

Educated



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TARA WESTOVER

Born in a rural Idaho town to Mormon fundamentalist parents, Tara Westover spent her childhood and teen years working in her father's scrap yard, helping her mother concoct and bless herbal tinctures, and attending a small, devout local church. Skeptical of public education, medical institutions such as hospitals and clinics, and the U.S. government's role in its citizens' lives more broadly, Tara's parents lived a self-sufficient lifestyle, homeschooling their children and tending to even serious injuries with herbal tinctures. The Westover home was plagued by physical and emotional violence, as well as a series of traumatic accidents which devastated the health and well-being of several members of Tara's large family. As Tara grew older, she became curious about the world beyond her small town and the role education could play in her life. Rebelling against her parents' wishes, she applied to and eventually attended Brigham Young University, a Mormon college in Utah, and eventually went on to study at Cambridge University and accept a fellowship at Harvard. As Tara moved back and forth between the new world her education opened up to her and the black hole of her abusive, delusional family, she spiraled into a depression, and was forced to make a choice that would forever alter the landscape of her life. Tara Westover's unique story has captivated readers around the United States and the world, and her 2018 book, *Educated*, has been shortlisted for awards from the National Books Critics Circle and PEN/America, and has topped the *New York Times* bestseller list.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tara Westover was born in Idaho in 1986, and grew up in the 90s and early 2000s. She remembers the Y2K scare—the widespread fear that at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 2000, the world's computers would be unable to process the change in date as the new millennium arrived and major electric and informational systems around the globe would crash. The moment is a pivotal one for Westover, whose doomsday-prepper father believed that Y2K would usher in the end of days. She poignantly recalls watching his outright disappointment when the Y2K disaster never materialized, and the world went on spinning. The book also makes mention many times of the Ruby Ridge standoff—a 1992 incident during which Randy Weaver and his family, doomsday preppers and Mormon fundamentalists like the Westovers, were locked in combat with members of the Hostage Rescue Team of the FBI after Weaver failed to appear in court on firearms charges. One of the Weavers' teenage sons was killed, as was their family

dog, and in a later siege, Weaver's wife was killed as well; Weaver himself killed a US Marshal, but was later acquitted of all charges and was awarded millions of dollars in a wrongful death suit on behalf of his deceased son.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tara Westover is not the only young Mormon woman whose "escape" from her devout (or delusional) family has become one of the central stories of her life—and the subject of a memoir. Carolyn Jessop's aptly titled *Escape* details her flight from the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), an ultra-religious sect of Mormonism—and her marriage (at eighteen years old) to a fifty-year-old man. Rachel Jeffs, the daughter of Warren Jeffs, president of FLDS, has also penned a memoir. Entitled *Breaking Free*, Rachel Jeffs' memoir offers an inside look at the insidious mechanisms of abuse and misinformation which allow the cult to prosper.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Educated*
- **When Written:** Mid-to-late 2010s
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir, coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** Idaho, Utah, Cambridge
- **Climax:** Tara's parents arrive at Harvard, where she is completing a postgraduate fellowship, and attempt to "reconvert" her to their fundamentalist sect of Mormonism. Tara refuses, creating a schism in her large family—and a psychological breakdown in herself.
- **Antagonist:** Gene Westover, Faye Westover, Shawn Westover, Audrey Westover
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Controversy. Tara Westover's parents—whose real names are Val and LaRee Westover—have heavily disputed many of the claims she makes in her memoir, and have sought legal representation in pushing back against the more unflattering portraits their daughter has painted of their family's life. The subjectivity of memory is a major theme within Westover's memoir, and though she freely admits that the details of her home and family life shared within the text are based on her memories, in many instances she has corroborated them through interviews with other members of her family and acquaintances from her Idaho days.



PLOT SUMMARY

Tara Westover's memoir, *Educated*, follows her journey from rural Idaho to the PhD program at Cambridge University as she struggles against her family's devout, isolationist religious beliefs and fights for an education, learning along the way that to be educated is to learn much more about the world than what's contained in books. Growing up at the foot of a mountain called Buck's Peak in a rural Idaho county, Tara's life was ruled by her domineering father, Gene—a charismatic but paranoid and delusional man who believed that the U.S. government was poisoning and corrupting its citizens through Godless education, Satanic medical practices, and surveillance methods designed to strip every citizen of their freedom. Adopting a self-sufficient, survivalist lifestyle, Gene put his children to work at a young age in his scrap yard and hoarded supplies for the “Days of Abomination,” which he always believed were just around the corner. As a result of Gene's isolating his family and denying them medical assistance in emergencies or education in anything other than the Bible and the ways of life on the harsh mountain, the Westover family suffered many terrible and debilitating accidents. Tara's mother, Faye, suffered brain damage during a car accident which was never treated. As a result, she developed intense migraines, memory loss, and turned to her own delusions for comfort—she believed that through a finger motion called “muscle testing,” she could determine whether one was sick or well and divine complicated questions straight from God himself. Faye began an essential oil business which would soon take off not just locally but nationally, and provide the family with enormous sums of money that would all be used in continual preparation for the End of Days.

As a young girl, Tara worked in her father's scrap yard but dreamed of living a normal life like the other children she met in town. She took music lessons and dance classes, but when Gene pulled her out of dance after deeming the recital costumes “whorish” (long, knee-length sweatshirts specially chosen so that Tara could participate), Tara turned to singing and theater. She met several friends through her community theater participation, such as Charles, her first crush, and even spent time bonding with her older brother Shawn, who also had an interest in taking part in plays and hanging out downtown. As Shawn grew older, however, he began stalking and harassing the girls he met and dated through the theater, and soon turned his violence on Tara. Shawn always insisted that the violent physical and emotional assaults against Tara were fun and games, and the pattern of abuse and reconciliation between them spiraled out of control for many years. When Shawn suffered a series of accidents during construction work which left him with permanent brain damage, Tara blamed his escalating violence and shortening temper on his suffering—but began to realize that the only way to escape her

claustrophobic and dangerous family would be to go to college. With the encouragement of her brother Tyler, who'd already left home and studied hard enough to gain admission to college, Tara studied for the ACT, applied to the prestigious Mormon institution Brigham Young University, and was accepted—despite never having set foot in a classroom in her life.

At BYU, Tara was overwhelmed by the “gentiles”—secular people or casual Mormons—all around her, and intimidated by her classmates. During an early lecture, when a professor mentioned the term “Holocaust,” Tara raised her hand to ask what the word meant. When her classmates responded in disgust, Tara looked up the term herself on a library computer—faced with the destruction, violence, and grief of the Holocaust and her own ignorance of the genocide, she realized how little she truly knew about the world around her. Tara struggled through her first several years of college to reconcile her expanding worldview and increasing skepticism of Mormonism with the continual pull to return home to her family.

Through her visits during summers and holidays, Tara is subjected to the violence and humiliation of Shawn's assaults, her father's nonsensical tirades, and her mother's cool indifference. The emotional tug-of-war she plays with her family throughout the years makes her emotionally withdrawn and physically ill, but with the help of her new friends, church community, and professors, she realizes that she must make her own choices and take charge of her own fate. When Tara's father is terribly burned during an accident on the mountain—an accident which echoes a burn injury Tara's brother Luke suffered many years earlier—she sees for the first time the cyclical and nonsensical suffering and violence her family continually puts themselves through in the name of their twisted beliefs.

When Tara is offered the opportunity to apply to a study abroad program at the prestigious Cambridge University, she accepts it—though she's fearful of what it will mean to put an ocean between herself and her family. In Cambridge, Tara feels insecure and unworthy—but her professors, impressed by her sponge-like brain and mystified by her lack of an educational background, eagerly support and encourage her to believe in herself. After returning to America, Tara continues to question her place in the Mormon faith—and within her own family. Confronted with the knowledge that her parents' backwards beliefs, terrible racism, and nonsense conspiracy theories will never change, she applies to study at Cambridge University in pursuit of a PhD. There, she continues to expand her consciousness and learn how to make choices for herself—she receives vaccinations and immunizations after twenty-something years of being uninoculated, and studies feminism for the first time in her life.

With each trip home to Buck's Peak for Christmas or a holiday,

she witnesses Shawn's violence against his young wife Emily, Gene and Faye's immersion in their booming oil business (which Tara knows to be built on fraud and delusion) and her sister Audrey's silent suffering—Audrey was abused by Shawn, too. Tara and Audrey discuss joining forces to finally share the truth of their lives with their family, but as communications break down, loyalties shift, and Audrey is faced with the threat of being disowned, she clams up and cuts herself off from Tara, leaving Tara standing alone against her family. After Shawn tells Tara that he wants to kill Audrey for speaking badly about him, Tara confronts her parents at last—but they demand proof, and when Tara is unable to show any, calls Shawn over to hash things out. Shawn brandishes a bloody knife and threatens Tara with it—she escapes to the bathroom and admonishes herself for having tried to stand up to Shawn at all. She recants all of her claims against him and returns to Cambridge, where she begins suffering night terrors, anxiety, and depression. Shawn calls to threaten her, promising to send “assassins” to England to take care of her, and again Tara's parents fail to defend her when she tells them what's going on, even claiming that Shawn is “justified” in his attempts to defend his family against Tara's hate and slander. As Tara begins to spiral, questioning her own memories and her own sanity in the face of her family's gaslighting and manipulation, she accepts a fellowship at Harvard—but can hardly enjoy the accomplishment.

Tara's parents come to visit her at Harvard and attempt to “reconvert” her. Dad offers Tara his blessing, and says that if she takes back everything she's said and done to tear the family apart, she can come home, welcomed back into the fold. Tara denies her father's offer, but after her parents leave and her own mental state continues to decline, she books a trip home to Idaho, desperate to reconnect. When she arrives, she finds emails on Mother's computer which denounce Tara to members of their county and community as a liar and a fraud, and knows that she is not truly welcome. She leaves abruptly, promising to return but knowing she may never see her parents again. Back at Cambridge, her tenure at Harvard finished, Tara flails and risks failing her PhD. She holes up in her room and watches television, rejecting her friends' and professors' attempts to get through to her. When Tara's brother Tyler sends her an email stating that he has heard what's going on and supports her unequivocally—and is denouncing and severing himself from their parents—Tara feels a burst of support and joy, and finds the strength to begin attending counseling and finish her PhD. After her degree is conferred and she moves to London with her steadfast boyfriend Drew, Tara is proud and truly happy for the first time in a long time—but knows she needs to make one final trip to Buck's Peak to reclaim her own history.

In Buck's Peak for her grandmother's funeral, Tara connects with her mother's estranged sisters and finds solace in their love and support. At church, she sees her entire family

gathered together—but most of them barely even glance her way. Tara sits with her siblings Tyler and Richard—the three of them, the ones who have chosen to pursue an education, are on the opposite side of a vast chasm from the rest of the Westover clan. In the book's final pages, Tara admits that she still often feels unworthy of her education, or like an impostor for choosing to pursue one—she fears she'll always be the little girl in men's jeans working the scrap yard up on Buck's Peak. At the same time, she has found refuge in the understanding that education is a lifelong process—and her education has been the acceptance of transformation, betrayal, and metamorphosis as painful but inevitable parts of any human life.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tara Westover – The protagonist and narrator of *Educated*. Over the course of the memoir, Tara Westover crafts an indelible portrait of her family and of herself. Through the book, she details her father Gene's Mormon fundamentalist faith and crippling paranoia about the Illuminati's role in the government and public schooling system, her mother Faye's dependence on rituals and tinctures to cure oft-injured loved ones, and her brother Shawn's physical, emotional, and verbal abuse—as well as the suffering, exploitation, and deliberate isolation of her many siblings. The young Tara is entirely at the mercy of her parents' paranoias and power struggles. She accepts her father's intense religious beliefs and adopts them as her own, and she, too becomes convinced of the outside world's corruption. As Tara grows older, the abuse she suffers at the hands of her brother Shawn, increasingly destabilized mentally and physically by a series of accidents incurred in their father's scrap yard, grows worse. Although Tara eventually pursues an education and is accepted to the religious but prestigious Brigham Young University, she realizes there is a lot she does not know about the world. Once the master of her surroundings on the farm and at the scrapyards, Tara, newly flung into the outside world, is terribly naïve. She doesn't know what the Holocaust is, and her dubious personal hygiene—borne out of her family's belief that germs don't matter, as God's will alone determines one's health—results in tensions with her new, more secular roommates. As Tara delves deeper into the world of academia and secures fellowships to study at Cambridge and Harvard, she knows that each degree she earns makes it more impossible for her to ever return to Idaho—where Shawn's power has grown as her father's has weakened, and where the women in her family doubt her memories of abuse and shun her for speaking out. As Tara eventually accepts that the scars of her past are indeed a part of her lifelong “education,” she weaves a tale that calls into question the subjectivity of memory, the bonds of family, and the truth of what it means to be an educated person.

Gene Westover / Dad – Tara’s father is a bombastic, devout, paranoid, and delusional man who imposes a self-sufficient survivalist lifestyle upon his family in preparation for the “Days of Abomination.” Gene is a radical Mormon fundamentalist who approaches the Bible literally and couches his misogynistic, anti-establishment beliefs in passages that he twists to fit his own interpretation of the word of God. Gene runs a scrap yard and enlists his children as members of his “crew”; the injuries they sustain working for him are often debilitating and life-threatening, and yet Gene refuses to turn to hospitals or clinics for medical assistance, describing doctors as being corrupted by “Satan.” Gene refuses to allow his children to attend public schools, believing the government will only “brainwash” them into becoming “socialists” and “gentiles”—the latter his word for anyone who is not religious enough, by his standards. As the years go by and Tara rebels against her father’s domineering personality, seeking out community engagement and education, Gene begrudgingly allows her to make her way into the world—but constantly belittles her choices and threatens to destabilize the life she’s making for herself by withholding the money she’s earned working in the scrap yard or showing up to her graduation to berate her “socialist” professors. Tara is willing to put up with her father through a lot of ups and downs, but the final straw comes when he fails to defend her against the cruel, violent Shawn, demanding “proof” of Shawn’s abuse even after he directly witnesses his son threaten Tara with a bloody knife. In the end, Tara realizes that in order to love her father and maintain any semblance of gratitude towards him for making her into the woman she’s become, she must cut herself off from him completely.

Faye Westover / Mother – Tara’s mother is a meek and subservient woman who studies midwifery to please her husband, Gene, and never questions his paranoia or his intense, survivalist, misogynistic religious beliefs. Throughout their marriage, Faye is subjected to emotional and physical violence, baseless cruelty, and horrible injuries sustained in accidents for which Gene refuses to allow her to seek medical help. As a result, Faye begins relying on homeopathic and faith-based or energy-based “cures.” She develops a method called “muscle testing,” by which she crosses her fingers, asks a question, and tries to make her fingers uncross in order to determine a “yes” or “no”—she believes the answers she divines through muscle testing come straight from God. Unable to midwife after suffering a brain injury and resulting migraines and memory loss during a car accident, she turns to a homeopathic essential oil business. It starts modestly and is meant to simply provide at-home cures for her children to use when they sustain cuts, bruises, or burns in the scrap yard, but eventually booms into a large operation that makes her something of a holy figure throughout the small rural Idaho county she calls home. Mother is defined by her obedience and indifference—she allows Dad to control her and her children’s lives, she allows Shawn to abuse his siblings and effectively rule the roost, and

she allows Tara to suffer physically, psychologically, and emotionally as a result of both men’s constant cruelty. In the end, Mother is just as delusional and convinced of her righteousness as her husband—the lines between them have blurred, and Tara realizes that she can no longer lean on her mother for any kind of support or solidarity.

Shawn Westover – One of Tara’s older brothers. Tara’s early memories of Shawn are hazy—he hasn’t lived at home for a long period of time, and when he finally moves back in, he’s earned a reputation throughout town for being quick to violence and hot-tempered. Shawn and Tara bond quickly, taking part in community theater together and working hard side-by-side in Dad’s scrap yard. As the years go by, however, Shawn reveals his true nature—obsessive, cruel, and violent, Shawn begins abusing his girlfriends Sadie and Erin and later turns his attentions to Tara. Their roughhousing “games” escalate into horrible fights, and when Tara experiments with makeup or flirting with a boy, Shawn calls her “whore” and “slut” and chokes her until she nearly loses consciousness. After Shawn suffers several falls and sustains brain damage that doctors say could alter his personality, Tara and her family begin excusing Shawn’s violence as a consequence of forces beyond his control. However, as the years go on and Shawn’s abuses extend to his wife, Emily, Tara decides she has to take a stand. She tries to band together with her sister Audrey, who has also suffered abuse at Shawn’s hands, but when Audrey is threatened with being disowned, she recants her accusations, leaving Tara alone. Each time Tara visits home, she’s subjected to Shawn’s increasingly unhinged violence—and taunted by the total immunity his off-the-wall cruelty affords him. Tara’s parents refuse to defend her even when they directly witness Shawn threaten Tara with a bloody knife, and her repeated attempts (and failures) to get them to see the truth about Shawn ultimately ends in a schism between them that can never be repaired.

Charles – One of Tara’s friends from town and her first “boyfriend,” though Tara struggles to behave intimately or romantically with Charles. She and Charles become close when Tara, whose beautiful voice moves Gene and many others at their church, is allowed to begin auditioning for local plays and musicals. Charles becomes important to Tara, and she nurses feelings of attractions to him—but her desire to grow closer to him is impacted by her father’s belief that Charles, and all secular people, are immoral, doomed “gentiles.” Charles is determined to be Tara’s friend and to help her understand that innocuous things such as ibuprofen and holding hands will not damn Tara or render her impure. Tara and Charles’s friendship cools when Tara shuts Charles out amidst worsening abuse at the hands of Shawn—she doesn’t want him to see what her life with her family is really like. When Charles and Tara reconnect via the internet years later, Tara learns that he works on an oil rig in Wyoming to support his wife and children. Charles

remains of the belief that Tara needs to sever herself from her family in order to grow, and is amazed that she still sounds “the same as when [they] were seventeen.” Charles is empathetic, generous, and does all he can to be there for Tara. While his friendship makes her feel supported and seen, she ultimately cannot accept the kind of help he tries to give her.

Tyler Westover – One of Tara’s older brothers. Smart, sensitive, and quiet, Tyler is more interested in reading and listening to classical music than helping out in the scrapyard. Tara is devastated when he leaves home to go off to college—a decision that forever alienates him from the rest of the family. As Tara grows older, Tyler urges her to apply to college amidst the escalating violence and insanity on Buck’s Peak. She follows his advice, enlists his help in studying for admissions tests, and ultimately earns an acceptance to the prestigious Brigham Young University. Tyler and Tara are not particularly close until Tyler defends Tara at a crucial moment—after Audrey, out of fear and coercion, refuses to stand up to Mother and Dad over their indifference to Shawn’s violent tendencies, Tyler steps in to denounce their behavior and stick up for Tara. Tara and Tyler begin cultivating a relationship in earnest, and Tara leans on Tyler for support as she at last acknowledges and seeks to mend the trauma of their shared past.

Richard Westover – One of Tara’s older brothers. Richard pursues an education and marries a woman named Kami—together they live a “mainstream” life, remaining loyal to the Mormon faith but abandoning the constricting and isolating traditions the Westovers have long clung to. Tara notes the internal struggle Richard seems to go through every time he comes home to Buck’s Peak with Kami—he doesn’t want to rock the boat with Gene by denouncing the man’s ludicrous ideas about the Illuminati and the evil of all doctors and teachers, but neither does he want to offend or alienate his wife. Though Richard does not support Tara in a pivotal moment of need, he eventually apologizes and tells Tara that she can always count on his support, confidence, and belief in her.

Luke Westover – One of Tara’s older brothers. Luke’s most memorable story in the memoir occurs when he sustains an accident at the scrap yard—one of his legs catches fire, and he sustains horrible burns that debilitate him for weeks. When Mother’s salves heal Luke—without the intervention of pain medicine, doctors, or hospitals—Mother and Dad raise Luke up as an example of Mother’s strengths as an herbalist, and as the power of God’s will to rescue the truly devout from pain, infection, and even death.

Grandma-down-the-hill – Tara’s paternal grandmother. As her nickname suggests, she lives just down the hill from Gene’s family—but opposes the way her grandchildren are being raised, believing that they should be in school instead of “roaming the mountain like savages.” Grandma-down-the-hill and Grandpa-down-the-hill spend the difficult winter months in Arizona, and once even offer to bring Tara with them so that

she can live a normal life and attend school, but Tara is too fearful to accept her grandparents’ offer. Nevertheless, Grandma and Grandpa-down-the-hill host the Westover clan at their Arizona home and maintain a close relationship with them—even though they often question Gene’s methods in raising his children.

Grandma-over-in-town – Tara’s maternal grandmother, who lives fifteen miles away from the Westover clan in the only town in the county. Though she keeps a modest home by “normal” standards, Tara is always entranced on her relatively rare visits to Grandma and Grandpa-over-in-town’s home by their creamy white carpet, spotless kitchen, and the generally calm atmosphere within the house. Grandma-over-in-town is disappointed by Faye’s brainwashing, and by the wild, unruly, deeply strange way Faye is raising her children. After Grandma-over-in-town’s passing, Tara regrets not having gotten to know the woman better because of her father’s attempts to keep his children from their maternal grandparents.

Professor Steinberg – One of Tara’s early supervisors during her study abroad program at Cambridge. He is fascinated by Tara’s background, and sees teaching her as having “stepped into Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.” He works tirelessly with Tara on perfecting her essays and other written work, and shows such kindness, interest, and support that Tara becomes overwhelmed. He eventually helps Tara secure a scholarship for further study at Cambridge, willing even to support her education financially in order to help her achieve her full potential.

Dr. Kerry – The professor of Tara’s Jewish history class at BYU. He helps secure Tara a spot on his annual study abroad program at Cambridge, setting in motion Tara’s involvement with and attachment to the prestigious university. He reminds her, at a crucial moment, that she is the master of her destiny—and that she has earned her place at the prestigious institutions she’s a part of.

Audrey Westover – Tara’s only sister. The two are never really close, and though Tara eventually attempts to form a relationship with Audrey and confide in her about the truth of Shawn’s abuses, Audrey ultimately stands with the rest of the family against Tara and goes into business helping Faye with her tinctures.

Emily Westover – Shawn’s wife. Nearly a decade younger than Shawn, she has a “compliant” personality. Though Tara foretells that Emily and Shawn’s marriage will be marked by violence and manipulation, she can do nothing to stop the union—or the couple’s slow descent into a miserable pattern of abuse, deception, and cruelty. The Westovers refuse to defend Emily in the face of Shawn’s physical and emotional violence, nor do they look out for Emily’s health in the face of two complicated and dangerous births.

Stefanie Westover – Tyler’s wife. A kind woman who slowly,

over the years, helps him to see that “normal” ways of life, such as immunization and other things forbidden to the Westovers, are not evil. Over the years, she and Tyler are among the few members of the Westover clan who truly support Tara, and Stefanie becomes a true sister to Tara.

Erin – One of Shawn’s old girlfriends. Tara writes to her once they’re both older in hopes of finding “evidence” of Shawn’s abusive personality that others can corroborate—Erin tells Tara a story about a time when Shawn physically attacked her, slamming her head against a wall. Though Erin seems like an ally, Tara eventually discovers that she has been communicating with Faye about Tara’s faithlessness and corruption.

Robin – One of Tara’s second-year roommates at BYU. A “tall and athletic” girl who intuits Tara’s naivete and gently helps her adjust to living in an apartment with several roommates. She cares for Tara, comforting her when she has night terrors and helping school officials get involved when Tara’s health becomes a financial and emotional burden.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kami Westover – Richard’s wife. Though Kami is a Mormon, Gene and the other Westovers see her as an “outsider”—she lives a life that is “normal” (and thus morally degraded) by the Westovers’ standards, a life that includes visits to doctors and hospitals.

Angie – Faye’s younger sister who lives in town close to Tara’s Grandpa-over-in-town and Grandpa-over-in-town. Though things between Angie and the other Westovers are difficult because of Gene’s cruelty and paranoia, Tara pursues a relationship with Angie, and the two develop a friendship.

Mary – One of Tara’s first-year roommates at BYU. Tara sees Mary as more devout than Shannon based on her conservative, modest clothing, but is again shocked when Mary goes shopping on a Sunday and drinks Diet Coke.

Vanessa – One of Tara’s classmates at BYU. Though they bond over being the only freshmen in an advanced history class, but their friendship is halted when Vanessa is outraged over Tara’s ignorance about the Holocaust—an event whose existence Tara never even knew about before hearing it discussed in class.

Dr. Runciman – One of Tara’s professors and mentors during her advanced education at Cambridge.

Jenni – One of Tara’s second-year roommates at BYU. Though she cares for Tara and senses she is in a lot of pain, she doesn’t know how to help her.

Megan – One of Tara’s second-year roommates at BYU. She is contemptuous of Tara and skeptical of her poor personal hygiene.

Tony Westover – The eldest of Tara’s brothers.

Debbie – One of Faye’s estranged sisters who shows Tyler and

Tara kindness and welcomes them to be a part of her family.

