. That's the sound I hear as my family huddles in the kitchen, lights off, hiding from the Feds who've surrounded the house. A woman reaches for a glass of water and her silhouette is lighted by the moon. A shot echoes like the lash of a whip and she falls. In my memory it's always Mother who falls, and she has a baby in her arms.

The baby doesn't make sense—I'm the youngest of my mother's seven children—but like I said, none of this happened.

A YEAR AFTER MY FATHER told us that story, we gathered one evening to hear him read aloud from Isaiah, a prophecy about Immanuel. He sat on our mustard-colored sofa, a large Bible open in his lap. Mother was next to him. The rest of us were strewn across the shaggy brown carpet.

“Butter and honey shall he eat,” Dad droned, low and monotone, weary from a long day hauling scrap. “That he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.”

There was a heavy pause. We sat quietly.

My father was not a tall man but he was able to command a room. He had a presence about him, the solemnity of an oracle. His hands were thick and leathery—the hands of a man who’d been hard at work all his life—and they grasped the Bible firmly.

He read the passage aloud a second time, then a third, then a fourth. With each repetition the pitch of his voice climbed higher. His eyes, which moments before had been swollen with fatigue, were now wide and alert. There was a divine doctrine here, he said. He would inquire of the Lord.

The next morning Dad purged our fridge of milk, yogurt and cheese, and that evening when he came home, his truck was loaded with fifty gallons of honey.

“Isaiah doesn’t say which is evil, butter or honey,” Dad said, grinning as my brothers lugged the white tubs to the basement. “But if you ask, the Lord will tell you!”

When Dad read the verse to his mother, she laughed in his face. “I got some pennies in my purse,” she said. “You better take them. They’ll be all the sense you got.”

Grandma had a thin, angular face and an endless store of faux Indian jewelry, all silver and turquoise, which hung in clumps from her spindly neck and fingers. Because she lived down the hill from us, near the highway, we called her Grandma-down-the-hill. This was to distinguish her from our mother’s mother, who we called Grandma-over-in-town because she lived fifteen miles south, in the only town in the county, which had a single stoplight and a grocery store.

Dad and his mother got along like two cats with their tails tied together. They could talk for a week and not agree about anything, but they were tethered by their devotion to the mountain. My father’s family had been living at the base of Buck’s Peak for half a century. Grandma’s daughters had married and moved away, but my father stayed, building a shabby yellow house, which he would never quite finish, just up the hill from his mother’s, at the base of the mountain, and plunking a junkyard—one of several—next to her manicured lawn.

They argued daily, about the mess from the junkyard but more often about us kids. Grandma thought we should be in school and not, as she put it, “roaming the mountain like savages.” Dad said public school was a ploy by the Government to lead children away from God. “I may as well surrender my kids to the devil himself,” he said, “as send them down the road to that school.”

God told Dad to share the revelation with the people who lived and farmed in the shadow of Buck’s Peak. On Sundays, nearly everyone gathered at the church, a hickory-colored chapel just off the highway with the small, restrained steeple common to Mormon churches. Dad cornered fathers as they left their pews. He started with his cousin Jim, who listened good-naturedly while Dad waved his Bible and explained the sinfulness of milk. Jim grinned, then clapped Dad on the shoulder and said no righteous God would deprive a man of homemade strawberry ice cream on a hot summer afternoon. Jim’s wife tugged on his arm. As he slid past us I caught a whiff of manure. Then I remembered: the big dairy farm a mile north of Buck’s Peak, that was Jim’s.

AFTER DAD TOOK UP preaching against milk, Grandma jammed her fridge full of it. She and Grandpa only drank skim but pretty soon it was all there—two percent, whole, even chocolate. She seemed to believe this was an important line to hold.

Every morning, my family sat around a large table of reworked red oak and ate either seven-grain cereal, with honey and molasses, or seven-grain pancakes, also with honey and molasses. Because there were nine of us, the pancakes were never cooked all the way through. I didn’t mind the cereal if I could soak it in milk, letting the cream gather up the grist and seep into the pellets, but since the revelation we’d been having it with water. It was like eating a bowl of mud.

It wasn’t long before I began to think of all that milk spoiling in Grandma’s fridge. Then I got into the habit of skipping breakfast each morning and going straight to the barn. I’d slop the pigs and fill the trough for the cows and horses, then I’d hop over the corral fence, loop around the barn and step through Grandma’s side door.

On one such morning, as I sat at the counter watching Grandma pour a bowl of cornflakes, she said, “How would you like to go to school?”

“I wouldn’t like it,” I said.

“How do you know,” she barked. “You ain’t never tried it.”

She poured the milk and handed me the bowl, then she perched at the bar, directly across from me, and watched as I shoveled spoonfuls into my mouth.

“We’re leaving tomorrow for Arizona,” she told me, but I already knew. She and Grandpa always went to Arizona when the weather began to turn. Grandpa said he was too old for Idaho winters; the cold put an ache in his bones. “Get yourself up real early,” Grandma said, “around five, and we’ll take you with us. Put you in school.”