Shannon – One of Tara’s first-year roommates at BYU. Tara is shocked by Shannon’s “immoral” outfits.

Sadie – One of Shawn’s girlfriends, whom he treats terribly. Sadie is the victim of Shawn’s stalking as well as physical and emotional abuse, and yet—out of fear or trauma—remains loyal to Shawn and totally under his control.

Benjamin – Audrey’s husband. He often works for Gene in the scrapyards and on various jobs around town.

Grandpa-down-the-hill – Tara’s paternal grandfather. A “weatherworn” and “rugged” horse wrangler with a “short fuse.”

Grandpa-over-in-town – Tara’s maternal grandfather. A former mailman, his longstanding government job inspires Gene’s derision and suspicion.

Nick – One of Tara’s college boyfriends.

Drew – One of Tara’s boyfriends, and an academic who studies all over the world. He is the first of Tara’s boyfriends in whom she confides the full story of her past in Idaho.

Papa Jay Moyle – The kindly owner of a gas station in town.

Myrna Moyle – Papa Jay’s wife. She runs the gas station alongside him.

Mary Moyle – Papa Jay and Myrna’s daughter and a piano instructor in town.

Caroline Moyle – Mary’s sister and a dance instructor in town.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MEMORY, HISTORY, AND SUBJECTIVITY

“My strongest memory is not a memory,” begins Tara Westover’s memoir, *Educated*. Though the book is a carefully written history of Westover’s childhood of growing up in a family of Mormon fundamentalists, she admits outright that memory is tricky and subjective—and therefore, she argues, so is the history of one’s life and one’s family. Throughout the book, Westover argues that both personal memory and family history are subjective things, perceived differently by different people. Using her own warped memories, family members’ varying accounts of incidents she’d taken for granted as true, and the campaign of paranoia and misinformation her father, Gene, fed her family for decades, Westover argues that when it comes to family history and personal memory, there is no one unifying truth—everything exists in shades of gray.

The early pages of *Educated* demonstrate the lies and cover-ups that formed the bedrock of Tara's childhood. Because so much of her family's truth—and indeed the truth of the world beyond her rural Idaho town—was kept from her at a young age, Tara experienced the world as other than what it was. To Tara and her family, doctors were evil, the government was conspiring against them, and the end of the world was just around the corner. She even remembers the infamous Ruby Ridge incident—a nationally spotlighted event in which a family of survivalists much like the Westovers became locked in an FBI shootout—as having happened to her own family. Tara clung to the details her father told her about Ruby Ridge and rehearsed them in her head until they became part of her own personal history. This incident shows how Tara's father's strange mix of delusion, charisma, and paranoia affected the rest of his family. Because of his total control over what his children saw or didn't see and learned or didn't learn, Gene could manipulate even objective facts and bend them to his own narrative. This rocky foundation would come to affect the ways in which Tara, as well as the other members of her family, perceived and processed the major traumatic events that would mark their family's history.

One of the major incidents Tara uses to deconstruct the ways in which her father's warped view of the world actually affected her own sense of memory occurs when her older brother Luke's leg catches fire during an accident at Gene's scrap yard. Tara describes remembering the events of the mundane day leading up to the accident with "unsettling clarity," but when it comes to the actual trauma of Luke's accident, the details become fuzzy. Tara has trouble discerning which parts of the story she recalls because they have been told and retold "so many times [they have become] family folklore," and which parts of the story are genuinely her own memories. She recalls watching a screaming Luke hobbling towards the house with "the jeans on his left leg [...] gone, melted away" and tending to her brother's third-degree burns by wrapping his leg in a trash bag and submerging it in a trash can filled with water. However, Luke's memory differs from Tara's—he remembers Dad bringing him down to the house from the scrap yard and putting him into a bath. In the end, unable to determine the full truth of what happened, Westover concedes that "perhaps [all] our memories are in error." Westover uses this incident to highlight several important components of the way memory works throughout her memoir. Having established the shaky foundation between fact and fiction that underscored her and her family's entire lives, she then relays an incident marked by trauma, confusion, and desperation. Here, she highlights both the complicated nature of memory itself, and how her family's uneasy relationship to objective truth has, over the years, compounded their inability to come to a consensus about a major moment in their family's history.

Toward the end of the book, as Tara and her sister Audrey seek

to bring their brother Shawn to justice for the years of physical and emotional abuse he's wrought—and continues to wreak against his defenseless young wife, Emily—memory, history, and subjectivity enter the narrative in a disturbing new way. Tara tries to make a case against Shawn by telling her parents about the horrible things he's said to her about Audrey, the violence he's perpetrated against old girlfriends, and the threats he's made against Audrey and Tara's own lives. Her parents refuse to see the truth about Shawn, and insist that without proof, Tara's memories must be wrong. Even when Shawn brandishes a knife at Tara in front of their parents and threatens to kill her, they *still* refuse to see the truth. As a result, Tara begins falling into an intense emotional spiral in which she questions the facts she herself laid out in journal entries throughout her childhood. In the shadow of her parents' doubt—and Shawn's emotional manipulations—Tara begins questioning her own personal history and flailing in her academic and social life in England as a result. She's only able to pull herself out of the tailspin when her brother Tyler speaks up to condemn Shawn's actions and declare that he won't accept the family's manipulations any longer. With someone to vouch for her memories and validate them, Tara once again feels sane and supported.

Westover relays several more instances throughout the book in which she freely admits and accepts that her memory—and the memories of the family members she's still in contact with—are fallible, imperfect things. She never directly blames her strange and isolated upbringing for the cracks and "ghosts" in her memories, but obliquely draws a connection between the campaign of misinformation that marked her childhood and her adult habit of questioning, doubting, and ultimately surrendering to the unknowability of her personal and family history.



LEARNING AND EDUCATION

Growing up the child of a Mormon fundamentalist with paranoid, extremist views—possibly exacerbated by bipolar disorder—Tara Westover was denied access to an education. Her father, Gene, believed that the American government used public schools to deliberately "brainwash" children, and refused to let his younger children attend school. Instead of receiving a formal education, Tara grew up studying the Bible, helping her mother mix and bless homemade herbal tinctures, and working alongside her older brothers in her father's scrap yard. As Westover retroactively examines her childhood and her burgeoning desire for a traditional education—and her uneasy but enthusiastic transition into the world of knowledge and academia—she explores what it means to be educated, ultimately arguing that education doesn't amount to the books a person reads or the facts they memorize in school. Instead, education is a life-long process that encompasses how a person

responds to the world around them, making decisions and changes—often painful ones—along the way.

The young Tara, deprived of traditional education, yearns for the normalcy and achievable goals that schooling provides. As she rebels against her parents' disdainful and paranoid view of all educational institutions and seeks admission to college, though, Tara begins to learn that her education has been compromised more heavily than she previously realized. Tara has more to learn about the world than history and arithmetic—and as she spreads her wings and hungrily pursues higher and higher learning, she comes to see that though her education has been anything but traditional, she has been selling herself short all along by claiming to be uneducated. In fact, Tara has been educated in ways that many people never will be—the lessons she's learned throughout her difficult adolescence about abuse, manipulation, and isolation and haven't been pleasant, but have made her into the person she is and have prepared her to understand education as a journey rather than a destination. In spite of her parents' insistence that public schools were “brainwashing” factories that turned innocent children into “socialists” and “gentiles,” Tara longed to be traditionally educated. She always knew she didn't belong in her father's scrap yard, and found herself drawn to books and reading despite the shortage of literature, textbooks, or learning materials in the household. Tara taught herself critical thinking and writing by studying the Book of Mormon and writings and journals of the early Mormon prophets, which were often composed in dense, nineteenth-century language. Tara spent hours poring over the pages, desperate to understand, to process, and to respond to the work of others. Looking back on her early attempts at self-directed learning from adulthood, she sees that the true education of her youth—“the one that would matter”—were the hours she spent developing “the patience to read things [she] could not yet understand.” The early days of Tara's attempts at securing an education for herself were steeped in shame, secrecy, and self-reliance. Because her family saw all forms of traditional, secular education as tools of an evil and far-reaching conspiracy to “brainwash” the youth of the world, Tara was forced to hone the mechanics of academic and literary thought on her own, with essentially no roadmap. Her older brothers who broke with tradition and pursued education paved the way for her, but as a girl, things were different for Tara—and the pursuit of an education was, for her, not just frowned upon, but even dangerous, drawing the ire of her mother, father, and contemptuous older brother Shawn.

In the latter half of the book, which details Tara's admittance to Brigham Young University and the start of her studies there, she comes to develop a more comprehensive view of what education is. When Tara starts class, she finds that she has never heard of major foundational aspects of world history, art, and culture, and as she asks for answers to basic questions, her

classmates and teachers are often offended by her lack of knowledge. So many people around her fail to understand just how isolated and prescriptive Tara's life has been, and can't imagine not knowing what the Holocaust is—or the basics of roommate etiquette and personal hygiene such as regular hand-washing. As the overwhelmed Tara navigates the new terrain of independence, she sees that her education is lacking not only in book-smarts, but in the rules and regulations by which others move through the world. Tara has help along the way—though she gets off to a rocky start in some of her classes and friendships, she eventually finds roommates, boyfriends, and professors who understand that the large gaps in Tara's academic and social education alike aren't her fault at all. These friends—her roommate Robin, her teachers Dr. Kerry and Professor Steinberg, and her boyfriends at BYU and Cambridge, Nick and Drew—help Tara to accept that her education in the ways of the world will always be one that is in-progress and ever-changing. With the support networks she finds at Cambridge and BYU, Tara is able to stop seeing her past as shameful and understand the gravity of what she's done for herself, her education, and her future in getting out of Idaho. Even in moments of profound doubt and fear, Tara slowly gains the tools to understand that her education has been her ability to distance herself from her abusive family, assert her desires and her needs, and begin to discern the difference between right and wrong, and fact and fiction. As a girl, Tara dreamed of education as the chance to sit in a classroom and study—as a woman, she understands that an education is much more broad, complex, and constantly evolving.

The memoir's title, *Educated*, trickily implies that one can ever be “educated” completely or linearly. As the book progresses, Westover shows what a fallacy this idea in fact is. Her own education is a work-in-progress, a series of transformations that both pain and uplift her as she works her way through the world. Her education has entailed learning about art, history, and culture—all of the things that compromise traditional schooling—but its most important components have been rooted in learning about herself. As a girl, Tara dreamed of education as the chance to sit in a classroom and study—as a woman, she reveals that an education is much more broad and complex than academia, and that pursuing this kind of multi-faceted education is a life-long endeavor.



DEVOUTNESS AND DELUSION

Though Tara Westover states in a short preface to *Educated* that her book is “not [a story] about Mormonism” or any other religious belief, it remains undeniable that much of the memoir concerns the work Westover had to do throughout her life to delineate the line between devoutness and delusion within her own family. Her father's anti-government, self-sufficient, end-times outlook on life was radical, hateful, and dangerous, and was rooted in

fear. He also trumpeted a warped sense of superiority over “gentiles”—which to him meant any person who visited a doctor, immunized their children or sent them to public school, or did not observe his own stringent rules about modesty, observance of the Sabbath, and rejection of popular media and entertainment. As Westover tells her story, she suggests that there is a fine line between devoutness and delusion—and that for isolated populations, it can be particularly difficult to discern the difference between the two.

Tara Westover describes her father, Gene Westover, as a man with “the solemnity of an oracle,” and indeed, to his children, he seemed to be the only one with the power to interpret and embody the word of God. Throughout her memoir, Tara illustrates the blurry divide between devoutness and delusion that ruled her childhood home—and influenced her own warped perception of the world for many years. Tara’s father’s devoutness often takes strange and twisted forms. For instance, when Gene closely studies a Bible passage that reads, “Butter and honey shall he eat [...] That he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good,” he throws away all of the dairy in the Westover home and goes out to buy fifty gallons of honey, believing that the Lord has commanded that butter, and by proxy all dairy, is “evil.” Throughout the book, Gene’s devoutness blurs with his delusions about the role of the Illuminati in the government, the “socialist” agenda of public schools, and the evil of doctors and hospitals. Because of his delusions, which he both couches and hides within his devotion to his fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and the Book of Mormon, Gene’s children grow up without immunizations, birth certificates, educations, or adequate medical care. His warped beliefs spread throughout the family, and seep into the minds of his wife and children—enabling patterns of abuse and neglect always disguised as piety, compliance with the word of God, and adherence to the teachings of sacred religious texts. As the years pass, the fact that many of Gene’s strange beliefs are completely divorced from the church he and his family belong to becomes evident to many people in their small county—except for his own spouse and children. As Gene begins construction on a giant church-like structure of his own—using the proceeds from Faye’s lucrative essential oil business—his desire to isolate himself and his family from their larger community and from common sense itself becomes crystal-clear.

Gene is not the only one in the Westover family beholden to a set of delusions disguised as religious devotion—Tara’s mother, Faye, also subscribes to a bizarre and flimsy set of beliefs, which she nevertheless clings to fiercely. A midwife by trade, Faye places her belief in the power of essential oils and a practice of her own making called “muscle testing”—checking the outcome of a question through hand motions she believes are controlled by divine forces—to heal even the most life-threatening injuries and guide her family through increasingly

difficult problems and predicaments. As Gene does the work of isolating himself and his family from the rest of society intentionally, believing that when the “Days of Abomination” arrive their clan alone will be able to survive on the fruits they’ve canned, the land they’ve amassed, and the self-sustaining world they’ve built, Faye becomes more and more convinced of the corruption and evil of institutions meant to protect and nurture her large brood. She pulls Tara out of dance classes after Gene remarks that the recital costumes—large sweatshirts that hang to the knee, specifically picked so that Tara could participate while still dressing modestly—were whorish and obscene. She treats her son Luke’s third-degree burns—and later, Gene’s—with tinctures, oils, and a homemade “anti-shock” potion called “Rescue Remedy” rather than conventional medicine or hospital visits. Every time a member of the family narrowly escapes infection, illness, or death, Faye echoes Gene’s belief that God has been in charge the entire time. As the lines between delusion and devoutness blur, Faye loses her ability to see the abuse festering within her own home. She disowns Tara for speaking out against Shawn’s physical and emotional cruelty even when presented with direct evidence of it—she has lived so long in a circus of delusion that she is, like her husband, eventually unable to separate fact from fiction.

In *Educated*, Tara Westover recounts how her family found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of their own making. They isolated themselves from society because of their devout religious beliefs, and in turn, their adherence to these fringe, extremist views further isolated them from society. In charting the ways in which her parents fed one another’s delusions in the name of supporting each other’s religious devotion and holiness, Westover demonstrates what a powerful force belief truly is—for better or for worse.



FAMILY, ABUSE, AND ENTRAPMENT

The stifling, claustrophobic home in which Tara Westover comes of age is marked by physical, emotional, and psychological abuse—an insidious triad that serves to entrap the members of the Westover clan, keep them vulnerable, and cause them to question whether what’s happening to them is really abuse after all, or just the normal way families treat one another. As Westover looks back on the ways in which she, her mother, and her siblings all fell prey to their father’s abuse—and how some of her beloved family members became abusers themselves—she argues that abuse within families often becomes normalized, and that this normalization, and the confusion it engenders, perpetuates cycles of entrapment, confinement, and isolation for victims.

Although Tara has no trouble looking back on her childhood and recounting certain memories (or at least the way they crystallized in her mind, if not the way they actually happened in real life), it is far more difficult for her to reckon with how

delusion, danger, and indeed abuse became so normalized within her family over the years. Tara's father Gene's intense religious devoutness centers around delusional beliefs that the "Days of Abomination," or the events that would mark the end of the world and human civilization, were fast approaching. This led to patterns of verbal, physical, emotional, and financial abuse meant to cement those mistruths as a common reality shared by all the members of the Westover clan. Insults, rants, racial epithets, conspiracy theories, and profound isolation from mainstream society and objective truth were all just a way of life within the Westover household—and Gene's paranoid, violent temperament was the root of the patterns of abuse that would grow and flourish throughout the family in the years to come.

With so much hate, fear, and paranoia as the baseline of relations within the Westover home, it is no wonder that the members of Tara's family grew meek, compliant, and subservient in response. Tara's mother, Faye, learned not to question the rules Gene dictated—because of his outright hatred of doctors, hospitals, and the medical profession, she refused to seek help even when she suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car accident. As a result, she endured years of debilitating migraines, memory loss, and confusion—and yet never stopped to question whether her husband's control over her and her children's very lives was right. In fact, as Faye hewed even more closely to Gene's dictums, she became more like him, and soon her own refusal to participate in society or seek medical help for her children in their moments of greatest need became forms of abuse in their own right.

Meekness and fear were not the only ways in which abuse became normalized and accepted. As Gene's hold on some members of his family was tested, others—namely Shawn—became abusers themselves, seeking to wield the kind of unquestioned power they saw their father exert every day. Shawn's role in Tara's life is originally that of jocular, teasing older brother. As she grows older, though, it becomes clear that the insults he lobs at her and the wrestling matches he engages on her are more than brotherly jests. Shawn tells Tara that she's stupid and makes sure to tell any friends she makes outside of the family that she's stupid, too; he twists her arms back when she disagrees with him, and eventually begins slamming her to the ground, forcing her head into the filthy toilet, and hitting and punching her. Shawn's abuses go unquestioned, and the claustrophobic environment within the Westover home means that Tara can never escape her brother. The normalization of misinformation, subservience, and cruelty within the Westover clan—normalization that started with Gene and Faye—eventually trickles down to the Westover children, and allows Shawn to abuse Tara physically, emotionally, and verbally for years. Even well into adulthood, Tara finds herself trying to convince herself that Shawn's threats are real and malicious. Even when Shawn kills his wife Emily's dog and threatens to

take Tara's life with the bloody knife he used to do the job, Faye and Gene, so inured to this culture of violence within their home, refuse to see what they have wrought—and the person they have allowed Shawn to become.

The abuse perpetrated within the Westover clan is so subtle and pervasive that over the years, it becomes impossible not just for Tara but for the majority of her family—save two of her brothers—to see the truth of what was happening to them all along. As Tara grows older, she comes to see how these mechanisms of abuse became normal and accepted within her family. With time, she understands that her parents have indeed been complicit in her suffering, as well as that of her sister Audrey, and her brothers Richard and Tyler, who chose to speak out and separate from the rest of the family. In *Educated*, Tara is determined to shine a light on the dark, shameful history of cruelty, indignity, and violence that is her family's past—implicit encouragement for readers to bravely face their pasts and carve out a better future.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE INDIAN PRINCESS

The Westover clan makes their home in rural Idaho, in a valley at the foot of a mountain called Buck's Peak. At the top of the mountain is a peak shaped in "the dark form of [an] Indian Princess," who, to the young Tara, seems to rule the mountain and the lands beyond. In *Educated*, the Princess is an emblem of Tara's family's self-sufficient, survivalist way of life—and a symbol of the strange traditions, superstitions, and logic that rule the Westover clan. Tara and most of her siblings have no birth certificates, no medical or school records, and no formal education—instead, they have been "educated in the rhythms of the mountain" and the natural world around them. Tara's father Gene—a deeply paranoid and devout man who believes that "the Days of Abomination" are swiftly approaching and the world will soon come to an end—tells her when she is young that eternity belongs to the mountain, and the Indian Princess who guards its peak. Visible only in the summer months, the "Princess" is the sign that spring has come to the valley, and Tara and her siblings learn to measure time and seasons by the sight of the Princess. As Tara grows older, pursues an education, and moves away from home, she can no longer "search the horizon for the Princess"—she loses her connection to the lore and tradition of her home even as she gains the education, normalcy, and participation in larger society she's always dreamed of. When Tara leaves Idaho in search of more, she comes to realize how abusive, isolated, and abnormal her home life has been—but each time she returns

home to visit and sees the Princess again, she feels “haunt[ed]” by her visage and feels the mountain “coaxing” her to come home forever, and abandon all she has learned for the familiar rituals of her childhood.



THE SHEAR

“The most frightening machine [Tara has] ever seen,” what Gene Westover calls the Shear, is a “three-ton pair of scissors” with blades made of dense iron. The blades are “twelve inches thick and five feet across,” and they cut through a mechanism of strength rather than sharpness. Just one of the many dangerous apparatuses on the scrap yard, the Shear symbolizes Gene’s obsession with domineering over his family and environment, and putting his family’s fate in the hands of God to prove to himself that their way of living is right. When Gene brings the Shear home to the scrap yard, even Shawn sees the Shear as a “death machine”—and yet Gene is determined to teach his children, including the young and slight Tara, to wrangle the machine. The Shear, then, becomes a symbol of Gene’s wildly delusional belief that he can tame any force of nature or any creation of man through will alone. Within five minutes of teaching the children how to feed scrap into the Shear’s jaws, Luke’s arm is “gashed to the bone” and “spurting” blood, but Gene sees the chomping blades—and his children’s ability to work them—as proof that he can exert control over his family, over the dangerous scrap yard, and over common sense itself. As the years go by and the Westovers experience a series of gruesome and life-threatening accidents in the scrap yard, including third-degree burns, brain bleeds, and serious falls from great heights, they only rarely turn to doctors and hospitals for medical attention, believing the medical profession to be a hotbed for “devils.” Gene and his brood return again and again to the dangerous pursuits which daily threaten their well-being, determined that they will recover if it is God’s will that they do.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: xii

Explanation and Analysis

In the prologue to the novel, Tara describes the “education” that marked her early years. The Westovers’ devout Mormon fundamentalist father barred Tara and her siblings from attending school, and they instead received a different kind of education; they learned the patterns of the mountain they lived on, and were educated in the eternal cycles which defined the vast, nonhuman world. This “education” foreshadows how Tara will come to discover eternally repeating patterns within her own family—patterns of ignorance, delusion, and abuse which will repeat over and over throughout her childhood and even her adulthood. *Educated* is a memoir about the many ways in which one can receive an education, and this prologue sets up the fact that for Tara and her family, the concerns of the “normal” human world are irrelevant; ancient cycles of life and well-worn, close-hewn paths define their existence.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ Dad had always believed passionately in Mother’s herbs, but that night felt different, like something inside him was shifting, a new creed taking hold. Herbalism, he said, was a spiritual doctrine that separated the wheat from the tares, the faithful from the faithless. Then he used a word I’d never heard before: Illuminati. It sounded exotic, powerful, whatever it was. Grandma, he said, was an unknowing agent of the Illuminati.

God couldn’t abide faithlessness, Dad said. That’s why the most hateful sinners were those who wouldn’t make up their minds, who used herbs and medication both, who came to Mother on Wednesday and saw their doctor on Friday—or, as Dad put it, “Who worship at the altar of God one day and offer a sacrifice to Satan the next.” These people were like the ancient Israelites because they’d been given a true religion but hankered after false idols.

“Doctors and pills,” Dad said, nearly shouting. “That’s their god, and they whore after it.”

Related Characters: Gene Westover / Dad, Tara Westover (speaker), Grandma-down-the-hill, Faye Westover / Mother



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Educated* published in 2018.

Prologue Quotes

☝☝ I had been educated in the rhythms of the mountains, 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.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tara reconstructs a memory from a family trip to visit her paternal grandparents at their summer house in Arizona. When Tara's father, Gene, finds out that his mother is seeing a doctor for cancer treatment, he explodes in a furious tirade of paranoia and delusion. Gene is a self-sufficient survivalist who harbors dangerous ideas about the role of Illuminati in the government and the medical establishment alike, and, upon hearing that his mother is seeking help from a medical professional, he uses the opportunity to launch into a rant. Gene often lectures Tara and her siblings about "socialist" university professors, Godless "gentiles" (which seems to include everyone except the Westovers themselves), and corrupt Feds who want to force the children to get immunized and go to school, where evil abounds. Dad's beliefs are tinged with a delusional devoutness that stems from his fundamentalist stance on Mormonism, and he believes that his way of living is the only right way. He has no shame about spouting his intense, often unmoored sermons at the slightest provocation, and believes that everyone in his family should subscribe to his ideals, beliefs, and practices.

☝ Me, I never blamed anyone for the accident, least of all Tyler. It was just one of those things. A decade later my understanding would shift, part of my heavy swing into adulthood, and after that the accident would always make me think of the Apache women, and of all the decisions that go into making a life—the choices people make, together and on their own, that combine to produce any single event. Grains of sand, incalculable, pressing into sediment, then rock.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Tyler Westover

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

On the way back from their visit to Arizona, the Westover family gets in a terrible car accident. Gene insisted on leaving at sundown and driving through the night—but when Tara's brother Tyler, only seventeen, falls asleep at the wheel, the car careens off the road. Tara, Tyler, and their other siblings receive superficial injuries—but Mother's

eyes swell up to the size of apples and turn black, indicating severe brain damage. Because the Westovers, with Gene at the helm, refuse to seek help from hospitals or doctors, Mother's injury goes untreated. In the wake of the accident, the sensitive and smart Tyler—who will soon teach himself algebra, literature, and history and go off to college—shoulders the blame for Mother's migraines and memory loss, but Tara, even at a young age, knows better. As she grows older and reflects on the memory more and more often, she retains the belief that Tyler was in no way responsible for the accident—their claustrophobic way of life, total fealty to Dad's delusional whims, and belief in self-sufficiency to the point of self-destruction have all "pressed" together to form the misinformed choices and inevitable tragedies that will mark the Westover family's history.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ Dad picked me up soon after on his way home from a job. He pulled up in his truck and honked for me to come out, which I did, my head bent low. Grandma followed. I rushed into the passenger seat, displacing a toolbox and welding gloves, while Grandma told Dad about my not washing. Dad listened, sucking on his cheeks while his right hand fiddled with the gearshift. A laugh was bubbling up inside him. Having returned to my father, I was taken by the power of his person. A familiar lens slid over my eyes and Grandma lost whatever strange power she'd had over me an hour before.