I shifted on my stool. I tried to imagine school but couldn’t. Instead I pictured Sunday school, which I attended each week and which I hated. A boy named Aaron had told all the girls that I couldn’t read because I didn’t go to school, and now none of them would talk to me.

“Dad said I can go?” I said.

“No,” Grandma said. “But we’ll be long gone by the time he realizes you’re missing.” She set my bowl in the sink and gazed out the window.

Grandma was a force of nature—impatient, aggressive, self-possessed. To look at her was to take a step back. She dyed her hair black and this intensified her already severe features, especially her eyebrows, which she smeared on each morning in thick, inky arches. She drew them too large and this made her face seem stretched. They were also drawn too high and draped the rest of her features into an expression of boredom, almost sarcasm.

“You should be in school,” she said.

“Won’t Dad just make you bring me back?” I said.

“Your dad can’t make me do a damned thing.” Grandma stood, squaring herself. “If he wants you, he’ll have to come get you.” She hesitated, and for a moment looked ashamed. “I talked to him yesterday. He won’t be able to fetch you back for a long while. He’s behind on that shed he’s building in town. He can’t pack up and drive to Arizona, not while the weather holds and he and the boys can work long days.”

Grandma’s scheme was well plotted. Dad always worked from sunup until sundown in the weeks before the first snow, trying to stockpile enough money from hauling scrap and building barns to outlast the winter, when jobs were scarce. Even if his mother ran off with his youngest child, he wouldn’t be able to stop working, not until the forklift was encased in ice.

“I’ll need to feed the animals before we go,” I said. “He’ll notice I’m gone for sure if the cows break through the fence looking for water.”

I DIDN’T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. I sat on the kitchen floor and watched the hours tick by. One A.M. Two. Three.

At four I stood and put my boots by the back door. They were caked in manure, and I was sure Grandma wouldn’t let them into her car. I pictured them on her porch, abandoned, while I ran off shoeless to Arizona.

I imagined what would happen when my family discovered I was missing. My brother Richard and I often spent whole days on the mountain, so it was likely no one would notice until sundown, when Richard came home for dinner and I didn’t. I pictured my brothers pushing out the door to search for me. They’d try the junkyard first, hefting iron slabs in case some stray sheet of metal had shifted and pinned me. Then they’d move outward, sweeping the farm, crawling up trees and into the barn attic. Finally, they’d turn to the mountain.

It would be past dusk by then—that moment just before night sets in, when the landscape is visible only as darkness and lighter darkness, and you feel the world around you more than you see it. I imagined my brothers spreading over the mountain, searching the black forests. No one would talk; everyone’s thoughts would be the same. Things could go horribly wrong on the mountain. Cliffs appeared suddenly. Feral horses, belonging to my grandfather, ran wild over thick banks of water hemlock, and there were more than a few rattlesnakes. We’d done this search before when a calf went missing from the barn. In the valley you’d find an injured animal; on the mountain, a dead one.

I imagined Mother standing by the back door, her eyes sweeping the dark ridge, when my father came home to tell her they hadn’t found me. My sister, Audrey, would suggest that someone ask Grandma, and Mother would say Grandma had left that morning for Arizona. Those words would hang in the air for a moment, then everyone would know where I’d gone. I imagined my father’s face, his dark eyes shrinking, his mouth clamping into a frown as he turned to my mother. “You think she chose to go?”

Low and sorrowful, his voice echoed. Then it was drowned out by sounds from another conjured remembrance—crickets, then gunfire, then silence.

THE EVENT WAS A FAMOUS ONE, I would later learn—like Wounded Knee or Waco—but when my father first told us the story, it felt like no one in the world knew about it except us.

It began near the end of canning season, which other kids probably called “summer.” My family always spent the warm months bottling fruit for storage, which Dad said we’d need in the Days of Abomination. One evening, Dad was uneasy when he came in from the junkyard. He paced the kitchen during dinner, hardly touching a bite. We had to get everything in order, he said. There was little time.

We spent the next day boiling and skinning peaches. By sundown we’d filled dozens of Mason jars, which were set out in perfect rows, still warm from the pressure cooker. Dad surveyed our work, counting the jars and muttering to himself, then he turned to Mother and said, “It’s not enough.”

That night Dad called a family meeting, and we gathered around the kitchen table, because it was wide and long, and could seat all of us. We had a right to know what we were up against, he said. He was standing at the head of the table; the rest of us perched on benches, studying the thick planks of red oak.

“There’s a family not far from here,” Dad said. “They’re freedom fighters. They wouldn’t let the Government brainwash their kids in them public schools, so the Feds came after them.” Dad exhaled, long and slow. “The Feds surrounded the family’s cabin, kept them locked in there for weeks, and when a hungry child, a little boy, snuck out to go hunting, the Feds shot him dead.”

I scanned my brothers. I’d never seen fear on Luke’s face before.

“They’re still in the cabin,” Dad said. “They keep the lights off, and they crawl on the floor, away from the doors and windows. I don’t know how much food they got. Might be they’ll starve before the Feds give up.”

No one spoke. Eventually Luke, who was twelve, asked if we could help. “No,” Dad said. “Nobody can. They’re trapped in their own home. But they got their guns, you can bet that’s why the Feds ain’t charged in.” He paused to sit, folding himself onto the low bench in slow, stiff movements. He looked old to my eyes, worn out. “We can’t help them, but we can help ourselves. When the Feds come to Buck’s Peak, we’ll be ready.”

That night, Dad dragged a pile of old army bags up from the basement. He said they were our “head for the hills” bags. We spent that night packing them with supplies—herbal medicines, water purifiers, flint and steel. Dad had bought several boxes of military MREs—Meals Ready-to-Eat—and we put as many as we could fit into our packs, imagining the moment when, having fled the house and hiding ourselves in the wild plum trees near the creek, we’d eat them. Some of my brothers stowed guns in their packs but I had only a small knife, and even so my pack was as big as me by the time we’d finished. I asked Luke to hoist it onto a shelf in my closet, but Dad told me to keep it low, where I could fetch it quick, so I slept with it in my bed.

I practiced slipping the bag onto my back and running with it—I didn’t want to be left behind. I imagined our escape, a midnight flight to the safety of the Princess. The mountain, I understood, was our ally. To those who knew her she could be kind, but to intruders she was pure treachery, and this would give us an advantage. Then again, if we were going to take cover on the mountain when the Feds came, I didn’t understand why we were canning all these peaches. We couldn’t haul a thousand heavy Mason jars up the peak. Or did we need the peaches so we could bunker down in the house, like the Weavers, and fight it out?

Fighting it out seemed likely, especially a few days later when Dad came home with more than a dozen military-surplus rifles, mostly SKSs, their thin silver bayonets folded neatly under their barrels. The guns arrived in narrow tin boxes and were packed in Cosmoline, a brownish substance the consistency of lard that had to be stripped away. After they’d been cleaned, my brother Tyler chose one and set it on a sheet of black plastic, which he folded over the rifle, sealing it with yards of silvery duct tape. Hoisting the bundle onto his shoulder, he carried it down the hill and dropped it next to the red railroad car. Then he began to dig. When the hole was wide and deep, he dropped the rifle into it, and I watched him cover it with dirt, his muscles swelling from the exertion, his jaw clenched.

Soon after, Dad bought a machine to manufacture bullets from spent cartridges. Now we could last longer in a standoff, he said. I thought of my “head for the hills” bag, waiting in my bed, and of the rifle hidden near the railcar, and began to worry about the bullet-making machine. It was bulky and bolted to an iron workstation in

the basement. If we were taken by surprise, I figured we wouldn't have time to fetch it. I wondered if we should bury it, too, with the rifle.

We kept on bottling peaches. I don't remember how many days passed or how many jars we'd added to our stores before Dad told us more of the story.

"Randy Weaver's been shot," Dad said, his voice thin and erratic. "He left the cabin to fetch his son's body, and the Feds shot him." I'd never seen my father cry, but now tears were dripping in a steady stream from his nose. He didn't wipe them, just let them spill onto his shirt. "His wife heard the shot and ran to the window, holding their baby. Then came the second shot."

Mother was sitting with her arms folded, one hand across her chest, the other clamped over her mouth. I stared at our speckled linoleum while Dad told us how the baby had been lifted from its mother's arms, its face smeared with her blood.

Until that moment, some part of me had *wanted* the Feds to come, had craved the adventure. Now I felt real fear. I pictured my brothers crouching in the dark, their sweaty hands slipping down their rifles. I pictured Mother, tired and parched, drawing back away from the window. I pictured myself lying flat on the floor, still and silent, listening to the sharp chirp of crickets in the field. Then I saw Mother stand and reach for the kitchen tap. A white flash, the roar of gunfire, and she fell. I leapt to catch the baby.

Dad never told us the end of the story. We didn't have a TV or radio, so perhaps he never learned how it ended himself. The last thing I remember him saying about it was, "Next time, it could be us."

Those words would stay with me. I would hear their echo in the chirp of crickets, in the squish of peaches dropping into a glass jar, in the metallic *chink* of an SKS being cleaned. I would hear them every morning when I passed the railroad car and paused over the chickweed and bull thistle growing where Tyler had buried the rifle. Long after Dad had forgotten about the revelation in Isaiah, and Mother was again hefting plastic jugs of "Western Family 2%" into the fridge, I would remember the Weavers.

END OF SAMPLE SECTION 1

IT WAS ALMOST FIVE A.M.

I returned to my room, my head full of crickets and gunfire. In the lower bunk, Audrey was snoring, a low, contented hum that invited me to do the same. Instead I climbed up to my bed, crossed my legs and looked out the window. Five passed. Then six. At seven, Grandma appeared and I watched her pace up and down her patio, turning every few moments to gaze up the hill at our house. Then she and Grandpa stepped into their car and pulled onto the highway.