"Don't you teach your children to wash after they use the toilet?" Grandma said.

Dad shifted the truck into gear. As it rolled forward he waved and said, "I teach them not to piss on their hands."

Related Characters: Gene Westover / Dad, Grandma-over-in-town, Tara Westover (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This passage perfectly encapsulates Dad's delusional logic when it comes to the strange, dangerous ways in which he's raising up his children. When Grandma-over-in-town, Gene's mother-in-law, points out Tara's lack of adherence to standard rules of basic hygiene, Gene insists that she doesn't need to follow those rules—because he's already taught her better. In reality, the things Gene is teaching his children (or, more realistically, failing to teach them) are strange, harmful, and occasionally just disgusting. In his

head, though, he's helping his children outsmart the corrupt, prescriptive systems which drive normal human life. Tara admits to being in thrall to her father and "taken by the power of his person"—she is entrapped by Gene's charisma and domineering personality, and unable to fight against his logic or escape his control.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ Since the writing of [the story of Luke's burn,] I have spoken to Luke about the incident. His account differs from both mine and Richard's. In Luke's memory, Dad took Luke to the house, administered a homeopathic for shock, then put him in a tub of cold water, where he left him to go fight the fire. This goes against my memory, and against Richard's. Still, perhaps our memories are in error. Perhaps I found Luke in a tub, alone, rather than on the grass. What everyone agrees upon, strangely, is that somehow Luke ended up on the front lawn, his leg in a garbage can.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Gene Westover / Dad, Richard Westover, Luke Westover

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

After relaying a vivid and grisly story about Luke sustaining terrible third-degree burns on his leg during an accident at the scrap yard, Tara adds the above footnote to the final page of the chapter. Because the book is largely concerned with memory, subjectivity, and the cracks and chasm in personal and family history, Tara calls attention to the fact that her memories of the event, vivid though they are to her, may be flawed. She admits that her siblings' memories are equally hazy and unreliable—and obliquely draws a connection between their fractured collective memories and the maze-like delusions which were a normal part of their shared youth. Throughout the book, Tara highlights how her parents never taught them the line between fact and fiction, presented outlandish ideals about Illuminati infiltration of the government twisted historical events such as the Ruby Ridge standoff to reflect their own political beliefs, and kept the children from interacting with anyone who challenged their point of view. Because of this upbringing, Tara and her siblings have a hard time agreeing on a shared reality—a theme that will recur throughout the book.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ I waited for the screen to flicker and die. I was trying to take it all in, this last, luxurious moment—of sharp yellow light, of warm air flowing from the heater. I was experiencing nostalgia for the life I'd had before, which I would lose at any second, when the world turned and began to devour itself.

The longer I sat motionless, breathing deeply, trying to inhale the last scent of the fallen world, the more I resented its continuing solidity. [...] Sometime after 1:30 I went to bed. I glimpsed Dad as I left, his face frozen in the dark, the light from the TV leaping across his square glasses.

He seemed smaller to me than he had that morning. The disappointment in his features was so childlike, for a moment I wondered how God could deny him this. He, a faithful servant, who suffered willingly just as Noah had willingly suffered to build the ark.

But God withheld the flood.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tara watches her father grow "small" and disappointed in the wake of Y2K's failure to materialize. Gene, who has been looking forward to the end of the world and the "Days of Abomination" for as long as Tara can remember, has been excited for Y2K to arrive as he believes it will bring about Armageddon. When the clock strikes midnight on January 1, 2000, and nothing happens, Gene sits despondently in front of the television, refusing to move or acknowledge the failure of his beliefs. Tara pities her father, whom she knows believes he is a "faithful servant" of God and deserving of God's love, attention, and validation. This passage reveals the tenderness Tara has for her father, in spite of his cruel and delusional behavior, and simultaneously suggests that the young Tara is beginning to see her father in a new light: as a man capable of error, failures in judgement, and hubris.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞☞ “Shouldn’t we drive slower?” Mother asks.

Dad grins. “I’m not driving faster than our angels can fly.” The van is still accelerating. To fifty, then to sixty.

Richard sits tensely, his hand clutching the armrest, his knuckles bleaching each time the tires slip. Mother lies on her side, her face next to mine, taking small sips of air each time the van fishtails, then holding her breath as Dad corrects and it snakes back into the lane. She is so rigid, I think she might shatter. My body tenses with hers; together we brace a hundred times for impact.

It is a relief when the van finally leaves the road.

Related Characters: Tara Westover, Gene Westover / Dad, Faye Westover / Mother (speaker), Richard Westover

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 93-94

Explanation and Analysis

On the Westover family’s second trip to Arizona, things unfold much like they did during the first trip—reflecting the quotation from the book’s prologue which talks about the eternal cycles of repetition which pervaded her family. Just like during the last trip, Dad and his mother argue over medical treatment, and then, just like at the end of the last trip, Dad insists on making a dramatic exit by forcing the family to drive home overnight. This time, though, the family encounters a snowstorm—a change in pattern, but not enough to change the situation—and the car drives off the road, just like it did last time. Caught in the moments of intense anxiety and uncertainty just before the crash, Tara finds herself almost hoping the station wagon will crash—it would be traumatic, but at least familiar. This encapsulates the entire structure of Tara’s childhood—she endures accidents, injuries, abuse, and maddening, delusional tirades, but eventually becomes so inured to her family’s abnormal existence that anything good, normal, or right starts to feel wrong.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞☞ I stood and quietly locked the bathroom door, then I stared into the mirror at the girl clutching her wrist. Her eyes were glassy and drops slid down her cheeks. I hated her for her weakness, for having a heart to break. That he could hurt her, that anyone could hurt her like that, was inexcusable.

I’m only crying from the pain, I told myself. From the pain in my wrist. Not from anything else.

This moment would define my memory of that night, and of the many nights like it, for a decade. In it I saw myself as unbreakable, as tender as stone. At first I merely believed this, until one day it became the truth. Then I was able to tell myself, without lying, that it didn’t affect me, that he didn’t affect me, because nothing affected me. I didn’t understand how morbidly right I was. How I had hollowed myself out. For all my obsessing over the consequences of that night, I had misunderstood the vital truth: that its not affecting me, that was its effect.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Shawn Westover

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 110-111

Explanation and Analysis

After Shawn physically attacks Tara, pushing her head into the filthy toilet and nearly snapping her wrist, he finally leaves her alone after she apologizes for playing a childish prank on him and dropping a water glass on his head. This is the first real assault Tara remembers suffering at her brother’s hands, and as she processes the fallout, she is unknowingly “defining” both the way she’ll recall this night and the way she’ll respond to its long-lasting effects in the future. Tara wants to be strong like stone and impervious to any emotional or physical violence aimed at her—but in walling herself off to pain, sadness, or tenderness, she is enabling the cycles of abuse, delusion, secrecy, and entrapment which permeate her family. It is not until she’s older, she writes, that she’ll understand what a disservice she did herself and her siblings in steeling herself against Shawn’s abuse and sweeping it under the rug rather than confronting it.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ Shawn fingered the thick steel, which I was sure he could tell was not cheap at all. I stood silently, paralyzed by dread but also by pity. In that moment I hated him, and I wanted to scream it in his face. I imagined the way he would crumple, crushed under the weight of my words and his own self-loathing. Even then I understood the truth of it: that Shawn hated himself far more than I ever could.

“You’re using the wrong screws,” he said. “You need long ones for the wall and grabbers for the door. Otherwise, it’ll bust right off.”

Related Characters: Tara Westover, Shawn Westover (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which takes place shortly after Shawn attacks Tara yet again—choking her until she loses consciousness after he sees her talking with a boy at the local theater where they’re both participants in a play—Tara considers putting a lock on her bedroom door. When Shawn catches her installing it, she’s ready for him to fly into a rage and attack her once again; instead, he sadly reckons with what she’s doing and why, and agrees to help her, knowing that he won’t be able to control himself and stop hurting her in the future. The cyclical abuse Shawn perpetrates against Tara revolves around a pattern of his demeaning her through words, assaulting her physically, and then tenderly apologizing to her often with gifts or other bribes. In this passage, the only gift Shawn knows how to give Tara is a rare moment of lucidity in which he obliquely admits that he knows what he’s doing to her—and feels shame about it.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛☛ Reflecting on it now, I’m not sure the injury changed him that much, but I convinced myself that it had, and that any cruelty on his part was entirely new. I can read my journals from this period and trace the evolution—of a young girl rewriting her history. In the reality she constructed for herself nothing had been wrong before her brother fell off that pallet. *I wish I had my best friend back, she wrote. Before his injury, I never got hurt at all.*

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Shawn Westover

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

After Shawn sustains a concussion and brain bleed during a construction accident—on a job site where no one was wearing a helmet, because Dad doesn’t believe in them—his doctors warn Tara and the rest of the family that Shawn’s personality may change because of the injuries. At this point, Tara has already been suffering physical, psychological, and emotional abuse from Shawn for years. In the wake of the accident, though she actively tries to rearrange and recast her memories, hoping to preserve her image of Shawn as a friend and ally rather than give into the fact that he is a monstrous abuser. This passage sets up the ways in which Tara will repeatedly over the course of her life make alterations to her memories to excuse or justify her family’s behavior, and to hide from herself the intense trauma their lack of care for her causes her. Memory is a major theme throughout the novel, and Tara’s revisionist approach to her most painful moments shows just how desperate she is to preserve her relationship with her family, even if doing so threatens her own happiness and her very sanity.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☛☛ A few days later Dad came home with the most frightening machine I’ve ever seen. He called it the Shear. At first glance it appeared to be a three-ton pair of scissors, and this turned out to be exactly what it was. The blades were made of dense iron, twelve inches thick and five feet across. They cut not by sharpness but by force and mass. [...]

Dad had dreamed up many dangerous schemes over the years, but this was the first that really shocked me. Perhaps it was the obvious lethality of it, the certainty that a wrong move would cost a limb. Or maybe that it was utterly unnecessary. It was indulgent. Like a toy, if a toy could take your head off.

Shawn called it a death machine and said Dad had lost what little sense he’d ever had. “Are you trying to kill someone?” he said. “Because I got a gun in my truck that will make a lot less mess.” Dad couldn’t suppress his grin. I’d never seen him so enraptured.

Related Characters: Shawn Westover, Tara Westover (speaker), Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

When Dad brings home the “frightening” Shear and begins instructing his crew on how to use it, Tara notes his glee and rapture even as everyone else around him—his children, who usually indulge his oddities and delusions—reacts with fear and doubt. Dad actively wants to test the limits of what he can do his body (and his children’s bodies) in hopes of proving that the Lord will heal them every time, thereby proving his particular brand of religious faith. He doesn’t want to safeguard himself or anybody else against workplace injuries, even after watching Luke and Shawn sustain serious injuries such as concussions, brain bleeds, and third-degree burns. Dad is so devout that his belief takes the shape of delusion—the delusion that no matter what he does and no matter how bad things get, God will keep him from death. The Shear is a direct provocation—an attempt to test that theory against a truly fearful piece of “indulgent” and “unnecessary” machinery.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ I’d always known that my father believed in a different God. As a child, I’d been aware that although my family attended the same church as everyone in our town, our religion was not the same. They believed in modesty; we practiced it. They *believed* in God’s power to heal; we left our injuries in God’s hands. They *believed* in preparing for the Second Coming; we were actually prepared. For as long as I could remember, I’d known that the members of my own family were the only true Mormons I had ever known, and yet for some reason, here at this university, in this chapel, for the first time I felt the immensity of the gap. I understood now: I could stand with my family, or with the gentiles, on the one side or the other, but there was no foothold in between.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

At BYU, a prestigious Mormon university in Utah, Tara finds herself rooming and studying with people she believe to be “gentiles”—Mormons who do not adhere to devout enough

beliefs or practices and are masquerading as religious people. She is overwhelmed by the temptations all around her, and fears that by living amongst gentiles, she will find herself led astray from the path her father has set down before her. As Tara allows herself to get to know her roommates and attend services at her new church, she sees that her new friends aren’t evil or sacrilegious, whorish or wanton—but at the same time, she would never be able to get her family to see things that way. Tara sees clearly for the first time that she will never be able to have her parents’ approval and her own personal freedom at the same time. Their beliefs are too strict and too extreme, and if Tara ever wants to continue on her journey of education, personal growth, and examination of what religion means to her, she won’t be able to do it with her parents by her side.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ But I couldn’t do the job, because to do it would be to slide backward. I had moved home, to my old room, to my old life. If I went back to working for Dad, to waking up every morning and pulling on steel toed boots and trudging out to the junkyard, it would be as if the last four months had never happened, as if I had never left.

Related Characters: Faye Westover / Mother, Tara Westover (speaker), Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After her first semester at BYU, Tara moves home for the summer to work and save money. She wants to work at the grocery store in town, Stokes, and save herself from the shame and danger of working in the scrap yard. She knows that moving home is dangerous enough, and threatens already to undermine the small amount of learning and personal growth she’s accomplished in her few months away. If she goes back to work in the scrap yard, she reasons, she will regress too far, and will be pulled back into her old ways and her old life. Tara feels pulled back home time and time again, and remains entrapped by her family’s insular world, but knows that to slide back too far is to close herself off from her future forever. Tara will face down this tension and play this game of tug-of-war many more time before she’s finally able to break away—but this time, she kowtows to her father’s will and accepts the summer of scrapping ahead of her.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☛☛ I came back to Buck’s Peak when I was sure the strep was gone. I sat by Dad’s bed, dripping teaspoons of water into his mouth with a medical dropper and feeding him pureed vegetables as if he were a toddler. He rarely spoke. The pain made it difficult for him to focus; he could hardly get through a sentence before his mind surrendered to it. Mother offered to buy him pharmaceuticals, the strongest analgesics she could get her hands on, but he declined them. This was the Lord’s pain, he said, and he would feel every part of it.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Faye Westover / Mother, Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tara’s father is recovering from a terrible accident at the scrap yard—an accident whose details bear an eerie resemblance to the accident which burned Luke’s leg many years ago. While emptying gas tanks on junk cars, Dad ignited an explosion and suffered third-degree burns on his face and hands. Now, as his family helps him to convalesce from his painful injuries, he refuses any form of medical attention or western painkillers, insisting he’d rather die than see a doctor. He insists on feeling the pain, which he believes is a gift from God himself. The emotional and physical pain that Gene’s family has suffered—and which he is now suffering—have strengthened rather than weakened his delusions that they have been chosen, that they are on the right path, and that their devout, delusional ways of living are the right ways.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☛☛ “Everyone has undergone a change,” [Dr. Kerry] said. “The other students were relaxed until we came to this height. Now they are uncomfortable, on edge. You seem to have made the opposite journey. This is the first time I’ve seen you at home in yourself. It’s in the way you move: it’s as if you’ve been on this roof all your life.”

[...]

I had to think before I could answer. “I can stand in this wind, because I’m not trying to stand in it,” I said. “The wind is just wind. You could withstand these gusts on the ground, so you can withstand them in the air. There is no difference. Except the difference you make in your head.”

Related Characters: Tara Westover, Dr. Kerry (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

As Tara tours Cambridge with the other members of her study abroad group and their teacher, Dr. Kerry, they climb to a high parapet atop the chapel. Standing in the wind, Tara’s classmates hunch and duck out of fear. When Dr. Kerry observes that Tara has not covered out of fear—and in fact seems stronger and more confident than she does on the ground, in a classroom, or at the dining hall—he asks her how this can be possible. In response, Tara gestures to the way that her parents’ delusions perhaps played a role in keeping the family alive in the face of injuries they refused to treat, accidents they refused to assume culpability for, and abuses they allowed to fester. The power of her own delusions of power and invincibility born from the struggles she’s faced have made her able to stand down things that her peers cannot.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☛☛ *Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery.* Marley had written that line a year before his death, while an operable melanoma was, at that moment, metastasizing to his lungs, liver, stomach and brain. I imagined a greedy surgeon with sharp teeth and long, skeletal fingers urging Marley to have the amputation. I shrank from this frightening image of the doctor and his corrupt medicine, and only then did I understand, as I had not before, that although I had renounced my father’s world, I had never quite found the courage to live in this one.

I flipped through my notebook to the lecture on negative and positive liberty. In a blank corner I scratched the line, *None but ourselves can free our minds.* Then I picked up my phone and dialed. “I need to get my vaccinations,” I told the nurse.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

In her first weeks at Cambridge, Tara finds her world expanding even more widely than it did at BYU through her interactions with new friends, teachers, and texts. When one of her friends introduces her to the music of Bob

Marley, Tara finds herself able to comprehend the difficult lectures she's been struggling to understand for weeks. She is starting to see that if she wants to live a truly free life, she must correct the mistakes her parents made and find the "courage" to carve out her own path in defiance of the narrow one they tried to set her on. Tara makes a big decision, and a scary one—after years of fearing doctors, hospitals, and clinics because of her father's ramblings about the evils of modern medicine and the socialist, Illuminati doctors who do the work of Satan, she decides to go get her immunizations, taking a large and symbolic step in the direction of continual healing and searching for the truth.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☛☛ The knife was small, only five or six inches long and very thin. The blade glowed crimson. I rubbed my thumb and index finger together, then brought them to my nose and inhaled. Metallic. It was definitely blood. Not mine—he'd merely handed me the knife—but whose?

"If you're smart, Siddle Lister," Shawn said, "you'll use this on yourself. Because it will be better than what I'll do to you if you don't."

[...] I half-wondered if I should return to the bathroom and climb through the mirror, then send out the other girl, the one who was sixteen. She could handle this, I thought. She would not be afraid, like I was. She would not be hurt, like I was. She was a thing of stone, with no fleshy tenderness. I did not yet understand that it was this fact of being tender—of having lived some years of a life that allowed tenderness—that would, finally, save me.

Related Characters: Shawn Westover, Tara Westover (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 286-287

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tara has just told her parents the truth about Shawn's years of abusing her and Audrey. She has had to do it alone—Audrey, fearful of being cut off or cast out, has refused to stand with Tara as an ally against their brother, even though Audrey was the one who reached out to Tara in the first place about Shawn's abuse. Tara's parents respond by calling Shawn over to the house to hash things out—and when he shows up, he is brandishing a bloody knife. As he threatens Tara with it in full view of their

parents, Tara becomes overcome with fear and is indeed paralyzed. She wishes that she could be the sixteen-year-old girl who endured and even forced herself to laugh off Shawn's cruel physical and verbal attacks. She doesn't yet know that in opening herself up to the pain of her past and her present reality, she has taken the first steps in escaping it. Right now, all she wants to do is retreat, recant, and deflect—but in doing so, she would only perpetuate the cycles of delusion and entrapment which have affected her relationship with her entire family.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☛☛ My parents said he was justified in cutting me off. Dad said I was hysterical, that I'd thrown thoughtless accusations when it was obvious my memory couldn't be trusted. Mother said my rage was a real threat and that Shawn had a right to protect his family. [...]

Reality became fluid. The ground gave way beneath my feet, dragging me downward, spinning fast, like sand rushing through a hole in the bottom of the universe. The next time we spoke, Mother told me that the knife had never been meant as a threat. "Shawn was trying to make you more comfortable," she said. "He knew you'd be scared if he were holding a knife, so he gave it to you." A week later she said there had never been any knife at all.

"Talking to you," she said, "your reality is so warped. It's like talking to someone who wasn't even there."

Related Characters: Faye Westover / Mother, Tara Westover (speaker), Shawn Westover, Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 291-292

Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Tara's cataclysmic encounter with Shawn, she receives additional threats from him over the phone and through email. His harassment culminates in a lengthy note detailing his decision to cut her out of his life, as she's dangerous and disloyal. When Tara brings this information to her parents, they side—once again—with Shawn and demonize Tara. Moreover, they try to undermine Tara's confidence in her own story, either out of a deliberate campaign to disorient her and break her down, or out of their own inability to accept the truth about their son—even if it costs them their daughter. As Mother's memories shift and change, she accuses Tara of being the one living in a

“warped” reality; she does not know that her words will send Tara into a spiral of confusion, anxiety, and depression which will threaten her physical and mental health and derail her graduate studies for over a year.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☛☛ While they plotted how to reconvert me, I plotted how to let them. I was ready to yield, even if it meant an exorcism. A miracle would be useful: if I could stage a convincing rebirth, I could dissociate from everything I’d said and done in the last year. I could take it all back—blame Lucifer and be given a clean slate. I imagined how esteemed I would be, as a newly cleansed vessel. How loved. All I had to do was swap my memories for theirs, and I could have my family.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker), Faye Westover / Mother, Gene Westover / Dad

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

When Tara’s parents come to visit her during her fellowship at Harvard, their relationship with her is in tatters. She has been back-and-forth with them about her desire to bring to light the truth about her brother Shawn’s abuses, and has felt shame, isolation, and sadness at their refusal to see her side of the story. Mother has attempted to “warp” Tara’s memories and cause her to question her own past, and Dad has accused Tara of maliciously trying to dismantle the family piece by piece. Now, in spite of all the pain her parents have caused her, Tara dreams of abandoning all her hard work—her self-improvement, her academic success, and her education in the ways of the world—and “swap[ping her] memories” out to appease her parents and make her return to Buck’s Peak possible. Tara is in the final stages of feeling entrapped by her family, unable to escape their toxic and dangerous cycles of misinformation, cruelty, and abuse. This is the final test she will face—the test of whether or not

to accept her father’s “blessing” and move home to live an insulated, isolated life in Idaho, or whether to press on in the face of loneliness and uncertainty and follow her heart.

Chapter 40 Quotes

☛☛ Until that moment [the girl in the mirror] had always been there. No matter how much I appeared to have changed—how illustrious my education, how altered my appearance—I was still her. At best I was two people, a fractured mind. She was inside, and emerged whenever I crossed the threshold of my father’s house.

That night I called on her and she didn’t answer. She left me. She stayed in the mirror. The decisions I made after that moment were not the ones she would have made. They were the choices of a changed person, a new self.

You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal.

I call it an education.

Related Characters: Tara Westover (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 328-329

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the book, Tara reflects on what the idea of “education” means to her, drawing on the title of her memoir. She reflects on one of the most traumatic moments of her life, and the impulse she felt within that moment to retreat into the person she had been as a child. When she was unable to do so, Tara writes, she became someone new—the sum of her lifelong education in the dangers of devoutness and entrapment, in the strength of the human spirit, and in the necessity of change and transformation. Tara started learning facts, history, and theory when she got to college—but her real education had already begun many years before, and continued many years after she completed her PhD.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The young Tara Westover stands on an abandoned railway car in the yard next to her family's barn. The strong wind whips her hair across her face as she looks down at the valley beyond her family's farm. She looks up at the mountain looming nearby, Buck's Peak, and is able to make out the "dark form of the **Indian Princess**." Tara looks back at her family's house on the hillside and can see movement inside. Her brothers are awake and moving about while her mother makes breakfast and her father gets dressed in his work gear for another day at the scrap yard. Tara watches as, on the highway below, a school bus "rolls past without stopping." At only seven years old, Tara understands that her family is "different" from other families: she and her siblings "don't go to school."

Tara's dad is often worried that the government will force the children to go to school, and has ensured that four of his seven children don't have birth certificates, medical records, or school records. Tara and more than half of her siblings were born at home and have never been to a doctor or received immunizations: "According to the state of Idaho and the federal government, [Tara does] not exist."

Tara and her siblings have grown up "preparing for the Days of Abomination"—stocking supplies, bottling peaches, and getting ready for the "World of Men" to fail. Tara has no formal education, but is "educated in the rhythms of the mountain" and the natural world of their rural Idaho county. She has been raised on her father's stories about the peak, and the **Indian Princess** atop it, who emerges each year when the snows start to melt and the buffalo return to the valley. According to Dad, the Indian Princess is an ancient Indian signal foretelling the arrival of spring, and the time for all of nature to "come home" to the valley.

Now, as an adult looking back on her childhood, Tara realizes that all of her father's stories were about the "jagged little patch of Idaho" where he'd chosen to raise his family. None of his stories prepared Tara to leave the mountain or "cross oceans and continents." Without the mountain—and the **princess**—Tara has struggled all her adult life to "know when it [is] time to come home."

The book's first passage establishes many things, both logistically and thematically. It shows that the details of Tara Westover's childhood are still deeply alive and resonant in her mind, tying into the book's primary theme of memory, and also suggests that Tara and her family have a language, a lore, and a logic all their own.



It's startling to see the adult Tara outline the facts of her childhood so plainly in this passage—and to admit so casually that her personhood has been denied to her because of her father's warped doctrine.



In this passage, Tara Westover complicates the idea of what it means to be educated. As the title suggests, this idea is the central thread that runs throughout the memoir. She and her siblings are not educated in any traditional sense—but they know things foreign to their peers and classmates, and are aware of the rhythms of nature in a way that is unique and even beautiful.



This last passage of the prologue shows the adult Tara's feelings of longing and ambivalence when it comes to the direction her life has taken. She is no longer tethered to her family or their strange way of life, and suggests that this is certainly for the better—but at the same time admits that there were things about her old life that she still misses.



CHAPTER 1: CHOOSE THE GOOD

Tara Westover writes that her earliest memory is not a memory—rather it is something she imagined, and then “came to remember as if it had happened.” She recalls huddling in the kitchen with her family, all the lights turned off, hiding from “Feds” who have surrounded their house. In the memory, Tara’s mother has a baby in her arms—even though Tara is the youngest of all her siblings.

One evening, Tara and her family gather around her father as he reads aloud from the Book of Isaiah in the Bible. As Dad recites a passage which reads, “Butter and honey shall he eat [...] that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good,” the words intrigue or trouble him, and he recites the line over and over again. He at last declares that the line is a “divine doctrine,” and resolves to “inquire of the Lord.” The next morning, Dad purges the family fridge of all dairy products—that evening, when he returns from work, his truck is “loaded with fifty gallons of honey.”

When Dad tells his mother—who lives at the bottom of the hill and whom Tara and her siblings aptly refer to as Grandma-down-the-hill—about the butter and honey revelation, she tells him he has no sense at all. Dad and Grandma-down-the-hill have a contentious relationship, and frequently argue about the junkyard Dad has established right at the border of his parents’ “manicured” lawn. Grandma-down-the-hill also believes that the Westover children should be in school, but Dad believes that sending the kids to school would be like “surrender[ing them] to the devil himself.”

The Westovers attend a small Mormon church in the shadow of Buck’s Peak every Sunday, and each week, Dad attempts to proselytize to many of their fellow church-goes—several of whom are distant family—after services have ended. Most everyone shakes off Dad’s lectures.

Though the entirety of the book and its narrative are reliant on Tara’s memories—their vitality and their veracity alike—she freely admits in these opening lines that her memory is a fallible thing, full of holes and inconsistencies. Tara plans to explore the idea of memory and subjectivity itself in the pages of her memoir rather than blindly relying on the things she believes to be true.



This passage—a relatively benign and unremarkable memory for Tara—shows readers how volatile her father is, and how his devotion to the word of God often results in delusional thinking and strange or even dangerous behavior.



There are other people around the Westover home—even members of their family—who disagree with the way Gene has chosen to raise his children, but they are powerless in the face of his own angry, vicious delusions.



This passage shows that Gene is essentially forcing his family into accepting, practicing, and even believing his wild doctrine because no one else will take him seriously.



In the wake of Dad's revelation about dairy, Tara starts going to Grandma-down-the-hill's house each morning so that she can have milk and cereal for breakfast. One morning, Grandma offers Tara the chance to come with her and Grandpa-down-the-hill to Arizona, where they go for several months each year when the weather turns cold. Grandma tells Tara that she could attend school and have a normal life. Tara is worried about going against her father, but Grandma assures Tara that her father won't be able to come get her, as he'll be busy with a large construction project for months. Tara, reluctant but increasingly excited, agrees to go. That night, Tara is too excited to sleep. She packs a bag and puts her boots by the door and dreams of how her family will react when they discover that she's missing.

Tara reflects on her "conjured" memory that is not a memory. It derives from a story her father told her and her siblings at the start of canning season, or summer, one year. Though Tara would later learn that the story was of national importance, at the time it felt like a secret amongst her family. One evening, Dad sat the whole family down to tell them about a family not far from them—"freedom fighters"—who were assaulted and attacked by the Feds because "they wouldn't let the Government brainwash their kids in them public schools." Dad told everyone that the Feds would soon come for Buck's Peak, and made the kids pack their "head for the hills bags" and fill them with herbal medicines, ready to eat meals, and other survival tools.

A few days later, there was no sign of the Feds, but Dad came home with "more than a dozen military-surplus rifles." As the days went on, more news of the nearby family's struggle against the Feds came in, and Dad relayed the bloody details of the standoff to the children. He never told them the end of the story, however, and would only sadly say, "Next time, it could be us." Tara focused hard on the gruesome details that had been told to her, manufacturing them into her own memories.

In the morning, it is time for Tara to head down to her Grandma-down-the-hill's house—but she can't bring herself to make the trek down the hill. Several hours after the appointed meeting-time, Tara watches her grandparents get in their car and drive away. Tara goes to the kitchen, eats a bowl of bran and water, and completes her morning chores which consist of feeding her family's pigs, goats, and horses. As the sun comes out, Tara sits atop the abandoned railway car and looks up at the **Princess** on top of the mountain. Soon, Tara knows, the snows will come, and the "watchful" Princess will be buried.

Tara finds a friend and ally in her grandmother. Grandma-down-the-hill knows that the life Tara is living is abnormal and even dangerous, and wants to help her escape it—at least for a little while. Tara, though, is so frightened of the world beyond her family's enclave that she may not even be able to pull herself away.



Tara doesn't know that the incident Gene is telling the family about is the infamous Ruby Ridge standoff, in which the FBI were locked in gunfire with a radically devout and deeply paranoid family much like Tara's. Dad presents the Weavers, the family at the heart of the Ruby Ridge incident, as "freedom fighters" picked on by the government—but fails to mention, or even see himself, that the government was trying to help the younger, more defenseless members of the Weaver clan get the medical care, education, and safety they were being denied by their delusional guardians.



Gene strategically delivers and withholds information based on what he wants his children to believe—not just when it comes to the Bible, but to the cold hard facts about major national news events happening all around them.



Tara rejects her grandparents' offer to escape her stifling and claustrophobic life and chooses to stay on Buck's Peak. As she looks at the Princess—a symbol of the steady onward march of time, the call to "come home," and the renewal of the seasons—she feels both comforted and surveilled by the familiar form.



CHAPTER 2: THE MIDWIFE

The next spring, Tara helps her mother weigh and bottle tinctures and herbs to give to a local midwife—who is unlicensed by any formal agency but wants to take Mother on as an assistant. The midwife makes several more visits to the Westover home and leaves each time with her arms full of herbal cures. One time, she brings her daughter Maria—a girl about Tara’s age who also doesn’t attend school, and who tells Tara stories about the births she’s witnessed.

The first time Mother assists with a birth, she is gone from the house for two days. She comes back looking tired and drawn and describes the difficult birth as “awful.” Dad assures her that she has been called by the Lord to do this difficult work. Tara reveals that Mother’s apprenticeship in midwifery had been Dad’s idea—“one of his schemes for self-reliance.” He wanted for her to learn how to bring babies into the world so that in the “End of Days,” she’d be able to deliver babies.

The next birth is easier, and as the months go by and spring and summer turn to fall, Mother assists with dozens and dozens of births. The following spring, Mother tells Tara’s father that she’s at last prepared to deliver a baby on her own—but Dad insists she actually deliver a baby by herself in order to prove her skills. Though Mother doesn’t think anyone would hire her when they could hire a more experienced midwife, soon the house is overrun with pregnant women practically “begging” Faye to deliver their babies for them. Midwives are scarce because even though midwifery is not illegal in the state of Idaho, it is not sanctioned, and midwives could face criminal charges if anything goes “very wrong” during the birth.

Mother begins delivering babies on her own and becomes so popular that she even hires an assistant. She begins instructing Audrey and Tara in herbal remedies and palliatives, and Tara enjoys seeing her mother feel joy at finally being in charge of something. Mother charges about five hundred dollars per birth and soon has a steady income of her own, which supplements the meager funds Dad earns through the scrap yard and odd construction jobs. When Mother pays to have a phone installed, Dad balks at the new technology first but then relents, recognizing that it’s essential for her business.

There are other people like the Westovers in this small Idaho community—people who rely on herbal cures and communal knowledge and refuse to send their children to schools, doctors, or hospitals.



This passage shows how Gene couches his own desires—in this case, for Faye to gain midwifery skills that will help him personally in his preparations for the end of the world—in religious verbiage and divine messaging.



This passage shows that even when things start going well for Faye as a midwife, she must contend with increasingly dangerous threats to her well-being. The Westovers—and the families like them in their community—are locked in a vicious cycle by which their distrust of institutions forces them to come up with their own (often illegal) solutions, putting them at the mercy and in the crosshairs of the very institutions they’re trying to sidestep.



As Faye gains success and renown in the field Gene essentially forced her into, Tara shows how her father still tried to constrict her mother and control her—even as (and possibly because) she became their family’s primary breadwinner.



When Tara's older brother Luke turns fifteen, he asks Mother for a birth certificate. He wants to enroll in Driver's Ed so that he can learn to drive and eventually pilot rigs like one of his elder brothers, Tony, who makes "good money" hauling gravel. Tony, one of the elder Westover children, has a birth certificate and a license. Mother begins filing paperwork on Luke's behalf, and though Dad doesn't like the idea of relying on the government or giving them any information about his family, he relents when he realizes that Luke's ability to drive is, much like a telephone, a necessity.

Mother decides to get birth certificates for Audrey, Tara, and their brother Richard, too. She has trouble finding records of the dates when any of them were born, however, and no one can agree on the date of Tara's birth. Mother decides to say that Tara's birthday is the twenty-seventh of September—an arbitrary date—and persuades Grandma-down-the-hill to sign an affidavit confirming the date.

That fall, Tara is nine years old, and accompanies Mother to witness her first birth. Tara has been brought along so that she can tend to the pregnant woman's several small children during the labor and delivery. On the drive over, Mother goes over the protocol for what to do if something goes wrong and the Feds come to the house—she warns Tara to "under no circumstances" tell anyone official that her mother is a midwife. As Tara watches her terrified mother drive, she realizes at last just how much is at stake, and how much could go wrong, at every single birth over which Mother presides.

Weeks later, after a birth goes wrong and Mother is forced to drive the laboring woman to the hospital, she relays the story of how she managed to convince both a police officer who pulled her over on the way, and a doctor who questioned her at the hospital, that she was simply a friend of the pregnant woman who knew nothing about births. Listening to the story—and repeating it to her friend Maria later—Tara feels proud of her mother for being both a "fine midwife" and a master when it comes to deceiving "doctors and cops."

CHAPTER 3: CREAM SHOES

Tara's mother, Faye, was a mailman's daughter and grew up in town in a "yellow house with a white picket fence." Her mother, a seamstress (whom Tara and her siblings all call Grandma-over-in-town) sewed her beautiful clothes for church and school, and Faye and her family's life "had an air of intense order, normalcy, and unassailable respectability."

This passage shows that despite Gene's devout doctrine and steadfast hatred of government institutions, he is willing to make concessions for his children and allow them to participate in the mainstream world when it serves to benefit him financially or ensure the success of the larger family.



Tara's personhood is confirmed in the eyes of the government—but her family's unorthodox and unsentimental approach to normal things like birthdays shock the officials helping to legitimize the Westover children.



Tara has not, before this moment, understood just how much her mother is risking with every birth she facilitates. Now, Tara is frightened for her mother and for the rest of the family—there is much more at stake than she'd ever imagined.



This passage shows that Tara is absorbing the doctrine her family has been teaching her. She is skeptical of medical and government institutions alike, and is proud of her family for being able to deceive and skirt them at every turn.



In looking back on the facts of her mother's childhood in this section, Tara attempts to chart just how Faye became so isolated from the way she grew up.



Grandma-over-in-town herself had come from a family seen as the “wrong kind” by many others in her pious Mormon community, and spent her life trying to give Faye an easier entry into the social world of their small town and “shield her” from “social contempt.” Tara believes that due to this strict, prim upbringing, Faye rebelled, and married Gene—a man with an “appetite for unconventionality.” Faye rejected her mother’s attempts at instilling respectability and normalcy in her, and instead swung in the other direction, rebelling against the upbringing she saw as materialistic and claustrophobic. Tara remembers her mother telling her a story about Grandma-over-in-town spending hours deliberating about whether to put the young Faye in white or cream shoes for church one morning.

Tara knows very little, on the other hand, about her father’s childhood. She knows that despite the views he developed about women’s duties to homemaking and family, Grandma-down-the-hill actually worked in town while he was growing up, and that Gene spent a good deal of time in town, too—Gene and Faye met at a local bowling alley. Tara believes that Faye, sick of “contorting herself” for other people all her life, was attracted to the “sense of sovereignty” over his own life Gene had, a sovereignty that came with living life on a mountain.

Growing up, Tara and her sibling understood that “the dissolution of Mother’s family was the inauguration” of their own. Dad rarely even set foot in Grandma-over-in-town and Grandpa-over-in-town’s house, and Faye’s parents hardly ever visited the mountain.

Looking at pictures of her parents on their wedding day, the young Tara often wondered about how the “untroubled young man” in the picture became the Dad she knew. She is unsure of how he went from being “eccentric and unconventional” out of a desire to shock others to being controlling, paranoid, and obsessed with hoarding food and supplies for the End of Days. The older Tara reflects on how, during a college lecture years later, she heard a professor describe the symptoms of bipolar disorder and immediately thought of her father.

The older Tara reflects, too, on the recent death of Grandma-over-in-town. She attended the memorial despite tensions with her family, and as she looked down into her grandmother’s open casket, she lamented that “the only person who might have understood” her difficult childhood was kept at arm’s length while “paranoia and fundamentalism” slowly destroyed Tara’s life—and Faye’s.

Grandma-over-in-town tried to give her daughter a dignified and structured upbringing—but Tara, looking back on the facts, can see that it was perhaps this stringent adherence to rules, regulations, and keeping up appearances which drove her mother into the arms of a delusional iconoclast who rejected even the most basic societal norms, structures, and institutions.



Tara can look at her mother’s life and see the path she took—and the reasons she took it—very easily. With her father, however, things are more mysterious. There is no rhyme or reason to his paranoia and delusion, and Tara continues searching for answers as to how her father became the man who raised her.



In marrying Gene and choosing his way of life, Faye forever removed and isolated herself—and her children—from her own family.



Tara has long been unable to deduce how her father became the paranoid, delusional man she always knew him to be—but the answers eventually come in the form of a possible medical diagnosis, which explains many of the gaps in Tara’s own understanding not just of her father’s childhood, but her own.



In severing herself from her family, Faye effectively cut her children off from anyone who could have helped them understand that their lives were abnormal and even dangerous. Tara grieves this fact as she grieves her grandmother.



CHAPTER 4: APACHE WOMEN

Tara tells the story of a time her brother Tyler, at seventeen, fell asleep at the wheel and drove the family car off the road. He'd been driving overnight back to Idaho from Arizona, on the way home from a trip to visit Grandma-down-the-hill and Grandpa-down-the-hill at their winter home. The trip had been Mother's idea—Dad had settled into a deep depression after Christmas and could barely get out of bed. In February, the family piled into their station wagon and drove for twelve hours, through the night, to “plant” Dad in the sun like a sunflower in need of golden rays.

Dad remained listless the first few days in Arizona, but turned back into his old self when he heard Grandma-down-the-hill receive a voicemail from a doctor she'd been seeing. He saw her reliance on doctors as a show of “faithlessness,” and said she was the most “hateful” kind of sinner to accept Mother's herbs and tinctures and then see a doctor behind her back. Dad told his mother that all doctors tried to kill their patients, and that by seeing one, she was becoming “a knowing participant in the plans of Satan.” These tirades continued for the rest of the trip, and though Grandma laughed them off, they disturbed the young Tara.

One afternoon, Grandma-down-the-hill takes Tara and Richard for a drive through the desert. She makes them wear their seatbelts—something their father has never made them do, as he doesn't believe in them. Up in the red hills, Grandma helps the children hunt for small black rocks called “Apache tears.” The children collect the stones, which Grandma plans to sell, and all the while she tells them the legend of the Apache tears—the story of a tribe of Apaches' terrible defeat at the hands of the U.S. Cavalry in these very hills, many years ago. The rocks, legend has it, are the tears the Apache women cried when they saw their husbands' dead bodies. Even on the drive home, Tara cannot get the Apache women out of her head.

The longer the Westovers stay in Arizona, the more Tara finds herself missing the mountain, and the **Princess** atop it. Tara longs to return home, but is nevertheless surprised when one night after dinner Dad hurriedly tells everyone to collect their bags and get in the car as Mother's eyes “darken with worry.”

This passage seems to confirm the suspicions Tara will develop later on in life about the tenuous state of her father's mental health. Sidelined by a depression which may or may not have been affected by the seasons, Gene became helpless and dependent on his family to take care of him.



It seems to be not necessarily the change of pace or scenery, but the chance to deliver a tirade against “faithlessness” that brings Gene out of his depression at last. As he rants ceaselessly at his own mother, the depth of his delusions becomes apparent—as does the fact that much of his family either agrees with him or laughs him off rather than standing up to his paranoia and harmful beliefs.



The story of the Apache women—and their predetermined fate of misery, loss, and lack of agency—resonates deeply with Tara. She, too, feels a loss of control over her own circumstances, even at a young age, and sees the senselessness of her own life reflected in the senseless violence suffered by the Apache women and their husbands.



Even though Tara feels disturbed by the landscape of her life for reasons she can't articulate, she still longs for the familiarity of home.



Tara falls asleep on the drive home, and wakes only in the middle of the accident, as the station wagon hits a utility pole. As the car skids to a stop, everyone takes stock of one another's injuries. Tyler and Audrey are bloody but conscious, and Tara has a big gash in her arm. Dad says that power lines have fallen on top of the car, and slowly gets out of the car, making sure his body never touches it and the ground at the same time. He goes to the other side to check on Mother, who is unconscious in the passenger seat. Tara remembers her father asking if he should call an ambulance, but is shocked by this memory, as it is decidedly out of character for her father.

A nearby farmer, whose tractor the Westovers' car has hit, calls the police. They arrive on the scene, and soon Utah Power shuts off the lines draped over the station wagon. Tara remembers only bits and pieces of these moments, but seared into her brain is the memory of Dad lifting Mother—"her eyes hidden under dark circles the size of plums"—from the car.

Tara does not remember how their family got home. The next morning, Mother regains consciousness and begs to be carried to the basement, where there is no sunlight, while Tyler spits blood into the sink. Mother does not come out of the basement for a week, but every day when Tara goes to check on her, she is horrified by the swelling around Mother's eyes—it is as if she has "two objects strapped to her forehead, large as apples, black as olives." Despite Mother's obvious injuries, there is never any talk of taking her to a hospital—Dad insists she is "in God's hands."

It takes months for Mother to recover. She is often confused, and calls Tara by her siblings' names, unable to discern who she is. Even after the swelling goes down, Mother has dark circles around her eyes which the kids call "Raccoon Eyes," oblivious of the fact that raccoon eyes is a legitimate medical term—and the sign of a serious brain injury. The sensitive Tyler blames himself for the accident, and "every decision that [is] made thereafter," but Tara never blames him or anyone. A decade later, the accident reminds her of the story of the Apache women, whose fate was decided for them by others—like "grains of sand [...] pressing into sediment, then rock."

The seriousness of the car accident the Westovers get into is evidenced by Gene's strange confusion about whether or not they should call for an ambulance—something he would never consider in other circumstances.



It is clear that Mother has sustained the worst injuries of all. While the other Westovers have superficial cuts and gashes, Faye's loss of consciousness—and serious cranial damage—shows that she is in for a miserable recovery, especially considering Gene's refusal to rely on doctors or hospitals for help.



Even when Faye is in obvious pain and grave danger, Gene refuses to take her for any real medical assistance. His belief that God alone has the power to decide whether she lives or dies—and, if she lives, what kind of long-term pain and distress she'll suffer—is his most powerful delusion, and it blots out anyone else's authority on the matter.



This passage encapsulates the pain of Tara's childhood. She and her siblings knew something was wrong, but were naïve as to how bad things really were. As a result, they allowed their fate to be decided for them, and their paths solidified without their consent—just like the painful paths of the Apache women.



CHAPTER 5: HONEST DIRT

A month after the accident, during morning scripture one Sunday, Tyler nervously makes an announcement to the family: he is going to college. Dad is impassive and stonily silent at the news. Tyler will be the third of Tara's brothers to leave home, after Tony, the eldest, and Shawn, who has "taken off" after a fight with Dad months earlier. When the young Tara asks what "college" is, Dad tells her that it is "extra school for people too dumb to learn the first time around." Tara watches Tyler brace himself for one of Dad's lectures, and, sure enough, Dad begins pontificating about how all college professors are either "bona fide agent[s] of the Illuminati" or "high-minded" braggarts who believe themselves "greater than God."

Mother tells Dad that he is wasting his time trying to talk the sensitive but staunch Tyler out of his decision, and then goes downstairs with a migraine—lately, Mother always has migraines, and frequently spends days on end in the basement. Tyler tries to explain to Dad that the school he wants to go to is run by the Mormon church, but Dad insists that the "Illuminati have infiltrated the church" in order to "raise up a generation of Socialist Mormons."

Tara considers the "bizarre fact of" her brother Tyler's mere existence within the Westover clan. Where Tara's other brothers were "like a pack of wolves," violent and quick to fight, Tyler has always liked books and quiet. While the other boys roughhoused, Tyler spent his youth listening to classical music CDs. Tyler's stutter marked him as different and timid, and though he and Tara never talked much, they bonded over music and enjoyed a CD together every night.

Mother homeschooled the Westover children, though Dad didn't even think they should be learning the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic she taught them. Tyler excelled at "school," even as Tara and the others floundered when it came to studying. If Tara flipped through a math text book and touched fifty pages, she'd tell Mother she'd done fifty pages of math, and Mother would marvel at her fast pace, which would "never be possible in the public school."

Though Dad disagreed with education, he never outright stopped the kids from learning—they could teach themselves anything they wanted after their chores on the farm and in the junkyard were complete. Only Tony, Shawn, and Tyler—the eldest boys—had ever set foot in school, though Dad pulled them out when his delusions about the Illuminati worsened. Tyler, however, struggled as hard as he could to find time to study and teach himself, often butting heads with Dad over his choice to immerse himself in learning.

This passage makes it clear that Gene values his own opinions—and delusions—more than he values his children's lives. He has no respect for any of their desires, and steamrolls any attempt at honest, open conversation with his conspiracy theories and ruthless rants.



Mother weakly tries to come to Tyler's defense, but as debilitated as her physical and mental state is in the wake of the accident, she's not able to do much to call Dad off or stop him from attacking Tyler and his desire for an education.



Tara's family is full of rough-and-tumble men and hard workers, but Tyler is a sensitive, artistic aesthete who eschews the hardscrabble work ethic the rest of his family embodies.



Dad never wanted the children to receive any kind of education, including homeschooling. A part of him had to consciously realize that education, for his children, would be a means to freedom—the more they learned about the world beyond the mountain, the more they'd come to see how abnormal their lives there really were.



Dad never disciplined his children for pursuing an education, but simply used teasing, cruelty, and conspiracy theories to undermine the value of education.



As the summer goes by, Tara convinces herself that Tyler won't really leave and go off to college. When she accompanies him on a visit to Grandma-over-in-town and Grandpa-over-in-town's house, however, they remark on how he'll soon be going away to school, and Tara finds herself frightened and sad. In the middle of summer, Dad announces that he is converting all of the family's paper money into silver coins in preparation for "The End." When Tyler, too, converts some of his savings into silver, Tara convinces herself that he is staying after all.

One morning in August, Tara awakes to find Tyler packing all of his belongings. He tells Tara that he's leaving her favorite CD behind for her. She grows "crazed" with sadness and rage, and runs out into the yard so that she doesn't have to watch him drive away. Just before Tyler leaves, though, Tara runs up to his car to give him a hug goodbye. Tyler tells Tara he'll miss her, then gets back in the car and goes.

A month after Tyler's departure, Tara is spending an afternoon at Grandma-over-in-town's house, and they are baking cookies. When Tara uses the bathroom and comes out without washing her hands, Grandma reprimands her, but Tara replies that the Westovers "don't even have soap in the bathroom at home." Grandma, stunned, remarks only that she raised Faye "better than that." Grandma takes Tara back into the bathroom and forces her to wash her hands. When Dad picks Tara up that evening, Grandma asks him why he wouldn't teach his children to wash their hands after they use the bathroom. Gene replies that he teaches his children, instead, "not to piss on their hands."

CHAPTER 6: SHIELD AND BUCKLER

The winter after Tyler leaves, Audrey turns fifteen. She gets a job and a driver's license, and starts spending more and more time away from home and the "restraints" Dad has been trying to put on her. Tara can feel her family "shrinking." Dad, determined to keep making money and hold what's left of the family together, makes Luke, Tara, and Richard work every day in the junkyard. Dad teaches the ten-year-old Tara the difference between aluminum and steel, and puts her to work sorting debris. He doesn't allow her to wear gloves or a hard hat even as she handles rusted, jagged pieces of metal, claiming they'll just slow her down.