When the car was gone, I got out of bed and ate a bowl of bran with water. Outside I was greeted by Luke's goat, Kamikaze, who nibbled my shirt as I walked to the barn. I passed the go-kart Richard was building from an old lawnmower. I slopped the pigs, filled the trough and moved Grandpa's horses to a new pasture.

After I'd finished I climbed the railway car and looked out over the valley. It was easy to pretend the car was moving, speeding away, that any moment the valley might disappear behind me. I'd spent hours playing that fantasy through in my head but today the reel wouldn't take. I turned west, away from the fields, and faced the peak.

The Princess was always brightest in spring, just after the conifers emerged from the snow, their deep green needles seeming almost black against the tawny browns of soil and bark. It was autumn now. I could still see her but she was fading: the reds and yellows of a dying summer obscured her dark form. Soon it would snow. In the valley that first snow would melt but on the mountain it would linger, burying the Princess until spring, when she would reappear, watchful.

Chapter 2

The Midwife

"Do you have calendula?" the midwife said. "I also need lobelia and witch hazel."

She was sitting at the kitchen counter, watching Mother rummage through our birchwood cabinets. An electric scale sat on the counter between them, and occasionally Mother would use it to weigh dried leaves. It was spring. There was a morning chill despite the bright sunlight.

"I made a fresh batch of calendula last week," Mother said. "Tara, run and fetch it."

I retrieved the tincture, and my mother packed it in a plastic grocery bag with the dried herbs. "Anything else?" Mother laughed. The pitch was high, nervous. The midwife intimidated her, and when intimidated my mother took on a weightless quality, whisking about every time the midwife made one of her slow, solid movements.

The midwife surveyed her list. "That will do."

She was a short, plump woman in her late forties, with eleven children and a russet-colored wart on her chin. She had the longest hair I'd ever seen, a cascade the color of field mice that fell to her knees when she took it out of its tight bun. Her features were heavy, her voice thick with authority. She had no license, no certificates. She was a midwife entirely by the power of her own say-so, which was more than enough.

Mother was to be her assistant. I remember watching them that first day, comparing them. Mother with her rose-petal skin and her hair curled into soft waves that bounced about her shoulders. Her eyelids shimmered. Mother did her makeup every morning, but if she didn't have time she'd apologize all day, as if by not doing it, she had inconvenienced everyone.

The midwife looked as though she hadn't given a thought to her appearance in a decade, and the way she carried herself made you feel foolish for having noticed.

The midwife nodded goodbye, her arms full of Mother's herbs.

The next time the midwife came she brought her daughter Maria, who stood next to her mother, imitating her movements, with a baby wedged against her wiry nine-year-old frame. I stared hopefully at her. I hadn't met many other girls like me, who didn't go to school. I edged closer, trying to draw her attention, but she was wholly absorbed in listening to her mother, who was explaining how cramp bark and motherwort should be administered to treat post-birth contractions. Maria's head bobbed in agreement; her eyes never left her mother's face.

I trudged down the hall to my room, alone, but when I turned to shut the door she was standing in it, still toting the baby on her hip. He was a meaty box of flesh, and her torso bent sharply at the waist to offset his bulk.

"Are you going?" she said.

I didn't understand the question.

"I always go," she said. "Have you seen a baby get born?"

"No."

"I have, lots of times. Do you know what it means when a baby comes breech?"

"No." I said it like an apology.

THE FIRST TIME MOTHER assisted with a birth she was gone for two days. Then she wafted through the back door, so pale she seemed translucent, and drifted to the couch, where she stayed, trembling. "It was awful," she whispered. "Even Judy said she was scared." Mother closed her eyes. "She didn't *look* scared."

Mother rested for several minutes, until she regained some color, then she told the story. The labor had been long, grueling, and when the baby finally came the mother had torn, and badly. There was blood everywhere. The hemorrhage wouldn't stop. That's when Mother realized the umbilical cord had wrapped around the baby's throat. He was purple, so still Mother thought he was dead. As Mother recounted these details, the blood drained from her face until she sat, pale as an egg, her arms wrapped around herself.

Audrey made chamomile tea and we put our mother to bed. When Dad came home that night, Mother told him the same story. "I can't do it," she said. "Judy can, but I can't." Dad put an arm on her shoulder. "This is a calling from the Lord," he said. "And sometimes the Lord asks for hard things."

Mother didn't want to be a midwife. Midwifery had been Dad's idea, one of his schemes for self-reliance. There was nothing he hated more than our being dependent on the Government. Dad said one day we would be completely off the grid. As soon as he could get the money together, he planned to build a pipeline to bring water down from the mountain, and after that he'd install solar panels all over the farm. That way we'd have water and electricity in the End of Days, when everyone else was drinking from puddles and living in darkness.

Mother was an herbalist so she could tend our health, and if she learned to midwife she would be able to deliver the grandchildren when they came along.

The midwife came to visit Mother a few days after the first birth. She brought Maria, who again followed me to my room. "It's too bad your mother got a bad one her first time," she said, smiling. "The next one will be easier."