Even as Tyler prepares to leave for school, he submits to his father's delusions and doctrines for reasons that Tara—and perhaps even Tyler himself—cannot begin to explain.



Tara is devastated to watch her brother leave—but realizing that leaving home to pursue an education is possible will reverberate through Tara's childhood in ways she can't yet foresee.



This passage gives some insight into Gene's warped way of thinking. He's not preparing his kids to function or thrive in mainstream society—he's teaching them to function in a world of his own making, in which his rebellious flouting of societal rules is more important than concepts such as education, kindness, or even basic hygiene.



The Westover children are growing up—and finding ways to rebel against their claustrophobic, stifling upbringing. Tara, however, is too young to make her way out into the world, and is subjected to her father's orders. Gene has no care for Tara's well-being or safety—she's just another pair of hands he can use as free labor and control however he wants.



The junkyard which was once Tara's childhood playground becomes a "mysterious, hostile" place, as she's forced to dodge the flying debris her father throws around carelessly. Tara thinks of all the injuries she's seen her brothers incur over the years, but when she expresses her nervousness about getting hurt to Dad, he replies only that "God and his angels," who are "working right alongside" them, won't let Tara get hurt.

Mother, meanwhile, is steadily recovering from her head injury, but her memory is erratic and she's plagued by terrible headaches. She often loses track of ingredients while mixing tinctures, and worries that she'll never midwife again. When, at Christmas, a friend gives her a bottle of expensive essential oil that helps her headaches, Mother decides to start making her own. Mother relies on the help of "muscle testing" in making her oils—a process by which she holds ingredients around different parts of her body and gauges her body's muscular response to determine whether she needs to add it or not.

Muscle testing soon becomes an exercise Mother does only with her fingers, by crossing the middle and index fingers and then "flex[ing] slightly to try to uncross them" while asking herself a question. If the fingers stay together, the answer is yes; if they part, the answer is no. Mother begins using muscle testing to determine answers in other kinds of healing, and she starts doing "energy work" on clients in the basement, adjusting their chakras and massaging pressure points. Mother sometimes enlists Tara and Richard's help in these rituals, but Tara doesn't feel the energy her mother purports to feel during the healing sessions.

Mother sees muscle testing as a "divine supplication" and relies upon it almost compulsively to complete even the most basic household tasks. Dad is enraptured by Mother's new skill, believing that she, unlike doctors, can tell what's wrong with someone just by touching them.

As Tara works in the scrap yard all winter, she finds herself "haunted" by thoughts of what Tyler is doing off at school. She wants to go to school herself, but is too afraid to ask her father for permission. She tries to make time to study in private, but her work in the junkyard and with mother often renders her too tired to focus on math, science, or history. Richard, meanwhile, studies obsessively in his free time, reading volume after volume of the family's encyclopedia.

Gene's belief that no harm will befall him or his "crew" while they're at work allows him to behave with impunity. Operating under the assumption that God will protect his family from serious harm, he throws caution to the wind and shirks all common-sense protocol for working in a place as dangerous as a junkyard.



Mother's delusions are worsening, too. Tara never clearly states whether she believes Mother's sudden reliance on strange, religion-adjacent rituals stems from her traumatic brain injury or from the faith she needs to maintain her bizarre, constricting lifestyle in the wake of it.



Mother's rituals and beliefs are equal in devoutness to Dad's, and similar in their delusional quality and detachment from reality. Mother's beliefs are rooted in spiritualism rather than Christian doctrine and scripture, but it doesn't matter what God or idea she's serving—she's learned the mechanisms of intense piety and delusion from her husband.



Dad is proud of Mother for her new skill—and for the fact that she's absorbed and emulated the example he's set forth all these years.



Tara longs for an education, but at this point in her life, her fear of disturbing the status quo and rocking the boat at home outweighs her motivation to outright pursue her dreams.



Tara begins studying religion, reading the Book of Mormon, the New Testament, the Old Testament, and the writings of early Mormon prophets. Though Tara struggles with the material, her work teaches her a “crucial” skill—“the patience to read things [she] could not yet understand.”

Tara approaches the religious materials which are so central to her family's life with a critical eye—she is not particularly pious or devoted to the texts, but instead longs to understand them on a mechanical level.



By the spring, Tara has become a slightly more competent scrapper, though she still fears accidents—and working with Dad. One morning, though, after filling a bin with over two thousand pounds of iron, Tara is forced to ask Dad for help in operating the heavy machinery needed to empty the bin. Dad, hoping to expedite the process, urges Tara to climb into the bin so that she can settle the iron once it's been dumped. Though Tara doesn't understand the plan, she agrees to it—and as Dad raises the forklift and starts pitching the bin forward, Tara becomes trapped as a piece of metal digs into her leg. Dad rebukes Tara for getting stuck, and urges her to go back up to the house and let Mother treat her bloody gash.

This passage represents all of the confusing and dangerous rules of Tara's childhood more broadly. When her father instructs her to do something—even though it seems risky, and Tara is unclear about what's expected of her—she decides that bending to his will is easier than questioning or arguing with him. As a result, she gets injured—but her father refuses to see his role in his own daughter's suffering, and he also fails to acknowledge that the family is not, in fact, immune from accidents in the scrap yard because God and his angels are watching over them.



Mother muscle-tests Tara's wound and declares that she will not get tetanus. She examines Tara's bruises and determines that Tara has damaged her kidney—but decides to treat it with a “fresh batch of juniper and mullein flower.” As Tara's wounds heal over the next several weeks, she arrives at a decision: she wants to go to school. She approaches Dad and asks for permission, but in response, he only asks her if she remembers the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau, implying that Tara is “not the daughter he had raised.”

Tara is frustrated with both her parents—her father's carelessness and her mother's ineffectual attempts to care for her and her siblings in the face of increasingly worrisome injuries. When Tara attempts to extricate herself from her difficult home life, though, she's met only with cruelty disguised as piety.



CHAPTER 7: THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

Tara spends the summer making—and blessing—homeopathic remedies for Mother while her brothers work in the junkyard and on the mountain with Dad. One afternoon, Luke, Tara's seventeen-year-old brother, is helping Dad drain gasoline from the tanks of old cars before putting them into the crusher. Tara remembers lunch that afternoon with “unsettling clarity”: she and her family are eating casserole, and then Mother puts Tara on dish duty while she goes off to consult with another midwife on a complicated pregnancy. Luke and Dad head back up the mountain after lunch and resume work—but Luke's leg catches fire when he goes to remove a car's gas tank using a cutting torch. Luke, who has tied his jeans on with a piece of rope like he does every morning, is unable to get out of them, and takes off running through the grass, starting a fire up on the mountain.

Tara reflects on a particularly traumatic event not just in her family's history, but her own. Given that Tara has, up to this point, recounted being forced to work for both of her parents, denied an education, and barred from seeking help for serious injuries, it stands to reason that her siblings have been having the same experiences—perhaps even more intense ones, as they're older than little Tara. In telling this story about Luke, Tara approaches it from her own point of view, but at the same time plays with the mechanisms of memory, subjectivity versus objectivity, and the collective consciousness she and her siblings once shared.



Tara, unaware of what's happening up on the mountain, is washing dishes when she hears Luke's strangled screams. She looks out the window to see him hobbling across the grass, calling for Mother—the jeans on his left leg are melted away, and the skin has begun to peel away from his burned thigh “like wax dripping from a cheap candle.” Tara grabs a bottle of Rescue Remedy—a homeopathic for shock—and goes out to the lawn to tend to Luke. His eyes have rolled back in his head, and he is screaming that his leg is on fire.

Tara, only ten, doesn't know what to do for Luke. She goes to fetch an ice pack to hold against the burn, but at the contact, Luke screams. Tara thinks of a way she can cool down Luke's leg, and decides that putting it in a large plastic garbage bin full of cool water will do the trick. She drags out the can and begins filling it with water from a hose, but then realizes that the filthy can will no doubt cause an infection in Luke's leg, so she wraps his leg in a garbage bag first. The cool water does soothe Luke, who refuses to take his leg from the bin even after Dad gets back from the mountain.

When Mother comes home that night, she tends to Luke's wounds, cutting the plastic bag away and getting to work debriding the burns and dead tissue. Mother dresses the wounds in a salve of her own making, but admits that she's never seen a burn as bad as Luke's. That night, as Luke burns up with fever, Tara and Mother feed him tinctures of herbs—which do nothing to dull his pain. Every night that week, as Tara falls asleep, she dreams of the fire she did not witness.

Luke is confined to bed for weeks, and Dad instructs the family to tell their friends and neighbors at church that Luke is just under the weather—he warns them that there will be trouble if the government finds out about Luke's leg, stating that if Luke gets taken away and put into a hospital, he'll get an infection and die.

Tara blocks out the memory of the afternoon Luke got burned for over eighteen years. Now, at twenty-nine, as she sits down to write and reconstruct the memory, she realizes that there is an inconsistency in the story she and her siblings have taken for granted all these years: the question of who put out the fire on the mountain. Tara tells herself that Dad must have put the fire out, but then wonders why Dad, if he had been on the mountain with Luke when he caught fire, wouldn't have helped him back to the house. Tara checks in with her brother Richard about the memory in an attempt to get to the bottom of things, and Richard tells Tara that Dad stayed on the mountain to put out the brush fire while Luke drove back to the house.

The injuries Tara has sustained—and has witnessed her family endure—have always been taken care of by other people. In this moment, though, she alone is called to the front lines and forced to respond to a very dire situation that is obviously beyond her control.



Tara, like any other ten-year-old, doesn't know what to do in such an enormous crisis. Unlike other ten-year-olds, however, Tara has not been taught to ask for help, call emergency services, or rely on others in such moments. She nearly makes Luke's leg worse by submerging it in a filthy trash can, remembering only at the last minute that infections exist and are related to dirt.



Even with the nauseating severity of Luke's burns and the excruciating level of his pain, Faye chooses only to rely on homeopathic treatments for her son, and refuses to help him secure professional help.



Gene continually endangers his family, and then prevents them from seeking help by lying to them about how if anyone finds out the truth about their lives, they'll be separated or harmed further.



Tara has clearly tried to distance herself from her more painful memories over the years. In the writing of this memoir, as she delves deeper and deeper into the past, she's forced to confront the conflicting accounts her family members have of events common to all of them—and face down the idea that her version of events may not be the right one.



As Tara looks back on the memory of that day, she finds something new bubbling to the surface: an image of Mother slathering Dad's hands that evening in one of her salves. She deduces that Dad must have decided to stay on the mountain and put out the fire before it spread to the house. She imagines her father beating back the flames with his shirt while Luke drove down the mountain. In a footnote, Tara reveals that Luke remembers the incident entirely differently than she does: he remembers Dad bringing him down the mountain, administering the Rescue Remedy for shock, and putting him in a cool bath.

Tara's journeys into her old childhood memories are igniting new—possibly forgotten or suppressed—images and details. She is trying her best to get a clear picture of the formative and traumatic events that comprised her childhood, but in the end must accept that memory is subjective, fallible, and often different for everyone, even people who were present for the same objective events. It's also interesting that in Luke's memory, Dad takes the place of Tara as the hero of the story. Perhaps the situation was so traumatic for young Tara that she inserted herself into the story, but it's also possible that Luke, fearful and reverent of the kids' domineering father, believed that no one but Dad could have saved him.



CHAPTER 8: TINY HARLOTS

At eleven, Tara longs to get away from the junkyard, but she is too young to get a job like her older sister. Still, she goes into town and visits the local gas station owned by a kindly couple named Papa Jay and Myrna Moyle, asking if she can put up flyers advertising her babysitting services. Tara begins babysitting for Jay and Myrna's daughter Mary, and some of Mary's friends, too. Through her new network of friends in town, Tara gets another small job packing boxes for a man who owns a nut business.

Tara begins testing the bounds of freedom by venturing away from the mountain and seeking help from the community her family has long been estranged from.



When Tara overhears Mary playing piano one Sunday in church, she asks if Mary can pay her for babysitting in piano lessons rather than money. Mary tries to ask Tara about whether she goes to school or has any friends, but Tara is quiet and deflects the questions. Mary suggests Tara attend dance classes, which her sister Caroline teaches every Wednesday at the back of Papa Jay's.

Tara, like Tyler, has a passion for music and the arts—a passion that can never flourish because of her father's opposition to education, participation in society, and anything that deviates from the chores and activities he has prescribed.



Tara shows up to her first dance class in a huge gray T-shirt and steel-toed boots. She struggles to keep up with the other girls, who wear leotards and tights, know the popular music Caroline plays in class, and the dance steps she teaches. After class, when Caroline suggests Tara get a leotard for the next class, Tara tells her teacher that leotards aren't "modest." Caroline volunteers to talk to Tara's mother for her. A few days later, Mother takes Tara to a dancewear shop over forty miles away and helps her pick out a leotard and some dance shoes, but urges Tara to keep them in her room—hidden away from Dad.

Tara's dance lessons are a kind of education—an education in social norms and structures and the world beyond the mountain. Mother is willing to help Tara attend classes, and her teacher is willing to make concessions so that Tara can participate—but everyone knows that if Dad finds out, it will be the end of Tara's foray into the real world.



Tara grows to love dance class, even though the other girls rarely speak to her—and even though she feels exposed by the “immodest” dance uniform. When rehearsals for the Christmas recital begin, Caroline consults specially with Tara’s mother about what kind of costume Tara will be allowed to wear. When Tara arrives at class for her costume fitting later that week, she finds that Caroline has made the costumes for their class’s number large gray sweatshirts that hang to the knees in order to accommodate Tara.

The night of the recital—held at the Westovers’ church—Mother and Tara finally tell Dad about Tara’s dance lessons. He grimaces, but agrees to go watch the recital. After Tara’s class’s number, on the drive home, Dad is “furious”—and as he rants on and on, Mother, too, begins a diatribe against the “obscene” costumes Caroline picked out for the girls. Tara knows that her mother is lying to Dad. Even after they arrive home, Dad continues talking about how Caroline’s class is just another one of “Satan’s deceptions.”

Hoping to ease the blow of Tara’s being banned from dance classes, Mother helps her find a new hobby—Tara begins taking voice lessons, and her teacher helps her get ready to sing in church for all to hear. After Tara’s big performance, the whole congregation congratulates her, and the choir director and bishop clamor to ask Tara to sing at upcoming church events. Dad is proud and beaming, and from that moment on, he longs for Tara’s “voice to be heard.” When Tara’s voice teacher tells her family that the theater in town is putting on a production of *Annie*, Dad even puts aside his qualms about “socialists” and “Satan’s deceptions” and urges Mother to do whatever it takes to make sure Tara is cast as the lead.

CHAPTER 9: PERFECT IN HIS GENERATIONS

Tara is cast as the lead in *Annie* during the summer of 1999—the summer Dad is in “serious preparedness mode” for the upcoming Y2K catastrophe, which he believes will cause all of the computer systems to fail, sinking the world into chaos and “usher[ing] in the Second Coming of Christ.” At the Westover home, everyone works round-the-clock canning fruit to hoard in the family’s emergency cellar. One afternoon, Tara watches as her dad uses the forklift to lower a thousand-gallon tank of gasoline into a giant pit in the yard and bury it with nettles and thistle, so that they can drive at the end of the world “when everyone else is hotfooting it.”

Tara’s teacher wants to accommodate Tara and help her to feel less alienated from her classmates as she slowly learns about the world beyond the mountain. Caroline’s kindness is palpable and genuine.



Even though the recital is at church and Caroline has selected drab, modest costumes for the class to perform in, Dad still sees the entire enterprise as the work of the devil. Any expression of individuality or normalcy and any attempt to participate in larger society is condemned.



This passage reveals Gene’s hypocrisy when it comes to his beliefs about the evils of mainstream modern society. He’s fine with Tara participating in music lessons and entertainment when it’s the kind of entertainment he likes—and when it brings him recognition and admiration.



As Tara experiments with more and more involvement in the community and society more generally, Gene starts preparing for the end of the world more fervently than ever before.



At play rehearsals in town, Tara gets to enter “another world”—no one there is talking about Y2K. Tara is relieved, but also uncertain of how to behave—she has never learned to talk to “people who went to school and visited the doctor” and spent their days doing things other than preparing for end times. Tara doesn’t recognize cultural references in the script, such as a line about President Roosevelt or “FDR.” When the director tells the cast they’ll need to provide their own costumes, Tara’s heart sinks as she realizes she doesn’t have a pretty dress to wear in the second act. Mother takes Tara to her sister Angie’s house, and Angie lets Tara borrow one of her own daughter’s dresses. On opening night, Dad is in the front row, and he comes to every single performance until closing.

Tara continues taking part in the plays in town, though she occasionally has to field Dad’s comments about the theater being “a den of adulterers and fornicators.” Dad drives Tara to rehearsal every night, wanting her to have the chance to sing and make him proud, but also threatens to take her out of each play she participates in. One winter, when Tara’s tonsils swell, Dad worries her singing will be affected, and urges her to undertake “treatment”—by standing out in the sun with her mouth open and letting the sun heal her throat.

One night, Tara meets a new boy at play rehearsal—though he’s not in the cast, he has many friends who are. Tara is immediately entranced by the boy, whose name is Charles, and he is similarly taken with her. He tells Tara that her singing is the best he has heard in his life. That night, Tara gets home from play rehearsal to find Dad and Richard hunched over a large metal box on the kitchen table, assembling something. When it’s done, Dad shows Tara what they’ve built: it is a fifty-caliber rifle, which he’s bought for what he’ll only call “defense.”

The next night at rehearsal, Tara flirts with Charles, and he urges her to come to his school’s choir practices, even though she isn’t a student. As Tara imagines spending time with Charles at his house, playing games or watching a movie, she gets excited—but when she imagines bringing him to her house at Buck’s Peak, she feels only panic at the thought he might find the root cellar, or the buried fuel tank, or the fifty-caliber rifle.

Tara is both grateful for the chance to escape her stifling home life for a little while—and discouraged by the mounting number of differences she’s discovering between her and her peers. Her father’s support of her performance is wholehearted and genuine, but still an example of his only allowing the members of his family to participate in society when it brings him joy, money, or clout.



Dad clearly still has reservations about allowing Tara to participate in society, and attempts to remind her even as he ferries her to rehearsals and performances that the world beyond the mountain is evil and corrupt.



Tara’s mundane, normal life at rehearsal is filled with crushes and flirting—but her strange home life remains marked by delusion and the ever-present threat of violence.



Tara increasingly wants to be normal like her new friends, and begins to see her family as a shameful source of embarrassment rather than the rare example of piety in an evil and corrupt world.



On New Year's Eve, after weeks of intense preparations, Dad studies the Bible and then sits down in front of the TV to watch *The Honeymooners* and wait for "The End." At 11:59 p.m., Tara, sitting in the living room with him, holds her breath, but as the clock strikes midnight, nothing happens. Dad remains immobile on the couch as the minutes tick by. At 1:30 a.m., Tara at last heads to bed, leaving her father sitting up alone watching TV. The next morning, Tara's father seems "smaller" to her—she can see the "childlike" disappointment in his features as he reckons with the fact that the world has continued spinning on.

Around the same time that Tara is feeling new feelings of shame and estrangement where her family is concerned, the anticlimactic passing of "Y2K" confirms that Tara's home is a place ruled by her father's grand—but false—delusions. Tara is beginning to grasp the fact that her father doesn't know everything, and that his ideas and beliefs may actually be harmful.



CHAPTER 10: SHIELD OF FEATHERS

After "Y2K" fails to bring about the end of the world, Dad slips into a deep depression, and Mother decides that it's time for another trip to Arizona. Tara, Richard, Audrey, Mother, and Dad pile into an old van Dad has "fixed up" so that the back seats have been replaced with a queen mattress. In Arizona, the sun improves Dad's mood just as it did the last time—but just like the last time, Dad argues nonstop with Grandma-down-the-hill, who is receiving cancer treatment at a local hospital.

This chapter and the events within it show how Tara's family is locked in a cyclical, doomed pattern in which they make the same mistakes over and over again because of their refusal to change, adapt, or confront the dangers of their collective delusions.



One afternoon, Audrey tells Tara to pack her things—they're all leaving right away. Grandma-down-the-hill urges Dad to stay the night rather than driving through the approaching storm and risking an accident, like last time, but Dad ignores his mother and makes everyone load up the van. In the middle of the night, a blizzard descends, and Richard, who has been driving, pulls over. Dad takes the wheel and begins speeding towards home. The drive becomes so erratic and so dangerous that it is a "relief" to Tara when the van finally and inevitably skids off the road.

Tara's "relief" at running off the road in a car accident yet again shows that even when the patterns within a family are dangerous and painful, there is comfort to be found in the familiar. This is the reason Tara's family is so trapped: they find comfort even in their most bizarre delusions, ill-advised routines, and dangerous beliefs.



Several days after the accident, Tara's neck freezes up. She wakes one morning unable to move it, and feels herself slowly become overtaken by a terrible headache. Rather than taking Tara to a doctor, Mother calls over one of her friends, another "energy specialist," who attempts to heal Tara by urging her to imagine herself in a "white bubble" full of pleasant things. A month goes by, and though Tara's pain does not abate, she gets used to moving through the world with a stiff neck and debilitating migraines. She soon takes to bed, and experiences the world around her through a dull haze.

In the last accident, Mother found herself suffering from a serious injury but was unable to seek medical help due to Gene's delusions of doctors being accomplices of the devil. Now, Tara finds herself doomed to that same fate. The patterns within the Westover family repeat and repeat with no end in sight as they refuse to learn from their past mistakes.



Sometime during Tara's month in bed, her brother Shawn returns home. He has been living away from home and earning himself a bad reputation in town. Tara, who hasn't seen her brother in a long time, sees him "as more legend than flesh." One evening, Tara goes into the kitchen to help with dinner. Shawn tells her she should see a chiropractor, but she ignores him. While Tara is at the stove with her back towards Shawn, he comes up behind her, grabs her skull, and jerks her head "with a swift, savage motion." Tara blacks out from the pain, but when she comes to, she is able to move her neck without any trouble. Tara begins seeing Shawn, in the wake of this "violent, compassionate act" as the "defender" she's longed for all her childhood.

This passage—and the "compassionate" but "violent" act Shawn commits within it—shows that despite his dangerous reputation both within his own family and beyond it, he represents, to Tara, a kind of salvation. This establishes Tara's devotion to her older brother, and the fact that she sees his unorthodox or even dangerous methods of showing "compassion" as the highest form of love she's known.



CHAPTER 11: INSTINCT

Grandpa-down-the-hill was once a rancher who tended a huge herd of cattle on the mountain with sleek, well-trained horses. As Grandpa got older, he stopped ranching, and set the horses loose—now, a whole herd of wild horses lives on Buck's Peak. Once a year, Luke, Richard, and Tara help Grandpa round up a handful of them to take to town and sell for slaughter. Out of every handful, Grandpas choose a young stallion or two to keep and tame, and Tara and her brothers take on the daunting work of training the wild, feral beasts. One year, when Tara's grandpa is given a trained bay gelding from a relative, Shawn offers Tara help in training the horse. Tara, never having known a horse that wasn't wild, is terrified, but is soon able to ride the yearling, which she names Bud, with ease—thanks to Shawn's help.

This anecdote is representative of Tara's childhood as a whole. She has become so used to dealing with the difficult, the bizarre, and the dangerous that she believes these things to be the default. When she encounters something normal, she's more scared of it than she should be—because so much of her own personal "normal" has been frightening and intimidating for so long.



Shawn's return home has been calm and peaceful, but he refuses to speak of his "old life" or see his old friends. Shawn often drives Tara to her rehearsals down in town, and these drives are pleasant and jovial—but Tara notices a change in her brother as soon as he arrives in town and sees other boys. He often picks on the younger boys they run into, taunting and baiting them.

Shawn is one person when he's with Tara, and another person when he's around anyone else. Though Tara loves spending time with her brother, there's a twinge of nervousness to all their interactions.



A month before Tara turns fifteen, she is outside on a summer evening helping Shawn train a new mare. Tara rides Bud, and Shawn rides the mare. When Tara's horse gets too close to Shawn's, Shawn's horse kicks Bud in the chest, and Bud takes off. Tara is able to hold onto the saddle horn, but her foot slips through the stirrup—the one thing Grandpa-down-the-hill has told her to never let happen when riding. Tara holds fast to the saddle horn even as her instincts tell her to let go and try to fall, pulling her leg out of the stirrup in the process. While Bud bucks and rears furiously Tara holds fast to the saddle, hoping Shawn will come rescue her. Sure enough, he arrives on his mare within minutes, and is able to grab Bud's reins and slowly calm the horse down.

This anecdote shows that Tara loves and trusts Shawn so much that she will sublimate her own survival instincts out of the belief that he will take care of her. Just as Dad and Mother believe unfailingly in the power of scripture and herbal cures, Tara is devout in her devotion to her brother. This sets up the unhealthy dynamic between the two of them that will fester as the book goes on.



CHAPTER 12: FISH EYES

Tony has been driving long-haul rigs to earn a living, but when his wife gets sick, he asks Shawn to run the rig for a week or two. Shawn agrees to the job—if he can bring Tara along. Tara is excited for an adventure out west. Shawn drives for long shifts—illegally doctoring his driving records to make it seem like he’s stopping to sleep—and every other day, he and Tara stop to shower and eat a real meal. Stopped in Albuquerque one evening, waiting in the parking lot of a Walmart for employees to unload the rig, Shawn teaches Tara how to fight—how to “incapacitate [someone] with minimal effort [and] control someone’s whole body with two fingers.” On the rest of the journey, Tara and Shawn play word games to pass the time, and Shawn gives Tara the nickname “Siddle Lister,” an inversion of “little sister.”

Back in Idaho, Tara auditions for a production of *Carousel*—and to her great surprise, Shawn auditions, too. At the first rehearsal, a girl named Sadie flirts with Shawn. When Tara asks Shawn if he likes Sadie, he says that Sadie has “fish eyes”—beautiful, but “dead stupid.” Sadie begins coming around Buck’s Peak to visit Shawn, but Shawn hardly ever speaks to her. At each rehearsal he purposefully messes with her in some new way—reprimanding her for talking to other boys or tormenting her by making her get him candy bars from the vending machine but demanding something different than what she comes back with. Shawn always apologizes to Sadie to keep her on the hook, often telling her she has “lovely eyes [...] just like a fish.”

Sadie’s parents announce that they’re getting a divorce. When Mother hears the news, she says that Shawn has “always protected angels with broken wings.” Shawn, meanwhile, get a hold of Sadie’s high-school class schedule and memorizes it—he drives by school during the day when she’s moving between buildings to watch her. When he sees her walking with Charles one day, he starts ignoring her phone calls until Sadie becomes desperate and promises she won’t hang out with any other boys. Shawn begins inviting Sadie over to the house, but only to torment her by forcing her to bring him different drinks or foods that they don’t have in the house, so that she has to go into town and buy them for him.

Shawn and Tara have a fun time together taking on a decidedly unorthodox brother-sister bonding trip. The excursion out west is fun for Tara, but tinged with the same volatility and unease that she feels when she sees Shawn through the eyes of other people—she is beginning to see that he is a little bit dangerous.



As Tara and Shawn start spending more and more time together, she begins to notice the ways in which his cruelty and desire for control manifest. He longs to degrade and diminish Sadie, while at the same time insatiably lapping up all of her energy and attention. This pattern will soon transfer to his relationship with Tara—and have devastating consequences.



Even as Mother commends Shawn for his kindness and selflessness, he begins stalking and emotionally abusing Sadie just because he can. He is trying to prove that he has complete control over her by slowly winding his influence into every part of her life.



One night, Shawn asks Tara to bring him a glass of water. As she approaches Shawn with the glass, she's overcome by the desire to dump the whole thing on his head—when she does, he chases her down the hall, yelling at her to apologize. When she refuses, he grabs a fistful of her hair and drags her to the bathroom. He drops her head into the filthy toilet, just above the water, and holds her there. Tara still refuses to apologize. After a minute or so, Shawn lets her up—but then, using the technique he taught her back in Albuquerque, seizes her wrist and begins folding it backwards, incapacitating her. Tara at last apologizes. Shawn lets go of her and leaves the bathroom.

Tara's resistance to Shawn's tyranny is playful and sisterly—but he retaliates with a full-force attack. The psychological effects of Shawn's abuse are just as painful as its physical ones.



Tara locks herself inside the dirty bathroom, and stares, crying, at “the girl clutching her wrist.” Tara hates the girl in the mirror “for her weakness”—for letting herself be hurt. Tara tries to tell herself that she's crying only from the pain—that Shawn's actions haven't affected her emotionally—and tells herself this narrative over and over again throughout the years, unaware of the “consequences” this encounter will have in the future.

Tara has been raised by people obsessed with self-sufficiency, strength, and resilience. As she begins to feel the potent physical and psychological effects of Shawn's abuse, she tells herself that she's weak and attempts to shut her emotions down rather than reckoning with what is happening to her, or blaming Shawn for his cruelty.



CHAPTER 13: SILENCE IN THE CHURCHES

That September, the Twin Towers fall in New York—it is the first time Tara has ever heard of them. Three days later, Audrey gets married to Benjamin, a farm boy she met down in town. The wedding is a grim affair—Dad has, in the wake of 9/11, been doing a lot of praying, and believes he has received a “revelation” foretelling “a conflict, a final struggle for the Holy Land.” Tara and the rest of her family spend the fall waiting for some cataclysmic war, or for the end of the world to finally arrive—but by winter, nothing in Idaho has changed.

A national crisis gives rise to a new wave of paranoia in the Westover family, as Gene believes the attack foretells the onset, at last, of the Days of Abomination he's been waiting for.



Tara is fifteen now, and her body is changing. She wants the changes to stop so that she can stay a child, but nothing can stop the forward march of time. After a while, she finds herself both “thrilled and frightened” by the ways she's developing differently from her brothers.

Against the backdrop of her father's unrelenting paranoia and her brother's increasingly worrisome abuse, Tara realizes that she is growing up and becoming the woman she's going to be—for better or for worse.



Shawn and Tara continue spending a lot of time together at rehearsals down in town. When Shawn notices Tara talking to Charles, he reprimands her for being “that kind of girl,” and “just like the rest.” He stops calling her Siddle Lister and starts calling her Fish Eyes—and when she wears lip gloss for the first time, he calls her a whore.

What's happening between Shawn and Tara is not normal, playful sibling rivalry. Shawn is systematically attempting to break Tara down and exert control over her by diminishing and even demonizing her.



Shawn dumps Sadie and starts seeing an old girlfriend named Erin. When Charles and Sadie start going out, Shawn becomes irate. He takes Tara on a drive through town hunting for Charles—there is a pistol on the seat between them, and all the while, Shawn mutters under his breath about giving Charles “a new face.” Tara is terrified, but cannot reconcile this violent, vengeful version of her brother with the Shawn she once knew.

Shawn is violent, possessive, and vengeful, but even when faced directly with these facts, Tara is too afraid to stand up for herself. It's not even that she's afraid of Shawn's actions, though they're dangerous and worrisome—she's afraid of admitting the truth of who he really is to herself.



One morning, Tara wakes up to find Shawn's hands around her throat. Her brain feels like pins and needles, and she can dimly make out the fact that Shawn is calling her “slut” and “whore” while, in the background, Mother begs Shawn not to “kill” Tara. Mother manages to get Shawn off of Tara and she catches her breath, but seconds later, he has her by the hair and is dragging her through the house while she cries. He throws her onto the floor in the kitchen and screams at her for “pretend[ing] to be saintly and churchish” while secretly “pranc[ing] around with Charles like a prostitute.”

Shawn's rages seem to stem from the same devout paranoia as Dad's prayers and pontifications. Though Dad exerts control and abuse in more sinister ways, Shawn uses outright brute force to establish dominance within the family.



Mother follows them into the kitchen, shouting for Tara to take the car keys and leave. Shawn grabs Tara's wrist in his special hold, though, and demands she admit she is a whore. Tara is about to give in, when she hears a man's voice ask what's going on—she looks up and sees Tyler. She believes at first that her brother is a hallucination, but as Shawn releases her wrist, she realizes he's real; Tyler has come home for a visit. Tyler gets in Shawn's face, forcing him to back down, and then tosses Tara his own car keys, urging her to go. Tara runs out to the car and starts it. Tyler follows her and warns her not to go anywhere familiar, or Shawn will find her.

Tara has been locked in conflict with Shawn for a while—but no one, until now, has witnessed the truth of who Shawn is and how he treats Tara. Now, as Mother and Tyler both get a glimpse of what Shawn is capable of, Tara realizes that she can only run from the truth—and from her brother's violence—for so long.



That night, when Tara returns home, Shawn is not in the house. She goes to sleep, but is awoken by the sound of Shawn's pickup coming up the hill. Shawn enters Tara's bedroom and calmly sits down on her bed. He hands her a black velvet box with a string of pearls inside, and tenderly tells her how “special” she is—he says he only wants to keep her from going down the wrong “path.” Tara stares at Shawn, who seems in this moment “wise,” and asks him to help her stay on the right path.

In a classic hallmark of abusive patterns of behavior, Shawn makes a grandiose apology for his behavior by tenderly offering Tara a beautiful gift, praising her, and implying that only he understands and can “help” her.



The next morning, Tara's neck is bruised, and her wrist is swollen. She feels as if her brain itself aches. She goes to work but comes home early, and lies down in the basement for some rest and quiet. Tyler comes down to find her, and though she's embarrassed that he saw her in such a low moment, she feels comforted by his presence. Tyler asks Tara if she's ever considered leaving home—she tells him she's planning on going to high school in the fall. Tyler warns her that Dad will make it impossible for her to do so. Tyler tells Tara that home is the “worst possible place” for her, and that she needs to take the ACT and apply straight to BYU. The school takes “homeschoolers,” he says, and he urges Tara to lie and say she has been homeschooled all her life.

Tyler, having escaped from home, knows that the only way for Tara to save herself is to make a clean break and extricate herself from the Westover household. He wants to help her accomplish this goal, and does not shy away from warning her of the endless conflict and abuse she'll suffer if she stays.



The next day, Tara goes to the hardware store and buys a bolt for her bedroom door. She starts installing it, but when Shawn comes down the hall and asks what she's doing, she is paralyzed by dread. Shawn sees the bolt and helps Tara install it—she realizes in that moment that he hates himself “Far more than [she] ever could.”

This surprisingly tender moment seems to imply that Shawn is fully aware of what he's doing to Tara, and what he's been doing to Sadie and to others. He seems to want to help Tara protect herself from him, thereby suggesting that he does not have the control over his own actions to stop himself from hurting her.



CHAPTER 14: MY FEET NO LONGER TOUCH EARTH

That October, Dad wins a contract to build some industrial granaries in Malad City—a “dusty farm town” on the other side of the mountain. Dad's crew consists of only Shawn, Luke, and Benjamin, but Shawn is a good foreman and makes sure that everyone is working hard every day.

Even in the hazy, nightmarish atmosphere of abuse and control in the Westover home, life and work continue on as usual.



Tara is still working for Randy, the man with the nut business. With his help, she learns to use the internet and a cell phone. Tara stays in touch with Tyler, and he encourages her to buy ACT study books and learn them so that she can apply to college. Tara, though, is unable to see where college will “fit in” with the predetermined plan for her life: to get married, have babies, and become an herbalist or midwife like Mother while her husband goes to work for Dad. When Tara goes online and sees the happy, smiling students on the BYU homepage, though, she becomes determined to pursue admission—she goes out and buys an ACT book and an algebra textbook and starts studying.

Tara is trying to separate herself from her family and get out of the house a little bit. She has reservations about striking out on her own, but when she encounters a vision of how her life could be, which contrasts the constraining vision of what she'd always imagined, she feels excited and motivated to pursue a new path.



Tara spends all her downtime during play rehearsals teaching herself complicated math—trigonometry and algebra—and begins hinting about her plans to both Mother and Dad. Dad scoffs at Tara’s desire to go to college, insisting that “a woman’s place [is] in the home,” and accusing Tara of “whoring after man’s knowledge instead of God’s.” When Tara struggles with math, she asks Mother and Dad—but when her knowledge surpasses their own, she gets in touch with Tyler and begins meeting up with him at their aunt Debbie’s house for study sessions.

One evening, at Debbie’s, the phone rings: it is Mother, and she tells Tara to come home quickly as there’s been an accident in Malad. Mother has little information—all she can tell Tara is that Shawn has fallen on his head and been airlifted to a nearby hospital. Tara wants to go, but knows a storm is coming and she won’t be able to drive through it on bald tires.

Tara writes that the story of Shawn’s accident would come to her in “bits and pieces” from Luke and Benjamin, who were there when Shawn fell. Shawn was standing on a wooden pallet raised on a forklift—a forklift Dad was driving. No one can pin down the exact reason for Shawn’s fall, or even come to a consensus on whether he was actually standing on a wooden pallet or just forklift tines—but whatever happened, Shawn lost his footing and plunged headfirst into a piece of metal jutting off the frame of one of the granary buildings. After the fall, Dad and the others examined Shawn. He had no apparent external injuries, and though they all noticed that his pupils were two different sizes, no one realized this meant that Shawn had a brain bleed. Dad told Shawn to sit down and take a break.

Apparently, about fifteen minutes after the fall, Shawn tried to get back to work, but as soon as Dad gave him instructions Shawn grew angry, irate, and violent. As he tried to attack Dad, the other boys leapt on him and tackled him to the ground. When Shawn’s head suffered yet another blow, he either had a seizure or lost consciousness—the details are “hazy”—and someone at last called 911, something no Westover had ever done before. Shawn screamed and flailed all the way to the hospital, where he finally blacked out.

Even though Tara has to deal with her father’s diatribes and her mother’s silent condemnation, she does not allow her family’s disapproval to derail her new plans for her life.



Tara’s refusal to rush to Shawn’s side in a display of family solidarity shows that she is growing up and changing—she is prioritizing herself instead of people who have repeatedly hurt her.



In another anecdote that draws on the concepts of memory, personal history, and subjectivity, Tara relays the “story” of Shawn’s accident—making sure to account for all the uncertainties and inconsistencies which mark the traumatic moment.



Even in the midst of a major brain injury, Shawn—a Westover through and through—resisted being forcibly taken to the hospital, a place always sold to him as a dangerous and sinful one.



The next morning, Tara drives back to Buck's Peak—but rather than going to the hospital, she heads to work. Mother calls Tara to tell her that Shawn has been asking for her—hers is the only name he's said since arriving at the hospital, and he does not recognize anyone else. Tara goes to the hospital, but Shawn is asleep, and after sitting with him a while, she leaves. The next morning, Tara returns—Shawn is conscious, and happy to see her. As she looks into Shawn's eyes, she realizes why she didn't come sooner—she had been “afraid that if he died, [she] might be glad.”

The moment Shawn is stable enough to leave the hospital, the Westovers take him home. For the next two months, he lives on the living room sofa, so weak he can barely make it to the bathroom and back. Though Shawn looks the same as he did before he accident, he is very different—he tells stories that make no sense, and he succumbs to blind rages and nastiness more and more often. Tara tries to convince herself that all of the changes in Shawn's personality are new, and a result of his accident—but looking back, she now admits that he was probably just as cruel before the incident as he was afterwards.

As Shawn's abuse has worsened, Tara has grown more and more conscious of her true feelings about him. She no longer sees him as her silly, albeit protective, older brother—she recognizes him as a predator, and longs for the moment he's out of her life.



This passage also brings up issues of memory and subjectivity. Tara tries to tell herself that Shawn's aggression and cruelty are new things, the result of his injury and forces beyond his control—in reality, though, she knows deep down that he has always been in this way, and she is just making excuses for him as she always has.



CHAPTER 15: NO MORE A CHILD

That winter, Tara begins having unsettling visions of herself pregnant and begging to go to the hospital, but barred from entering by her father. She realizes that “no future” she might have will be able to hold both her own desires and her father's. One evening, after Tara has already gone to bed, Dad comes into her room and sits with her. He tells her that he has been “praying” about her desire to go to college, and has received a message. Dad says that “the Lord” is “displeased” with Tara's decision to “whore after man's knowledge,” and will soon incur God's “wrath.”

The next morning, Tara finds Mother mixing oils in the kitchen. Tara announces that she has decided not to go to college. Her mother is disappointed, and Tara is shocked—she thought Mother would be “glad to see [her] yield to God.” Mother quietly, urgently tells Tara that she shouldn't “let anything stop [her] from going,” but as Dad's footsteps approach the kitchen, Mother hurriedly turns back to her work.

Tara's father senses that she is getting closer and closer to breaking free from the future he's laid out for her, and is attempting to shame and frighten her into abandoning her plans. Tara, though, is smart, and realizes that he is couching his own feelings in what he claims to be a message from God so that if his authority doesn't scare her out of pursuing an education, God's supreme authority just might.



Though Tara's mother is willing to secretly support her desire to get out of Idaho, she is not strong enough to express her true hopes for Tara to her husband. Tara begins to understand that her mother, too, is trapped here.



Without Shawn, Dad's construction business is suffering, and so Tara returns to scrapping that winter to make some extra money. Every morning, she wakes up early to study for the ACT before heading out to the junkyard. When the day of the test comes, Tara is nervous—she has never taken an exam in her life. On the day of the test, she is confused by the bubble sheet and forced to ask the proctor how to use it. Tara drives home from the test center feeling “stupid,” grateful for the first time all winter to be headed to the scrap yard—the world where she feels she belongs.

That spring, as the cold weather turns warm, Tara wishes she could take her shirt off in the heat of the afternoon like her brothers. Instead, she settles for rolling up the sleeves of her shirt—every time she does, though, Dad commands her to unroll them, accusing her of dressing like a whore.

Tara begins hoarding her paychecks on the off chance her ACT scores come back good enough for admission to BYU—but Dad has been forcing her to pay part of the family's car insurance to show her that “Government fees will break [her.]” When her test scores come back somewhat low but better than Tara hoped for, Mother rejoices at the news, but Dad tells Tara it's time for her to move out. Mother, quickly going along with Dad, asks Tara to move out by Friday. Tara explodes in rage and grief, and Mother counters by saying that when she was Tara's age, she was already living on her own. Tara protests that she's only sixteen. Mother seems genuinely confused—she'd thought Tara was twenty. She softens and tells Tara she can stay at home.

Several months after the accident, Shawn returns to work. He helps Dad out a few hours a day building a barn about twenty miles from Buck's Peak. Tara, meanwhile, continues working the scrap yard. Dad comes home one day with a “frightening” machine called **the Shear**—it is a “three-ton pair of scissors” with blades “twelve inches thick and five feet across.” It is used to cut iron, which Dad wants to do so that he can sell the pieces. The Shear is an imperfect machine, snapping the iron more than cutting it, and occasionally recoiling and driving whoever's operating it towards the blades. Tara is more shocked by the force and danger of the Shear than any other of her father's “dangerous schemes” throughout the years.

Tara has been studying hard and getting herself excited about taking steps to pursue an education, but the world of schools and test-taking is new and unfamiliar, and Tara is ultimately relieved to come back to the place that makes sense to her in spite of all the ways it serves to entrap her.



Dad is using every available opportunity to demean and berate Tara in hopes of breaking her spirit. In berating Tara for pushing up her long sleeves in the heat, Dad sexualizes Tara's body, claiming that even her exposed wrists and forearms are sinful. Meanwhile, Tara's brothers enjoy a totally different standard, as they are not only allowed to roll up their sleeves but remove their shirts altogether.



This passage shows just how intense Tara's family's collective delusions are. Because of the constraints Gene has placed on Mother and the whole family, simple facts such as age mean nothing. Tara is forced to remind her parents that she's still their child, and bargain with her mother—the one person who could still protect her—for support and shelter.



The Shear is a potent symbol of Dad's delusional but threatening way of thinking. He's so determined to take shortcuts, to bring everyone under his control, and to prove that God will protect him and his family that he flirts with death again and again, provoking fate itself.



Shawn calls **the Shear** a death machine, and when he sees Dad teaching Tara to use it just moments after the blade injures Luke, Shawn protests and pulls Tara away from the giant scissor's jaws. Dad insists that Tara is strong enough to operate the machine, but Shawn will not let Tara near it again. She watches as the two of them scream at one another and eventually begin fighting physically. Dad ultimately says that if Tara doesn't operate the Shear, she won't get to live under his roof. Shawn retaliates by stating that if Tara is going to work the Shear, he's going to help her—and give up his construction job.

For over a month, Shawn and Tara run **the Shear** together each day. Tara manages to avoid any major injury, receiving only a few bruises. Shawn has a hard time with the work, weak and disoriented as he is from his accident—but every morning, they get ready together and head out to the scrap yard to work, spotting one another as they feed iron into the giant machine.

CHAPTER 16: DISLOYAL MAN, DISOBEDIENT HEAVEN

As construction on the barn intensifies, Dad and Shawn recruit Tara to help on their crew. Tara is put in charge of operating the crane—an idea that was Shawn's, and which incensed Dad. The two of them, Tara notices, are arguing intensely almost every single day, often getting physical with one another. Each time they brawl, Tara is in awe—Shawn is the only person she's ever seen stand up to their father and even make him change his mind.

One Saturday night, Tara is at Grandma-over-in-town's alone. She is studying, hoping to retake the ACT and improve her score even more. Shawn comes over to watch a movie, and during the study break, encourages Tara to keep studying and tells her how proud he is of her hard work. After the movie, the two of them decide to ride home on Shawn's motorcycle and leave the truck Tara drove down in the driveway until tomorrow. As they're getting on the bike, though, Tara remembers her math textbook—she goes back in to get it and tells Shawn that she'll just take the truck and meet him at home.

As Tara drives down the dark country roads towards home, she comes around a curve and sees several cars pulled off to the side near a ditch. Seven or eight people are huddled together around something. In the middle of the road, Tara can see Shawn's hat. Realizing what has happened, she pulls over, gets out of the car, and pushes through the crowd—Shawn is facedown on the road in a pool of blood. Tara has one of the men in the crowd help her turn Shawn over, and sees blood pouring from “a hole the size of a golfball in his forehead.” Tara peers through the wound and sees straight through to Shawn's brain.

Though Shawn has been cruel and abusive towards Tara since his return home, in this passage, he calls Dad out without naming what he's doing. He doesn't accuse him of using the Shear to threaten and intimidate Tara, but nevertheless puts his foot down and tries to put a stop to the insidious psychological abuse he perhaps can't call by its name.



Shawn and Tara are united in a rare moment of peace—albeit by the presence of something very violent and unstable that threatens both of their well-beings daily.



Tara is spellbound and even excited by the ways in which she sees Shawn, more and more often, standing up to Dad—often in her defense.



Shawn and Tara are having more and more moments of brother-sister normalcy, and he even seems to be supportive of her dreams of leaving home in pursuit of an education.



Shawn, who is just barely recovering from the trauma of his first fall, gets into yet another violent accident—one which appears to be worse than the first one, at least in Tara's eyes.



Tara uses her cell phone to call home and tell Dad what has happened. Dad urges Tara to bring Shawn straight home so that Mother can treat him. When Tara tells Dad that she can see Shawn's brain through the wound, Dad doesn't change his position—he insists that Mother can deal with it. Tara loads Shawn into the truck, but at the last minute, she heads for town instead of home. She knows that though everyone told her that Shawn's first fall was "God's will," the second one couldn't possibly be.

At the hospital, Tara calls home to tell her family where she is while the doctor administers a CAT scan and determines that though Shawn's wound looks nasty, the damage is minimal. He explains that with head injuries, things are actually often more dangerous when everything looks okay. The doctor stitches Shawn up, and by three in the morning, the Westovers are on their way back home. Tara can't stop herself from feeling "ashamed" and like a "bad daughter" for going against her father's wishes and bringing Shawn to the hospital.

Three weeks later, the envelope with Tara's new ACT score arrives—it is six points higher than her last score, and at last good enough to get her into BYU. Tara, high on the news, resolves never to work for her father again, and drives into town to get a job at Stokes, the local grocery store. She is hired on the spot. A week later, with Tyler's help, she applies to BYU, but is immediately overtaken with conflicting feelings that change almost by the minute. Tara vacillates between pride and self-loathing, constantly afraid that God will "punish" her just for applying. Weeks later, when Tara's acceptance letter arrives, Dad says only that the letter proves that the Westover home school "is as good as any public education."

Tara's term starts on January 5th, and waiting for Christmas that year feels "like waiting to walk off the edge of a cliff." Dad's mood is terrible and volatile, and Tara is certain that "something terrible" is going to happen to her or her family and prevent her from going to school. Tyler, who is engaged to be married and starting graduate school at Purdue, comes home for the holidays and brings a copy of *Les Misérables* with him. Tara tries reading it, but is unable to distinguish the fictional story of Jean Valjean from the very real backdrop of the French Revolution—she is uncertain of which parts of the story are true and which are false.

Despite Tara's claims that Shawn is in serious trouble, Dad remains adamant that Mother is up to the task of healing him. Tara, though, is not so sure, and decides to take things into her own hands. In doing so, she's directly rebelling against Dad—and, according to Dad's doctrine, God himself.



Tara made the executive decision to take Shawn to the hospital, and is full of shame and self-loathing when she realizes that things weren't as bad as they seemed. She wonders if she actually should have brought Shawn straight home to Mother—in bringing Shawn to the hospital, she feels she's wasted everyone's time and money and dealt yet another blow to her tenuous relationship with Dad. The doctor's comment that brain damage is usually more severe when the person looks relatively normal from the outside points back to Shawn's earlier incident of brain damage.



Even as Tara struggles with feelings of shame and guilt over not being a good enough daughter to her parents, she experiments with independent actions and the prioritization of her own feelings—a radical thing for someone like her to do. When Tara brings home stories of her success to her family, Dad—delusional, self-absorbed, and indignant—claims her successes as his own.