A few weeks later, this prediction was tested. It was midnight. Because we didn't have a phone, the midwife called Grandma-down-the-hill, who walked up the hill, tired and ornery, and barked that it was time for Mother to go "play doctor." She stayed only minutes but woke the whole house. "Why you people can't just go to a hospital like everyone else is beyond me," she shouted, slamming the door on her way out.

Mother retrieved her overnight bag and the tackle box she'd filled with dark bottles of tincture, then she walked slowly out the door. I was anxious and slept badly, but when Mother came home the next morning, hair deranged and dark circles under her eyes, her lips were parted in a wide smile. "It was a girl," she said. Then she went to bed and slept all day.

Months passed in this way, Mother leaving the house at all hours and coming home, trembling, relieved to her core that it was over. By the time the leaves started to fall she'd helped with a dozen births. By the end of winter, several dozen. In the spring she told my father she'd had enough, that she could deliver a baby if she had to, if it was the End of the World. Now she could stop.

Dad's face sank when she said this. He reminded her that this was God's will, that it would bless our family. "You need to be a midwife," he said. "You need to deliver a baby on your own."

Mother shook her head. "I can't," she said. "Besides, who would hire me when they could hire Judy?"

She'd jinxed herself, thrown her gauntlet before God. Soon after, Maria told me her father had a new job in Wyoming. "Mom says your mother should take over," Maria said. A thrilling image took shape in my imagination, of me in Maria's role, the midwife's daughter, confident, knowledgeable. But when I turned to look at my mother standing next to me, the image turned to vapor.

Midwifery was not illegal in the state of Idaho, but it had not yet been sanctioned. If a delivery went wrong, a midwife might face charges for practicing medicine without a license; if things went very wrong, she could face criminal charges for manslaughter, even prison time. Few women would take such a risk, so midwives were scarce: on the day Judy left for Wyoming, Mother became the only midwife for a hundred miles.

Women with swollen bellies began coming to the house and begging Mother to deliver their babies. Mother crumpled at the thought. One woman sat on the edge of our faded yellow sofa, her eyes cast downward, as she explained that her husband was out of work and they didn't have money for a hospital. Mother sat quietly, eyes focused, lips tight, her whole expression momentarily solid. Then the expression dissolved and she said, in her small voice, "I'm not a midwife, just an assistant."

The woman returned several times, perching on our sofa again and again, describing the uncomplicated births of her other children. Whenever Dad saw the woman's car from the junkyard, he'd often come into the house, quietly, through the back door, on the pretense of getting water; then he'd stand in the kitchen taking slow, silent sips, his ear bent toward the living room. Each time the woman left Dad could hardly contain his excitement, so that finally, succumbing to either the woman's desperation or to Dad's elation, or to both, Mother gave way.

The birth went smoothly. Then the woman had a friend who was also pregnant, and Mother delivered her baby as well. Then that woman had a friend. Mother took on an assistant. Before long she was delivering so many babies that Audrey and I spent our days driving around the valley with her, watching her conduct prenatal exams and prescribe herbs. She became our teacher in a way that, because we rarely held school at home, she'd never been before. She explained every remedy and palliative. If So-and-so's blood pressure was high, she should be given hawthorn to stabilize the collagen and dilate the coronary blood vessels. If Mrs. Someone-or-other was having premature contractions, she needed a bath in ginger to increase the supply of oxygen to the uterus.

Midwifing changed my mother. She was a grown woman with seven children, but this was the first time in her life that she was, without question or caveat, the one in charge. Sometimes, in the days after a birth, I detected in her something of Judy's heavy presence, in a forceful turn of her head, or the imperious arch of an eyebrow. She stopped wearing makeup, then she stopped apologizing for not wearing it.

Mother charged about five hundred dollars for a delivery, and this was another way midwifing changed her: suddenly she had money. Dad didn't believe that women should work, but I suppose he thought it was all right for Mother to be paid for midwifing, because it undermined the Government. Also, we needed the money. Dad worked harder than any man I knew, but scrapping and building barns and hay sheds didn't bring in much, and it helped that Mother could buy groceries with the envelopes of small bills she kept in her purse. Sometimes, if we'd spent the whole day flying about the valley, delivering herbs and doing prenatal exams, Mother would use that money to take me and Audrey out to eat. Grandma-over-in-town had given me a journal, pink with a caramel-colored teddy bear on the cover, and in it I recorded the first time Mother took us to a restaurant, which I described as "real fancy with menus and everything." According to the entry, my meal came to \$3.30.

Mother also used the money to improve herself as a midwife. She bought an oxygen tank in case a baby came out and couldn't breathe, and she took a suturing class so she could stitch the women who tore. Judy had always sent women to the hospital for stitches, but Mother was determined to learn. *Self-reliance*, I imagine her thinking.

With the rest of the money, Mother put in a phone line.* One day a white van appeared, and a handful of men in dark overalls began climbing over the utility poles by the highway. Dad burst through the back door demanding to know what the hell was going on. "I thought you *wanted* a phone," Mother said, her eyes so full of surprise they were irreproachable. She went on, talking fast. "You said there could be trouble if someone goes into labor and Grandma isn't home to take the call. I thought, He's right, we need a phone! Silly me! Did I misunderstand?"

Dad stood there for several seconds, his mouth open. Of course a midwife needs a phone, he said. Then he went back to the junkyard and that's all that was ever said about it. We hadn't had a telephone for as long as I could remember, but the next day there it was, resting in a lime-green cradle, its glossy finish looking out of place next to the murky jars of cohosh and skullcap.

END OF SAMPLE SECTION 2

LUKE WAS FIFTEEN WHEN he asked Mother if he could have a birth certificate. He wanted to enroll in Driver's Ed because Tony, our oldest brother, was making good money driving rigs hauling gravel, which he could do because he had a license. Shawn and Tyler, the next oldest after Tony, had birth certificates; it was only the youngest four—Luke, Audrey, Richard and me—who didn't.

Mother began to file the paperwork. I don't know if she talked it over with Dad first. If she did, I can't explain what changed his mind—why suddenly a ten-year policy of not registering with the Government ended without a struggle—but I think maybe it was that telephone. It was almost as if my father had come to accept that if he were really going to do battle with the Government, he would have to take certain risks. Mother's being a midwife would subvert the Medical Establishment, but in order to be a midwife she needed a phone. Perhaps the same logic was extended to Luke: Luke would need income to support a family, to buy supplies and prepare for the End of Days, so he needed a birth certificate. The other possibility is that Mother didn't ask Dad. Perhaps she just decided, on her own, and he accepted her decision. Perhaps even he—charismatic gale of a man that he was—was temporarily swept aside by the force of her.

Once she had begun the paperwork for Luke, Mother decided she might as well get birth certificates for all of us. It was harder than she expected. She tore the house apart looking for documents to prove we were her children. She found nothing. In my case, no one was sure when I'd been born. Mother remembered one date, Dad another, and Grandma-down-the-hill, who went to town and swore an affidavit that I was her granddaughter, gave a third date.

Mother called the church headquarters in Salt Lake City. A clerk there found a certificate from my christening, when I was a baby, and another from my baptism, which, as with all Mormon children, had occurred when I was eight. Mother requested copies. They arrived in the mail a few days later. "For Pete's sake!" Mother said when she opened the envelope. Each document gave a different birth date, and neither matched the one Grandma had put on the affidavit.

That week Mother was on the phone for hours every day. With the receiver wedged against her shoulder, the cord stretched across the kitchen, she cooked, cleaned, and strained tinctures of goldenseal and blessed thistle, while having the same conversation over and over.

“Obviously I should have registered her when she was born, but I didn’t. So here we are.”

Voices murmured on the other end of the line.

“I’ve already *told* you—and your subordinate, *and* your subordinate’s subordinate, and *fifty* other people this week—she doesn’t *have* school or medical records. She doesn’t have them! They weren’t lost. I can’t ask for copies. They don’t exist!”

“Her birthday? Let’s say the twenty-seventh.”

“No, I’m not sure.”

“No, I don’t have documentation.”

“Yes, I’ll hold.”

The voices always put Mother on hold when she admitted that she didn’t know my birthday, passing her up the line to their superiors, as if not knowing what day I was born delegitimized the entire notion of my having an identity. You can’t be a person without a birthday, they seemed to say. I didn’t understand why not. Until Mother decided to get my birth certificate, not knowing my birthday had never seemed strange. I knew I’d been born near the end of September, and each year I picked a day, one that didn’t fall on a Sunday because it’s no fun spending your birthday in church. Sometimes I wished Mother would give me the phone so I could explain. “I have a birthday, same as you,” I wanted to tell the voices. “It just changes. Don’t you wish you could change your birthday?”

Eventually, Mother persuaded Grandma-down-the-hill to swear a new affidavit claiming I’d been born on the twenty-seventh, even though Grandma still believed it was the twenty-ninth, and the state of Idaho issued a Delayed Certificate of Birth. I remember the day it came in the mail. It felt oddly dispossessing, being handed this first legal proof of my personhood: until that moment, it had never occurred to me that proof was required.

In the end, I got my birth certificate long before Luke got his. When Mother had told the voices on the phone that she thought I’d been born sometime in the last week of September, they’d been silent. But when she told them she wasn’t exactly sure whether Luke had been born in May or June, that set the voices positively buzzing.

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THAT FALL, WHEN I was nine, I went with Mother on a birth. I’d been asking to go for months, reminding her that Maria had seen a dozen births by the time she was my age. “I’m not a nursing mother,” she said. “I have no reason to take you. Besides, you wouldn’t like it.”

Eventually, Mother was hired by a woman who had several small children. It was arranged; I would tend them during the birth.

The call came in the middle of the night. The mechanical ring drilled its way down the hall, and I held my breath, hoping it wasn’t a wrong number. A minute later Mother was at my bedside. “It’s time,” she said, and together we ran to the car.