Tara is about to change her life forever—but in the weeks leading up to her departure for school, she is beginning to realize just how little she knows about the world beyond Buck's Peak. There are enormous gaps in Tara's learning, and this passage foreshadows the difficulty, shock, and uncertainty which will mark the early days of her formal education.



CHAPTER 17: TO KEEP IT HOLY

On New Year's Day, Mother drives Tara to her new life in Utah. Tara's apartment is a mile south of campus, and when she arrives, she finds that her two roommates have not yet returned from the Christmas holiday. Mother hugs Tara goodbye briskly and drops her off, leaving Tara alone. None of her roommates return for three days, and Tara is disturbed and quiet by the silence of the apartment compared to the constant hum of her childhood home, as well as the noises of the college town just beyond her windows.

When Tara's first roommate, Shannon, arrives back at the apartment, Tara is shocked by the girl's "gentile" appearance. Shannon studies at a nearby cosmetology school and dresses in tight white tank tops and pink velour sweatpants. When Sharon invites Tara to come to church with her the next day, Tara is horrified that in Utah, gentiles are allowed in the churches—she worries that everyone else at BYU is a gentile, too. When Tara's second roommate Mary arrives, she's briefly comforted by Mary's floor-length skirt and conservative demeanor—but when Mary heads out grocery shopping on a Sunday, the Sabbath, Tara is again upset, lost, and confused.

The next day is Tara's first day of class, and she has a hard time finding her way around campus and getting to the right classes. As the week progresses, she manages to get to the right classrooms, but even in her first-year lectures and seminars, she feels behind—professors make mention of things like the "essay form," which all of her other classmates have learned in high school but are foreign to Tara. In her second American History class, Tara fails a pop quiz. Rather than feeling resentful of her family for denying her an education, she begins to wonder if she has made a mistake—perhaps "homeschooling [is] a commandment from the Lord" after all.

Later in the week, Tara makes a friend in her Western civilization class named Vanessa. Tara is beginning to feel comfortable in class when one day, she raises her hand to ask about a word in the textbook she's never seen before. After she asks the meaning of the word, the atmosphere in the classroom goes tense, and the professor refuses to answer her question. When the bell rings, Vanessa reprimands Tara for "making fun" of something serious and storms off. Baffled, Tara heads off to the computer lab to look up the word that is giving her trouble: it is "Holocaust." At the next lecture, Tara apologizes to Vanessa—but doesn't explain why she didn't know the word—and decides that she will not raise her hand for the rest of the semester.

Tara's loneliness and isolation foreshadows the difficult adjustment period ahead of her as she settles into her strange new life.



As Tara meets her roommates, she worries that she has made a mistake in coming to college. Her devout, conservative view of how women should behave is challenged by her roommates' "gentile" presentation and behavior. Tara's dad has always used the word gentile to describe anyone who doesn't subscribe to their family's devout, radical sect of Mormonism—now, Tara finds herself face-to-face with the heretics her father has long warned her about.



Tara continues questioning her decision to come to college. She is insecure, alone, and confronted on all sides by a way of life that feels positively foreign to her. She longs for the familiarity of home, forgetting how desperate she was to escape her claustrophobic family life.



Tara is so deeply naïve and uneducated about major world events that she actually alienates those around her. Not knowing about the existence of the Holocaust is so unthinkable to her classmates and professors that they're sure she must be playing some cruel joke, and never suspect that she is innocently ignorant.



That weekend, on Saturday evening, Tara works hard at her homework. When the clock strikes midnight, Tara worries that she should stop, as it is now officially the Sabbath—but she tells herself that the day of rest doesn't start until she wakes up. She works through the night, and in the morning goes to church with her roommates. As the girls mingle with their friends at church and make plans for the rest of the afternoon, Tara refuses to join them—Shannon explains that Tara is “very devout.” Tara considers how, in childhood, Dad always proclaimed that their family were the only “real” Mormons, and everyone else was merely a gentile. Tara is frightened that by living with and befriending gentiles, she is going to become one.

Tara wants to adjust and adapt to her new life, but is afraid that in doing so she'll incur the wrath of the God she and her family have spent their whole lives in service of. Tara is confused and alone, unsure of whether branching out and exploring her new life will force her to abandon her old one entirely.



CHAPTER 18: BLOOD AND FEATHERS

Tara begins having trouble with Shannon and Mary. Her standard of cleanliness is vastly different from that of her roommates, and she begins to annoy them for not washing her hands, leaving dirty dishes in the sink, and showering only once a week. Tara is also running out of money, and worries she won't be able to come back next semester. She sees that to get a full tuition scholarship, she'll need a near-perfect GPA—given her struggles in her classes, she knows she won't have one.

Tara's struggles run deeper than social anxiety. The way she has been raised is in direct opposition to the way those around her have grown up, and the pressure to learn a whole new set of social skills—and keep up with her studies and finances, as well—wears on her as the semester goes by. Tara is learning that education is more than just book-learning.



When Tara's first exam comes up, she is woefully unprepared. She doesn't have a standard blue exam book to write in and has to borrow one from Vanessa. As the exam begins—and the professor projects images and compositions onto a screen, asking students to write about the prompts displayed there—Tara struggles with her spelling, and resorts to copying Vanessa's answers. When the exam results come back a week later, she receives a failing grade.

Tara is adrift and alone, and needs to look to others for what to do—even when it's wrong.



Tara remembers a time when Luke found a wounded owl out on the mountain and brought it home so Mother could treat its bad wing, pierced by a rogue thorn. The family kept the owl barricaded in the kitchen while it recovered, and occasionally fed it dead mice. The kitchen became foul-smelling and the owl grew restless. Tara and her family let it walk out the back door before it was fully healed—Dad said it couldn't be taught to belong, and its chances were better out in the wild.

This anecdote about the owl seems to indicate that even though Tara is struggling at school—the “wild”—she's needs to learn how to survive here, as anything is better than her claustrophobic, stifling home.



Tara wants to talk to someone about her struggles at BYU, and decides to call home. Dad answers, and Tara is surprised to find herself confiding in him about how hard things are. Rather than going off on a diatribe about gentiles, socialists, or the Illuminati, Dad tells Tara lovingly that everything will be all right. Tara knows that the moment of gentleness was a rare one as she hangs up the phone, but is grateful for it nonetheless.

In a rare moment of kindness and empathy, Dad puts aside his own personal beliefs to offer his daughter some emotional support. These strange moments of love and connection—small and sparse though they are—will prove to be enough to keep Tara coming back to Buck's Peak.



In March, it is time for another Western civilization exam. This time, Tara studies furiously, and even gets together with Vanessa to review notes. When Vanessa tells Tara that all the information she needs is in the textbook, Tara admits that she hasn't read the textbook—she's only looked at the pictures. Vanessa is shocked by Tara's naivete, and instructs her to read the textbook in full. Tara takes her friend's advice, and earns a B on the exam. What's more, the professor announces that so many people failed the first exam that he's dropping it. Tara wants to high-five Vanessa—but Vanessa, bewildered by Tara's strangeness, has moved seats.

Tara's success is staggered and uneven. She begins getting the hang of school—how to study, how to learn, and how to take an exam—but is still floundering socially. Again, she's learning that her education will comprise more than becoming book smart—there are many other things she'll have to learn along the way.



CHAPTER 19: IN THE BEGINNING

At the end of the semester, Tara returns to Buck's Peak. She is awaiting the grades that will determine whether she will be able to return in the fall. Tara returns to her old job at Stokes, the grocery store, but Dad soon begins to insist that she come work for him at the scrap yard—he tells her that she isn't "too good" for his kind of work. Tara is determined not to return to the scrap yard, but when Mother confronts her and tells her she won't be allowed to stay if she doesn't work for Dad, Tara quits her job at the grocery store.

As soon as she arrives back in Buck's Peak, the progress Tara has made at school starts to be unraveled. She's pulled back into her family's claustrophobic and dangerous orbit, held back from making new strides in her personal life.



After a month working in the junkyard, BYU seems like a distant dream. Everything at home is as Tara remembers—except for Shawn, who seems to have grown quiet, peaceful, and even studious as he prepares to obtain his GED. When Tara and Shawn attend a play at the local theater, Charles is there, and he asks Tara to go to the movies. She agrees. After their quasi-date, Tara comes home feeling light as air—and Shawn, who has been waiting up for her, congratulates her on her new "boyfriend." As Tara heads to bed, though, she glimpses herself in the mirror, and becomes embarrassed by her boxy, unflattering scrapping clothes.

Even though Tara has to work in the scrap yard for the summer, there are parts of being home that are nice, like visiting old haunts and seeing old friends. The fact that things seem to have improved with Shawn give Tara hope that she can enjoy her time at home and mend her relationship with her family after all.



The next week, Tara drives to the nearest Walmart and buys some women's clothing. Though the jeans and shirts she purchases are not immodest, Tara feels exposed in them. Nevertheless, that night, she puts the clothes on in preparation for her date with Charles. They go out every night that week for burgers and ice cream, but never have a conversation about whether they are hanging out as just friends or something more. One Friday night, Tara comes home and checks the computer to find that her grades have been posted—and are good enough for her to secure a half-scholarship, enabling her return to BYU. The next day, Tara tells Charles the good news. He asks if she's angry that her parents never put her in school, and though she protests that her parents gave her an "advantage," Charles says quietly that he's angry on Tara's behalf.

As Tara pursues a relationship with Charles that, while not yet overtly sexual or romantic, is still more than friendship, she finds herself questioning things about herself and her family even more than she did when she was off at college. Charles wants Tara to want better for herself, and seems more invested in her own education and improvement than she herself is at times.



One night, driving to his house to watch a movie, Charles—at last, for the first time—reaches for Tara’s hand. She longs to hold his hand, but instead jerks hers away out of some “involuntary” instinct. When Charles reaches for her again she puts her hands beneath her thighs and thinks to herself the word “whore.” When she and Charles settle in on his couch to watch the movie, their legs touch briefly before Charles moves to sit on the floor.

Though Charles deeply cares for Tara, she’s unable to move their relationship to the next level out of fears, insecurities, and self-hating behaviors instilled in her by years of emotional and verbal abuse at the hands of Gene and Shawn.



CHAPTER 20: RECITALS OF THE FATHERS

Charles is Tara’s first real, true friend from “that other world”—the world her father has been trying to “protect” her from all her life. Charles is Mormon, but not particularly devout, and more interested in sports and music than “the End of Days.” Charles is weirded out by Mother’s constant muscle-testing and the smell of “rotted plants” that permeates the Westover home—yet he clearly cares for Tara, and hangs out with her almost every day.

Charles loves Tara enough to overlook the parts of her marked by her family’s delusions and the strange behaviors and traditions those delusions have engendered.



Dad tells Tara that she’s becoming “uppity.” He begins coming up with strange, meaningless tasks for her at the junkyard. As Dad’s cruelty towards Tara increases, so does Shawn’s. Tara notices that both Shawn and Dad think she needs to be “dragged through time” and reminded of who she is. Shawn begins calling Tara horrible nicknames like “wench,” “Wilbur,” and “nigger.” None of these nicknames are new, but now that Tara has been to college and learned about the history of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and racism in America, she is particularly upset by Shawn’s casual use of the word “nigger.” Once Shawn realizes how much the cruel and racist nickname bothers Tara, he uses it nonstop. Something within Tara begins to shift as she realizes how ignorant her family is—and how ignorant they have tried, and are still trying, to make her.

The more Tara learns about the world, the more clearly she’s able to see the patterns of her family’s abusive behavior. She’s not able to do much, stuck at home for the summer, to change the way her father and brother treat her, but her education has begun to teach her more than just facts about the world. Tara is beginning to understand how she wants to be treated and talked to, and is learning things about herself while she learns things about the world around her.



CHAPTER 21: SKULLCAP

The day before Tara leaves to return to BYU is a Sunday, and she decides to spend it with Charles rather than going to church. She has an earache, and Charles asks what she’s taken for it. She tells him Mother has given her lobelia and skullcap. Charles gives her two ibuprofen tablets, and though Tara insists that people like her and her family don’t take medicine, Charles urges her to see that she’s different from her family. Tara takes the pills and is amazed by how quickly they take her pain away. She has never been given any kind of medicine that actually makes her feel better.

Charles is helping Tara to see more and more clearly that she no longer needs to live by her parents’ abusive and delusional rules and values—and Tara is starting to understand that the secular, “gentile” behaviors she’s been kept from for so long are not harmful but actually beneficial.



In the morning, when it is time to leave for school, Mother is off on a birth. Tara—who has not been compensated as much for her summer work as Dad told her she would be—decides to take her older brother Tony’s old Kia and drive it to school, figuring it will make up the difference. Dad never says a word to her about it. She moves into a new apartment with new roommates named Robin, Jenni, and Megan. Robin is kind and gentle, and sees the ways in which Tara is different from other girls her age. Robin helps Tara do things the “right” way, and soon enough, Tara’s cleaning habits and personal hygiene improve.

Tara has designed her fall schedule with Charles’s help. She finds herself enjoying her music and religion classes but struggling greatly with algebra. Due to the pressure she’s facing, Tara stops sleeping and develops stomach ulcers. Her roommates often discover her doubled over in pain and offer to take her to the hospital, but Tara refuses to go. Out of money, she takes a job as a janitorial worker, which further debilitates her sleep schedule and weak stomach. One night, over the phone, Charles tells Tara that her behavior is “self-destructive,” and urges her to simply ask her algebra teacher for help. It has never occurred to Tara that she is encouraged, let alone allowed, to talk to her professors.

A few days before Thanksgiving, Tara meets with her algebra professor to tell him that she’s struggling but needs to pass to maintain her scholarship. The professor offers little sympathy, but makes Tara a bargain. He says that at the next lecture he’ll announce to the entire class that anyone who makes a perfect score on the final will receive an A in the class, regardless of their previous grades. Up for the challenge, Tara goes home and calls Charles—she tells him that she is coming home for Thanksgiving and needs his help with algebra.

As a new school year starts, Tara is behaving and thinking more independently than ever before. She’s finally finding people who try to understand her and want to help her rather than just rejecting her or passing her off as too weird or too devout.



Though Tara is easing her way into the secular world, she’s still wary of other people’s help—and the very individuals and institutions that are supposed to be there for her in moments of pain, weakness, or uncertainty.



Every time Tara encounters a problem at school, she’s surprised to find that there is, more often than not, a way out or through it. Tara begins relying on the support and help of her friends more and more as she becomes increasingly determined to succeed at school.



CHAPTER 22: WHAT WE WHISPERED AND WHAT WE SCREAMED

When Tara arrives back home, Mother is already cooking the Thanksgiving meal. Charles is coming for dinner—and Shawn is in a mood about it. As Tara lays out some nice china on the table, Shawn tells Tara not to bother. Charles’s standards aren’t that high, he says; after all, Charles is dating Tara. When Tara continues setting the table, Shawn jabs her in the ribs. When she shrieks at him not to touch her, he knocks her off of her feet and pins her to the ground by pressing his arm into her windpipe. “When you act like a child,” he tells Tara, “you force me to treat you like one.” Mother casually shouts for the kids to “knock it off.” Tara quickly apologizes to Shawn, and he lets her up.

Shawn, who was initially supportive of Tara pursuing a relationship with Charles, now turns sour, cruel, and violent. Shawn is attempting to belittle Tara; his language implies that she is a naïve child, and his usual method of restraining and incapacitating her just increases Tara’s sense of helplessness.



Charles comes over for dinner, and Shawn continues behaving badly. He brags about his gun collection and talks about “all the ways he could kill a man.” When Tara walks past Shawn’s seat with a plate of dinner rolls, he jabs her in the ribs again, and she drops the plate. Tara yells at Shawn for making her drop the rolls, and Shawn grabs a fistful of Tara’s hair and begins dragging her down the hall to the bathroom. Tara panics, desperate to keep Charles from seeing her like this. Shawn gets Tara’s head in the toilet, but she manages to scramble away from him. He pulls her by her hair back into the bathroom as Charles comes down the hall to help. Charles pulls Tara up from the floor as she laughs a “demented howl,” trying to play the whole thing off as funny, normal, brother-sister roughhousing.

Charles leaves. Several hours later, he calls Tara and asks her to meet him at church. They sit together in Charles’s car in the empty parking lot while he cries and tells Tara he won’t come up to Buck’s Peak anymore. Tara tries to convince Charles that what he saw was normal, but Charles cannot be fooled. When they begin arguing, Tara screams that she never wants to see Charles again. Before she returns to BYU for the end of the semester, they meet up one final time. Charles tells Tara that he loves her, but he cannot “save” her—he warns her that only she can save herself. Tara says she has no idea what Charles is talking about.

Tara returns to school, and her stomach ulcers flare up again. What’s more, her big toe—hurt badly in her Thanksgiving day fight with Shawn—has turned black. Robin tries to take Tara to a doctor, but Tara refuses to go. A few days later, Robin leaves a pamphlet for university counseling services on Tara’s desk. Tara, however, is determined not to admit that anything is wrong—as long as she sweeps her physical and mental distress under the rug, she is “invincible.” When she receives a perfect one hundred on her algebra test, she convinces herself that she is “untouchable.”

Tara returns to Buck’s Peak for Christmas. She is surprised to find that Dad is encouraging her brother Richard to study for the ACT and apply to college. Dad believes that Richard is a “genius,” and “five times smarter than that Einstein.” He wants Richard to go to school to “disprove all them socialist theories” and revolutionize the American university. During Dad’s tirade, Tara notices that Richard looks “miserable.” Later that night, in private, Richard confides in Tara that he’s been scoring terribly low on his ACT practice tests, and is terrified to take the real one.

Tara has long suffered Shawn’s abuses in private—but when he attacks her brutally in front of Charles, she becomes determined to downplay how painful, both physically and emotionally, the assault is for fear of scaring Charles away. Tara knows that to speak up or fight back will only make things worse, and as she tries to laugh Shawn’s behavior off, she plays into the collective delusion within her family that this kind of behavior is normal and acceptable.



Charles is able to see the truth of Tara’s situation—she is being abused by her family every time she returns home, and yet can’t stop coming back to the place and the behaviors that are so familiar to her. Charles doesn’t know how to help stop this cycle, and realizes that Tara will have to get herself out of it. Tara, though, is still so deep in the clutches of her family’s abuse—despite having gone off to school—that she can’t fully comprehend what’s happening to her.



Tara continues on with her self-destructive behavior, refusing help and medical attention in hopes that simply not acknowledging all the things that are wrong in her life will make them disappear.



Tara had to fight tooth and nail for her father’s support of her education, and is both shocked and indignant to see that her brother Richard is actually being encouraged to go to school. When she sees, though, that Richard is simply a pawn in her father’s newest delusion, she understands that for her father, allowing or not allowing his children to pursue an education has everything to do with his desire to control their actions, their feelings, and what they learn about the world.



On a break from work in the scrap yard one afternoon, Tara and Shawn drive to the grocery store for a snack. In the parking lot, Tara spots Charles's Jeep. Embarrassed by her filthy work clothes and dirty hair and face, Tara tells Shawn she'll wait in the car while he runs for food, but Shawn, sensing what's happening as if he can "smell shame," starts forcing Tara out of the car. When she tells him not to touch her, Shawn flies into a rage, yanking Tara from the car and pinning her to the icy asphalt. She sobs and begs for him to let her go, but he bends her wrist back and sprains it, dragging her upright and into the store. They walk through the entire supermarket, but Charles is not inside—the Jeep was not his.

This passage confirms that Shawn actively wants to humiliate Tara and alienate her from Charles. He is violent, cruel, and determined to make his sister suffer not just in private, for his own enjoyment, but in public.



That night, Tara writes in her journal about the painful encounter in the parking lot. Shawn knocks on her door and enters the room to apologize, explaining that he was just playing a "game" and had no idea he'd hurt her. He brings Tara a pack of ice, urging her to tell him if "something is wrong" the next time they're "having fun." Tara begins questioning whether she actually screamed for Shawn to stop or not—she believes her injured wrist is her own fault. As Tara falls asleep, though, the memories of the incident surge back to her, and she realizes that Shawn's violence against her is a direct attempt to humiliate and undermine her.

Tara is being manipulated and gaslighted, told that her understanding of what happened to her that very same day is not true. Shawn is always able to make up with Tara after her abuses her because he implies that he didn't really want to hurt her and would have stopped if he knew she was really in pain—of course, none of this is true, as Shawn's repeated attacks are obvious attempts to cripple Tara both physically and emotionally.



The next night, back at BYU, Tara returns to her journal and writes another entry in which she tries to tell herself that the fight with Shawn was simply a "misunderstanding." As she writes the words "I don't know" over and over again, she realizes that her life has been "narrated for [her] by others"—it has not yet occurred to her, though, that her voice "might be as strong as theirs."

Tara is trying to regain control of her own memories and her own narrative. This, too, is a part of her education—the process of learning how to assert the truth about her experiences even in the face of her family's deliberately conflicting narratives, which are meant to confuse and entrap her.



CHAPTER 23: I'M FROM IDAHO

Back at school, Tara finds herself fielding offers from men at church to go out on dates. She rejects every single one, and her staunch opposition to dating and marriage attracts the attention of the church's bishop. He calls Tara to a meeting, and tries to explain to her that "marriage is God's plan." Tara finds this advice in direct conflict with the ways in which Dad and Shawn always accused her of being a "whore" the minute she showed interest in makeup, clothing, or the attention of other boys her age. Their endless cruelty instilled in Tara the idea that there is "something impure in the fact of [her] being."

Tara is getting older, and coming into her womanhood—but is so afraid of being seen as a "whore" that she rejects experiences such as dating and experimenting with her physical image that are normal and healthy for a young woman her age. She believes that any desire, any attention to her appearance, and any interaction with men is "impure." Tara's family's doctrine and cruel worlds still have a hold on her, even in her new town.



Tara begins meeting with the bishop every Sunday until spring, attempting to explain the source of her shame when it comes to men, modesty, and human connection. The bishop is gentle and understanding, and at the end of the semester encourages Tara to take money from the church so that she can pay her rent and stay in Utah for the summer. Tara refuses the gesture but promises the bishop before leaving that she will not return to work for her father. Over the summer, Tara remains true to her promise. She gets her job at Stokes back and finds that she has no trouble avoiding both Dad and Shawn, since Dad is busy with work and Shawn is busy with a new “compliant” girlfriend named Emily, who is ten years younger than him.

Tara returns to BYU in the fall, concerned about money. When she wakes one night with a “blinding pain” in her jaw and learns, from a visit to the dentist, that a rotting tooth will cost fourteen hundred dollars to repair, she becomes more anxious than ever about how to secure the funds. She calls Mother to ask for a loan, but Mother tells her she’ll only lend Tara the money if she agrees to work in the junkyard next summer. Tara hangs up the phone. She tries toughing the pain out by swallowing ibuprofen like “breath mints,” but when she starts skipping meals because of trouble chewing, Robin tells the bishop what’s going on.

The bishop calls Tara to a meeting and tells her that he wants her to fill out some paperwork for a federal grant. Realizing that the grant comes from the government, Tara refuses to fill out the paperwork, hearing Dad’s words about the “Illuminati” echoing in her head. The bishop tries to offer Tara money from the church’s discretionary fund, but she refuses to take it.

By September, Tara is broke but in less pain—she is unsure whether the nerve in her tooth has died, or her brain has “adjusted to its shocks.” Tara calls home and has Shawn sell her horse for her—a few weeks later, she receives a check for only a few hundred dollars, and privately worries that Shawn sold Bud at an auction for meat.

Tara finds herself struggling in school, all her mental energy diverted to worrying about her finances. By January, she is behind on rent. She tries to come up with ways to earn more money, but every scheme fails, and she eventually decides to spend her last thirty dollars on a tank of gas to go home for Christmas, realizing that she might not have the funds to return to Utah. One night, before Christmas, Shawn calls Tara into his bedroom. He reaches into his pocket, and she worries that he is reaching for a weapon—instead, he pulls out a hundred dollar bill, hands it to her, and wishes her a Merry Christmas.

Tara keeps encountering people who are moved by her story, her motivation, and her purity, and who want to help her navigate the strange new world in front of her. Tara, though, having been reared on a doctrine of self-sufficiency, mistrust, and paranoia, is unable to accept help or friendship from anyone.



Tara’s parents are unwilling to give her the help she needs—everything comes with strings attached, and those strings are designed to keep Tara trapped and at their mercy even as she grows into her new life.



Tara is deeply in need of help, but again, her father’s delusions and paranoid beliefs hold her back from seeking financial or emotional support even in a dark, dire time.



Tara’s self-destructive behavior continues as she risks her health—and sells off part of her childhood—to try and make ends meet for herself rather than ask for financial help from someone else.



In her darkest moment, Tara chooses to accept help from someone who has systematically and repeatedly abused her rather than from the new friends and mentors she’s met in Utah. Tara only knows how to accept certain kinds of help, and will not allow herself to be indebted to anyone other than her family.



Tara drives back to BYU after Christmas feeling joyful and light—she believes the hundred dollars, enough to pay her rent, has been a sign from God urging her to stay in school. With some prodding from Robin and the bishop at church, she begins putting together the paperwork for a government grant, but finds she needs her parents' tax returns. Knowing her father will never help her, she decides to drive home to Idaho in the middle of the night and steal the forms. As she enters the house, quiet as she can, she comes face-to-face with Shawn, who is waiting up in the kitchen, pointing a pistol at her. Shawn lowers the gun, explains he thought Tara was “someone else,” and goes to bed. They never talk about the encounter again.