For ten miles Mother rehearsed with me what I was to say if the worst happened and the Feds came. Under no circumstances was I to tell them that my mother was a midwife. If they asked why we were there, I was to say nothing. Mother called it “the art of shutting up.” “You just keep saying you were asleep and you didn’t see anything and you don’t know anything and you can’t remember why we’re here,” she said. “Don’t give them any more rope to hang me with than they already have.”

Mother fell into silence. I studied her as she drove. Her face was illuminated by the lights in the dashboard, and it appeared ghostly white set against the utter blackness of country roads. Fear was etched into her features, in the bunching of her forehead and the tightening of her lips. Alone with just me, she put aside the persona she displayed for others. She was her old self again, fragile, breathy.

I heard soft whispers and realized they were coming from her. She was chanting what-ifs to herself. What if something went wrong? What if there was a medical history they hadn’t told her about, some complication? Or what if it was something ordinary, a common crisis, and she panicked, froze, failed to stop the hemorrhage in time? In a few minutes we would be there, and she would have two lives in her small, trembling hands. Until that moment, I’d never understood the risk she was taking. “People die in hospitals,” she whispered, her fingers clenching the wheel, wraithlike. “Sometimes God calls them home, and there’s nothing anyone can do. But if it happens to a midwife—” She turned, speaking directly to me. “All it takes is one mistake, and you’ll be visiting me in prison.”

We arrived and Mother transformed. She issued a string of commands, to the father, to the mother, and to me. I almost forgot to do what she asked, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I realize now that that night I was seeing her for the first time, the secret strength of her.

She barked orders and we moved wordlessly to follow them. The baby was born without complications. It was mythic and romantic, being an intimate witness to this turn in life's cycle, but Mother had been right, I didn't like it. It was long and exhausting, and smelled of groin sweat.

I didn't ask to go on the next birth. Mother returned home pale and shaking. Her voice quivered as she told me and my sister the story: how the unborn baby's heart rate had dropped dangerously low, to a mere tremor; how she'd called an ambulance, then decided they couldn't wait and taken the mother in her own car. She'd driven at such speed that by the time she made it to the hospital, she'd acquired a police escort. In the ER, she'd tried to give the doctors the information they needed without seeming too knowledgeable, without making them suspect that she was an unlicensed midwife.

An emergency cesarean was performed. The mother and baby remained in the hospital for several days, and by the time they were released Mother had stopped trembling. In fact, she seemed exhilarated and had begun to tell the story differently, relishing the moment she'd been pulled over by the policeman, who was surprised to find a moaning woman, obviously in labor, in the backseat. "I slipped into the scatterbrained-woman routine," she told me and Audrey, her voice growing louder, catching hold. "Men like to think they're saving some brain-dead woman who's got herself into a scrape. All I had to do was step aside and let *him* play the hero!"

The most dangerous moment for Mother had come minutes later, in the hospital, after the woman had been wheeled away. A doctor stopped Mother and asked why she'd been at the birth in the first place. She smiled at the memory. "I asked him the dumbest questions I could think of." She put on a high, coquettish voice very unlike her own. "Oh! Was that the baby's head? Aren't babies supposed to come out feet-first?" The doctor was persuaded that she couldn't possibly be a midwife.

THERE WERE NO HERBALISTS in Wyoming as good as Mother, so a few months after the incident at the hospital, Judy came to Buck's Peak to restock. The two women chatted in the kitchen, Judy perched on a barstool, Mother leaning across the counter, her head resting lazily in her hand. I took the list of herbs to the storeroom. Maria, lugging a different baby, followed. I pulled dried leaves and clouded liquids from the shelves, all the while gushing about Mother's exploits, finishing with the confrontation in the hospital. Maria had her own stories about dodging Feds, but when she began to tell one I interrupted her.

"Judy is a fine midwife," I said, my chest rising. "But when it comes to doctors and cops, *nobody* plays stupid like my mother."

* While everyone agrees that there were many years in which my parents did not have a phone, there is considerable disagreement in the family about which years they were. I've asked my brothers, aunts, uncles and cousins, but I have not been able to definitively establish a timeline, and have therefore relied on my own memories.

Chapter 3

Cream Shoes

My mother, Faye, was a mailman's daughter. She grew up in town, in a yellow house with a white picket fence lined with purple irises. Her mother was a seamstress, the best in the valley some said, so as a young woman Faye wore beautiful clothes, all perfectly tailored, from velvet jackets and polyester trousers to woolen

pantsuits and gabardine dresses. She attended church and participated in school and community activities. Her life had an air of intense order, normalcy, and unassailable respectability.

That air of respectability was carefully concocted by her mother. My grandmother, LaRue, had come of age in the 1950s, in the decade of idealistic fever that burned after World War II. LaRue's father was an alcoholic in a time before the language of addiction and empathy had been invented, when alcoholics weren't called alcoholics, they were called drunks. She was from the "wrong kind" of family but embedded in a pious Mormon community that, like many communities, visited the crimes of the parents on the children. She was deemed unmarriageable by the respectable men in town. When she met and married my grandfather—a good-natured young man just out of the navy—she dedicated herself to constructing the perfect family, or at least the appearance of it. This would, she believed, shield her daughters from the social contempt that had so wounded her.

One result of this was the white picket fence and the closet of handmade clothes. Another was that her eldest daughter married a severe young man with jet-black hair and an appetite for unconventionality.

That is to say, my mother responded willfully to the respectability heaped upon her. Grandma wanted to give her daughter the gift she herself had never had, the gift of coming from a *good* family. But Faye didn't want it. My mother was not a social revolutionary—even at the peak of her rebellion she preserved her Mormon faith, with its devotion to marriage and motherhood—but the social upheavals of the 1970s did seem to have at least one effect on her: she didn't want the white picket fence and gabardine dresses.

My mother told me dozens of stories of her childhood, of Grandma fretting about her oldest daughter's social standing, about whether her piqué dress was the proper cut, or her velvet slacks the correct shade of blue. These stories nearly always ended with my father swooping in and trading out the velvet for blue jeans. One telling in particular has stayed with me. I am seven or eight and am in my room dressing for church. I have taken a damp rag to my face, hands and feet, scrubbing only the skin that will be visible. Mother watches me pass a cotton dress over my head, which I have chosen for its long sleeves so I won't have to wash my arms, and a jealousy lights her eyes.

"If you were Grandma's daughter," she says, "we'd have been up at the crack of dawn preening your hair. Then the rest of the morning would be spent agonizing over which shoes, the white or the cream, would give the right impression."

Mother's face twists into an ugly smile. She's grasping for humor but the memory is jaundiced. "Even after we finally chose the cream, we'd be late, because at the last minute Grandma would panic and drive to Cousin Donna's to borrow *her* cream shoes, which had a lower heel."

Mother stares out the window. She has retreated into herself.

"White or cream?" I say. "Aren't they the same color?" I owned only one pair of church shoes. They were black, or at least they'd been black when they belonged to my sister.

With the dress on, I turn to the mirror and sand away the crusty dirt around my neckline, thinking how lucky Mother is to have escaped a world in which there was an important difference between white and cream, and where such questions might consume a perfectly good morning, a morning that might otherwise be spent plundering Dad's junkyard with Luke's goat.

MY FATHER, GENE, WAS one of those young men who somehow manage to seem both solemn and mischievous. His physical appearance was striking—ebony hair, a strict, angular face, nose like an arrow pointing toward fierce, deep-set eyes. His lips were often pressed together in a jocular grin, as if all the world were his to laugh at.

Although I passed my childhood on the same mountain that my father had passed his, slopping pigs in the same iron trough, I know very little about his boyhood. He never talked about it, so all I have to go on are hints from my mother, who told me that, in his younger years, Grandpa-down-the-hill had been violent, with a hair-trigger temper. Mother's use of the words "had been" always struck me as funny. We all knew better than to cross Grandpa. He had a short fuse, that was just fact and anybody in the valley could have told you as much. He was weatherworn inside and out, as taut and rugged as the horses he ran wild on the mountain.

Dad's mother worked for the Farm Bureau in town. As an adult, Dad would develop fierce opinions about women working, radical even for our rural Mormon community. "A woman's place is in the home," he would

say every time he saw a married woman working in town. Now I'm older, I sometimes wonder if Dad's fervor had more to do with his own mother than with doctrine. I wonder if he just wished that *she* had been home, so he wouldn't have been left for all those long hours with Grandpa's temper.

Running the farm consumed Dad's childhood. I doubt he expected to go to college. Still, the way Mother tells it, back then Dad was bursting with energy, laughter and panache. He drove a baby-blue Volkswagen Beetle, wore outlandish suits cut from colorful fabrics, and showcased a thick, fashionable mustache.

They met in town. Faye was waitressing at the bowling alley one Friday night when Gene wandered in with a pack of his friends. She'd never seen him before, so she knew immediately that he wasn't from town and must have come from the mountains surrounding the valley. Farm life had made Gene different from other young men: he was serious for his age, more physically impressive and independent-minded.

There's a sense of sovereignty that comes from life on a mountain, a perception of privacy and isolation, even of dominion. In that vast space you can sail unaccompanied for hours, afloat on pine and brush and rock. It's a tranquillity born of sheer immensity; it calms with its very magnitude, which renders the merely human of no consequence. Gene was formed by this alpine hypnosis, this hushing of human drama.

In the valley, Faye tried to stop her ears against the constant gossip of a small town, whose opinions pushed in through the windows and crept under the doors. Mother often described herself as a pleaser: she said she couldn't stop herself from speculating what people wanted her to be, and from contorting herself, compulsively, unwillingly, into whatever it was. Living in her respectable house in the center of town, crowded by four other houses, each so near anyone could peer through the windows and whisper a judgment, Faye felt trapped.

End of sample section 3