Tara's life and choices are changing rapidly. She's learning to accept help, but still insists on doing some things for herself—even when it gets her into dangerous situations. The bizarre encounter with Shawn, never explained or further discussed, shows that back at home, things are still as strange and dangerous as ever—and perhaps actually cements Tara's decision to start accepting the help of other people.



Robin helps Tara mail off the paperwork, and, several weeks later, a check for four thousand dollars arrives. Tara calls the number on the envelope to tell the government they've given her too much money. The confused representative on the other end is baffled by Tara's call. With the extra money, Tara submits to a root canal, buys textbooks, pays rent, and even gets herself a new Sunday dress. The money doesn't control Tara, as she worried it would—it frees her. She realizes that the world of BYU is truly her home—in Buck's Peak, as evidenced by the encounter with Shawn, she is an intruder.

Even when Tara receives the money she's needed so deeply for so long, she is nervous to take more than her fair share. Accepting help from others—and trusting in the government's responsibility to its citizens—is going to take some time, but Tara is learning to see that there are people in the world who want to help her, not hurt her. The real danger, Tara is starting to see, is at home.



CHAPTER 24: A KNIGHT, ERRANT

Tara takes an introductory psychology course, and, one day, as the professor lists some of the symptoms of bipolar disorder—“depression, mania, paranoia, euphoria, delusions of grandeur and persecution”—Tara is shocked to realize the symptoms perfectly describe Dad. The professor also notes that mental disorders such as bipolar disorder have played roles in some “famous conflicts” like Waco and Ruby Ridge. Tara looks these “famous” incidents up on the internet, having never heard of them, and realizes that Ruby Ridge is the story about the Weaver family which Dad always told—the story responsible for some of Tara's false and fractured childhood memories.

Tara's education at school is not just preparing her for the future—it's teaching her things about herself and her past. She is learning ways to put her experiences into words, and to explain—or at least try to—the parts of her childhood that have long pained and bewildered her.



Tara becomes “obsessed” with bipolar disorder and chooses it as the subject of one of her research papers. As the semester goes on, Tara learns that disease is not a choice and that sufferers of mental disorders are victims of circumstances beyond their control—but Tara can't stop feeling that she, her siblings, and Mother have had to pay for Dad's cruelty and paranoia for too long.

Tara understands that her father's paranoia, delusions, and bouts of depression are not, at their core, his fault—but she cannot excuse the ways in which he has allowed cruelty and carelessness to seep into the family.



Tara visits home, but winds up arguing with Dad and blowing up at him over his paranoid delusions and his terrifying stories about the Weavers. She drives back to BYU full of shame and anger, and when the semester ends, she doesn't return to Buck's Peak for the summer. She avoids her father's phone calls, effectively cutting him off. Tara is determined to "experiment with normality," and learn to live outside of the narrow rules of her father's world. She quickly meets a boy named Nick at church and they begin a relationship, but she is careful not to tell him anything specific about her past or her family.

At the end of May, Tara gets sick. She feels fatigued and achy, and her throat is on fire all the time. She stops going to work and sleeps day in and day out, and one day, Nick comes over to demand she see a doctor. Alone at the clinic, Tara has no idea how to talk to the receptionist or deal with nurses and doctors. Within a few days, the results of her tests are back—she has strep throat and mono. The doctor prescribes penicillin, and Tara reluctantly takes them. She waits for something awful to happen—for her eyes to bleed or her tongue to fall out—but nothing does.

One day, Tara receives a phone call from Audrey. Audrey tells her that there's been an accident involving Dad—and that if she leaves right now, she will have time to "say goodbye."

Tara is reckoning with her past and searching for the answers to her future. She cannot let go of her anger with Dad, and uses the freedom her anger gives her to explore parts of herself and her life she's been putting off out of loyalty to her father's values.



Tara is slowly but surely learning to accept more and more help—not just from her friends and community, but from doctors and professionals who, she is realizing, do truly have her health and best interest at heart.



Another accident in a series of ghastly developments back at Buck's Peak threatens to derail all of Tara's emotional progress, pulling her back into the family's fold.



CHAPTER 25: THE WORK OF SULPHUR

Tara recalls a story from her childhood in which Grandpa-down-the-hill, thrown from his horse up on the mountain, returned home to the porch covered in blood. After taking him to the hospital, Grandma-down-the-hill went looking for the mare that had thrown him up on the mountain. She found it tethered to a post by a knot only her grandpa Lott had ever known how to tie. Grandpa-down-the-hill woke from surgery and swore that he'd heard voices while he was unconscious—the voice of Lott and others. This story always made Tara and her siblings feel safe up on the mountain, and guarded by ancestors who'd protect them from harm.

This anecdote serves to show how Tara and her family believed that they were safe and protected up on their mountain—by God, and by their ancestors. Even in the face of human accidents and natural threats, Tara and her family have long believed that they are protected by forces beyond their understanding or control.



Tara reveals the details of her father’s accident. While draining fuel from cars in the junkyard, a tank exploded. Dad had been wearing a long-sleeved shirt, leather gloves, and a welding shield over his face. The flames caught his clothes on fire and “melted through the shield as if it were a plastic spoon,” consuming the skin and muscle on the lower half of his face and “liquefying” it. Tara doesn’t understand, to this day, how Dad was able to drag himself down the mountain—but somehow he did, and one of Tara’s cousins found him knocking at the kitchen door. Mother tried to take Dad to the hospital, but he told her he’d rather die, and so she covered his body in salve and fed him ice chips. Dad’s burns were so bad he could barely breathe, and Mother and her assistants used “energy work” to keep his lungs moving.

After getting off the phone with Audrey, Tara tells Nick that she has to go to Idaho for a few days for “a family thing, nothing serious.” Tara hesitates at the last minute, afraid that she will pass her strep along to Dad, but when she calls Mother to ask what to do she replies that Tara’s strep won’t matter—Dad will not live much longer.

Tara is horrified the moment she walks in the house by the smell of charred flesh and the sight of Mother changing Dad’s slimy bandages and prying his burnt ears away from his skull with a butter knife. Dad smells “like meat gone to rot,” and the bottom half of his face is red and raw. Dad is terribly dehydrated, and in the absence of any help from doctors or hospitals, Mother has resorted to giving him enemas in an attempt to flush some water into his system.

Tara waits out the night sleeping on the living room floor with Mother and Audrey. As dawn arrives, Dad stops breathing, and they believe he has died—but after several long seconds, he coughs and starts breathing again. Tara leaves home and returns to BYU, determined to give Dad the best chance of survival by removing her infection from the house.

Mother stops working at her essential oil business to tend to Dad full time. It is a miserable job, and Tara hears that Mother, Audrey, and the others have gone through seventeen gallons of salve in just two weeks. Tyler flies in from Purdue to help with the laborious, painful work of debriding Dad’s burns daily. Tara herself returns once she is sure that her strep is gone, and helps out by feeding him water and pureed vegetables with a dropper. Mother tries to buy Dad painkillers, but he refuses them, insisting that he wants to “feel every part of” what he believes is “the Lord’s pain.”

The series of accidents which befall Tara’s family over and over again show that they are trapped in a vicious cycle, unable to learn from their mistakes. Dad catches on fire almost exactly in the way Luke did so many years ago—his burns are startlingly more severe, and yet he still proudly refuses medical attention and places his faith in Mother’s healing rituals.



Tara has been feeling conflicted about her father in the last several months, and has cut off all contact with him. Now, hearing from her family that he may soon be gone forever, she still isn’t sure how to feel or what to do.



The scene at home is worse than anything Tara has ever seen. She is horrified by the details, burned indelibly into her memory, and sets them down here so that her readers, too, can understand just how gruesome, stifling, and nonsensical the atmosphere at Buck’s Peak has become.



In spite of his terrible injuries and lack of medical attention, Dad seems to be clinging to life, defying the odds against him.



Though Tara can retroactively identify the enabling behaviors within her family which create these vicious cycles of pain, suffering, and isolation, in the moment, she and her siblings are only concerned with keeping their father alive. In keeping with his devout beliefs, Gene staunchly demands to feel every moment of pain, seeing his anguish as a test or even a gift from God Himself.



CHAPTER 26: WAITING FOR THE MOVING WATER

As Dad slowly and painfully recovers over the course of several months, Tara and her siblings wait to see what kind of life he will have, and how much of him will “grow back.” Tara cannot imagine her strong, imposing father living out the rest of his life physically impaired. Though Tara feels sad for her father, she also feels a twinge of hope. Dad’s accident has made him an observer rather than a lecturer—within a few weeks, Dad knows more details about Tara’s life than he has in years, and asks her questions about her “interesting” classes and friends. Tara feels that maybe Dad’s accident has made way for a “new beginning.”

Shawn and Emily get engaged, and to celebrate, Tara goes with them on a long horse ride to camp at a lake twenty miles away. Tara and Emily share a tent, and as they lie together in the dark, Emily asks Tara about Shawn’s “problems.” Tara is about to tell Emily that she shouldn’t marry Shawn, but Emily begins talking about how Shawn is a “spiritual man” who has been called by God to “help people.” Emily says Shawn has told her stories about “helping” Sadie and Tara. Tara says that Shawn has never “helped” her, but finds herself unable to say anything more. Emily admits that she’s frightened of Shawn, but when Tara lies mutely in her sleeping bag, Emily says once more that Shawn is “spiritual” and then rolls over to go to sleep.

Tara returns to BYU a few days before the start of the fall semester and goes straight to her boyfriend Nick’s apartment. They have barely spoken all summer, and while Tara has told Nick that her father was burned, she hasn’t provided him with any of the gory details. When Nick asks Tara how her father is, she is aware that she has a choice: to deepen their relationship by sharing her burden with him, or to keep the world of Buck’s Peak separate from the world of BYU. Tara chooses the latter, refusing to let him in on the secrets of her family.

In September, Tara returns to Buck’s Peak for Shawn and Emily’s wedding. The event makes Tara upset and anxious, and she vomits in the church bathroom right before the start of the ceremony. A week after the wedding, Tara breaks up with Nick, refusing to explain the “hold” Buck’s Peak has on her or confide in him the truth about Shawn and Dad.

Tara has been feeling a lot of resentment for her father lately, more intensely than ever before. In the wake of his accident, though, it seems as if he is softening, perhaps sobered by the trauma of what he’s been through. Tara wants to start a new chapter in her relationship with her father, and is hopeful that he has changed enough for that to be possible.



Not all is well within Tara’s family, though—Tara longs to warn Shawn’s fiancée about how dangerous he really is, but finds herself paralyzed at the moment of truth. It’s unclear whether Tara clams up because of fear that Shawn will find out what she’s said and harm her, or out of some twisted loyalty to her older brother. Though Tara’s unable to say a bad word against her brother, it’s worth noting that she can’t bring herself to say anything good about him, either.



Tara still harbors a deep sense of shame about her past. She is trying so hard to make a new life for herself at BYU, and doesn’t want to drag any of the pain and horror of life at Buck’s Peak into her new relationships. She doesn’t realize what a disservice she’s doing herself—and her understanding of her family’s past, present, and future—by still refusing to rely on her friends for support.



Tara is still reeling from the trauma of her past, and eventually it catches up to her. After watching Emily marry Shawn, Tara’s own relationship suffers a blow; she ends it, unable to cope with the feelings of shame and suffering she feels at having let poor Emily marry Shawn.



CHAPTER 27: IF I WERE A WOMAN

Tara enrolled in BYU as a music major in hopes that she'd one day return home and direct the church choir. Now, though, as she enters the fall of her junior year, she drops all of her music classes and begins taking classes in geography, politics, and Jewish history. She begins learning about history, government, and current events, and by the end of the semester, the world feels "bigger" to Tara. At the same time, she feels that studying history and politics is not a "womanly" pursuit—and her conversations with some of her more conservative Mormon friends at BYU confirm the idea that it is "wrong" for women to have interests in certain things.

Confused and conflicted, Tara decides to meet with Dr. Kerry, the professor of her Jewish history class. They talk about her background, and Tara admits that she was kept away from school all her life and only learned about the Holocaust when she arrived at BYU. She tells Dr. Kerry the truth about her parents and her family, and he encourages her to "stretch herself" by pursuing whatever topics and interests call to her. He suggests she apply to a study abroad program he runs each year at Cambridge—a university Tara has never heard of.

When Tara returns home to Buck's Peak for Christmas, she learns that Emily is in the midst of a very difficult pregnancy. She is having contractions at only twenty weeks, and yet is not on bed rest or receiving any special treatment—she works in the kitchen with a half-dozen other women, straining herbs for Mother's oils. Six months after Dad's accident, he is faring better, but has trouble breathing and frightens people with his scarred, twisted hands and facial features. Nevertheless, Dad describes the explosion as a "blessing" and a "miracle" straight from God, meant to show people "there's another way besides the Medical Establishment."

Tara notices a shift in the employees who work in Mother's kitchen straining herbs and blessing oils. They listen to Dad's speeches with reverence and awe. They are "followers" of Mother and Dad's doctrine now, converted by Dad's trial and Mother's role in curing him with salves, herbs, and tinctures. Tara sees that her mother is not the meek woman she once was—emboldened by Dad's rhetoric, Faye sees herself as being in direct communication with the Lord Himself.

Tara's new life is secular compared to her old one in Buck's Peak—but as BYU is a Mormon university, it's still fairly insular compared to the world at large. There are still certain prejudices within some of Tara's classmates, teachers, and the general infrastructure of the university and surrounding town.



In the face of doubts about how she should be structuring her education, Tara seeks help from a professor, who encourages her to dive deeper and pursue what brings her joy rather than rely on antiquated ideas of what she "should" or shouldn't be studying as a woman.



Things at Buck Peak seem less dire on the surface, but as Tara realizes the shifting dynamics happening at the house, a more sinister picture emerges. Dad has spun his debilitating accident as a blessing—just as he used Tara's "homeschooling" as proof that denying a child an education was in fact a good thing, he is using his unlikely recovery to show that the "Medical Establishment" is evil.



Tara once counted on her mother to even out her father's worse impulses, and indeed Mother once or twice kept Tara from being kicked out. However, as Tara realizes just how deeply her mother has absorbed her father's doctrine, she sees that she no longer has a protector at home—she is alone against the rest of her family.



Tara is rejected from the Cambridge program a few weeks after Christmas, but Dr. Kerry tells Tara that he has written to the committee on her behalf and appealed the decision; she is going to be able to go. Tara cannot believe her good fortune—but is frightened, as the obstacle of obtaining a passport still stands in her way. Because of her conflicting documents and delayed birth certificate, she has some trouble, but her aunt Debbie signs an affidavit on her behalf and soon Tara has a key to the rest of the world.

In February, Emily gives birth. Though she is only twenty-six weeks along, Mother insists it is “God’s will” that Emily have the baby early. When the baby comes out “still, and the color of ash,” Mother realizes that the baby needs to be in a hospital, and the Westovers load up the van and drive through a blizzard to get there. The baby, Peter, undergoes “countless” surgeries on his heart and lungs over the subsequent months, and when his doctors send him home, they warn Shawn and Emily that he will always be frail. Dad and mother, however, insist that “Peter was supposed to come into the world this way.” He is a “gift from God,” and it is up to God alone to choose how he “gives His gifts.”

CHAPTER 28: PYGMALION

Tara arrives in England at King’s College, Cambridge and is positively overwhelmed by its grandeur. She has a room of her own there and eats breakfast each morning in a great Gothic hall. She feels out of place, though, whenever she spends time with her privileged BYU classmates, who have all bought new sophisticated clothes for the trip across the pond.

On a tour of the campus chapel, Tara and her classmates go up onto the roof. Though the wind blows hard and strong, Dr. Kerry observes that Tara is “not afraid of falling”—she stands tall against the wind while all her other classmates hunch and cling to the walls. Dr. Kerry observes that it as if Tara has been up on this roof “all [her] life.” Tara responds coolly that she’s “just standing”—only in crouching and hunching and refusing to control their panic do her classmates acknowledge the wind’s power to knock them down.

Tara’s first week at Cambridge passes in a blur of lectures and meals. She is assigned a supervisor, a professor who will oversee her work during the program—her supervisor is Professor Jonathan Steinberg, a scholar renowned for his writings on the Holocaust. At her first meeting with Professor Steinberg, as tells the man about her educational and personal background, and he is stunned. He sees Tara’s story as “marvelous,” and remarks that he feels “as if [he’s] stepped into Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.”

Tara is finally growing comfortable with accepting help, generosity, and kindness from others. The chance to go abroad to Cambridge will change her life and broaden her world, though she doesn’t yet know how profound a milestone it will be in the journey of her education.



Tara’s parents subscribe to the delusional and often harmful belief that humans have no control over the things that are “God’s will.” They refuse to intervene in Emily’s strenuous pregnancy until it is too late, and as a result, she, Shawn, and their baby will face the consequences the rest of their lives. This is a kind of abuse, as Mother, Dad, and Shawn are all complicit in denying Emily and her baby basic healthcare and the right to the best chance at a healthy, normal life.



Tara has earned a place at one of the premier institutions in the world—but still feels inadequate and out of place when compared to her “normal” peers.



This lyrical and metaphoric scene shows that Tara’s refusal to give into fear—and determination to make herself invincible—has indeed paid off, and has set her apart from her classmates. Tara sees the world differently than anyone else—though she has been through a lot of suffering and hardship to get to this point, her difficult life has given her at least a few gifts.



Professor Steinberg is intrigued and charmed by Tara, and, like Henry Higgins molding the country bumpkin Eliza Doolittle into a member of high society, becomes determined to mold Tara into a bona fide scholar able to make the most of her gifts.



Professor Steinberg takes a special interest in Tara, poring meticulously over her papers and helping her to understand that every word and punctuation mark says something and is important. At Cambridge, reading intensely each day, Tara is learning how to see books differently than how she was raised to. Her father saw books as objects of “fear or adoration,” but Tara realizes now that they don’t have to be either. Steinberg is deeply impressed by Tara’s work, and tells her she’s one of the best students he’s ever had. She is unprepared for such praise, knowing how to handle “cruelty better than kindness.” Steinberg encourages her to apply to graduate school at Cambridge or Harvard, and tells her not to worry about the fees—he will ensure that she is taken care of.

On her last night at Cambridge, there is a grand formal dinner, but all Tara wants is to be alone in her room. She leaves as soon as she can, but Dr. Kerry follows her out of the dining hall and asks her to take a walk with him. He tells her that it’s time to realize she has “as much right to be here as anyone,” and that she must always take pride and ownership in the person and the scholar she’s making herself into. Tara wants badly to believe Dr. Kerry—but can’t stop thinking of the lonely, beaten girl in the parking lot of Stokes and the bathroom mirror of her childhood home. Before heading back into the dining hall, Dr. Kerry urges Tara to think of the story of Pygmalion. As soon as Eliza Doolittle believed in herself, he says, “it didn’t matter what dress she wore.”

CHAPTER 29: GRADUATION

After Tara returns to BYU from Cambridge, she almost wishes she could forget the profound happiness she experienced there—but her mentors will not allow her to forget. Professor Steinberg encourages her to apply for a prestigious scholarship to study at Cambridge, and she does.

Tara begins thinking more seriously about what it means to be a Mormon—and the church’s checkered history and practices of polygamy and misogyny. Never having made peace with the way Mormonism treated its women, Tara reflects on the story of her great-great-grandmother—a Norwegian immigrant named Anne Mathea who converted her entire family to Mormonism and convinced them to move to America. Anne Mathea left everything behind and suffered greatly in her new life, devoted to her new faith but faced with a loveless marriage, a stillborn child, and a polygamist husband. Tara feels conflicted about following in her ancestors’ footsteps.

Tara’s education is deepening and her hold on her abilities is expanding—but she’s still having difficulty accepting kindness, help, or enthusiasm from others. She sees herself as unworthy of praise and deserving only of harsh treatment—side effects of her traumatic childhood and abusive relationships with her parents and brother.



As Tara prepares to leave Cambridge, she is not just leaving a place—she is leaving a state of mind. In Cambridge, she is bright and special, but back in the U.S., the pull of Buck’s Peak threatens to undermine all her progress at any time. Tara is working so hard to convince herself that she is deserving of praise, attention, and good things—and Dr. Kerry wants to help her see that all she needs to succeed is belief in her own worth.



Tara is afraid that she’ll never feel as good as she did at Cambridge, and immediately tries to begin stifling the confidence and happiness she found there—but an opportunity to return arises, and she seizes it.



Being back in Utah means that Tara must again confront the questions about Mormonism she was delving into before she left for Cambridge. She is trying to decide who to be, and reckoning with the predetermined choices that were made for her and paths available to her as a child.



Tara is selected for a short list of finalists for the Gates scholarship at Cambridge, and Robin helps her prepare for the interview by shopping for new clothes and rehearsing questions. Two weeks before the interview in Annapolis, Tara's parents come to visit her at BYU for the first time on their way to Arizona. Dad orders a ton of food at a local restaurant, wanting to show off how much money he and Mother have because of her booming essential oil business. While waiting for the food, Dad deems French, which Tara is studying, a "socialist language" and rattles off conspiracy theories about Jewish bankers having engineered the Holocaust. Tara stares at him in shock and disgust, but doesn't speak up against him. At the end of the night, Tara is relieved when her parents get into their car and drive away.

Tara wins the Gates scholarship and becomes something of a local celebrity at BYU. The student paper and local news interview her, and the announcement of her success plasters BYU's online homepage. When reporters ask Tara about her high school experience, Tara dodges their questions and often lies outright—she doesn't tell anyone that she never went to school before BYU, confused by the narrative and message of her own life.

A month before graduation, Tara visits Buck's Peak. Dad reprimands her sharply for not telling people about being homeschooled and accuses her of not being "grateful" to him and Mother for taking her out of school in the first place. He berates her for deciding to go to a "socialist countr[y]" for her education, and vows to "stand and speak" at her graduation, testifying against Tara's socialist, gentile professors. Tara tells him that he will behave in no such way.

Tara is honored at a dinner and a luncheon for outstanding undergraduates in the days prior to her graduation, but her parents attend neither ceremony. When she calls them to ask if they're coming, Mother tells her that Dad, offended, will not come unless she apologizes for her behavior in Buck's Peak. The desperate Tara relents, and her parents arrive at the very end of her official graduation ceremony. That night, Tara is due to fly straight to England. As her parents drive her to the airport and say goodbye to her, she senses "fear and loss" in her father's face.

On her last night in Buck's Peak, Tara remembers, Dad whispered to her that if the End Days came, and she was in America, they could come for her—if she is overseas, he fears, he will not be able to "make [her] safe."

Tara had recently hoped that she'd be able to start a new chapter in her relationship with her father, and that perhaps his brush with death had humbled or softened him. Now, Tara sees that her father is incorrigible. Whereas his paranoid, delusional beliefs were always strange to her, they now deeply offend her. Her education is changing her, and helping her to establish boundaries in her life in terms of what she's willing to tolerate from her family. She's not all the way there, but she's learning to resist the pull of her family's collective delusions.



In spite of all she's achieved, Tara still balks when it comes to talking about her past. She feels great shame at what she's endured rather than pride at what she's overcome.



Tara's achievements will never be her own—her father takes everything she accomplishes and acts as if his own genius and benevolence allowed her to achieve greatness. He's determined to belittle her and hold her back, even threatening the reputation she's spent four years developing at BYU.



Dad's pride threatens to deprive Tara of having her parents present at her graduation. She's forced to cave in and apologize in order to get them to do the bare minimum of showing up.



Tara's father doesn't want her to leave because he's afraid that if the end of the world arrives, he won't be able to care for her. Because he believes that the Days of Abomination are just around the corner, this fear is very real to him—though it sounds like nonsense to Tara now.



CHAPTER 30: HAND OF THE ALMIGHTY

Tara arrives back at Cambridge—the imposing, beautiful campus is just as she remembered it. This time, though, she is not a visitor or a guest—she is “a member of the university.” Nevertheless, she still feels out of place in her lectures and at mealtime—she is intimidated by how well-read and well-spoken her classmates are. After a complex lecture on negative liberty and positive liberty—“freedom from external obstacles or constraints” versus “freedom from internal constraints”—Tara returns to her room and calls home, telling Mother that she’s worried she’s made a mistake in coming to school. Mother says that through muscle-testing, she’s determined that one of Tara’s chakras is out of balance. She promises to adjust the chakra and “wing it to” Tara. To living energy, Mother says, “distance is nothing.”

One morning, while studying in the library, Tara receives an email from one of her BYU friends, Drew. It contains a link to a song Tara has never heard—“Redemption Song” by Bob Marley. The line “emancipate yourself from mental slavery” resonates with Tara, and as she reads on the internet about Bob Marley’s struggle with cancer and his refusal to treat the disease with traditional medicine, she realizes that she needs to finally get her vaccinations.

Tara begins making a couple friends at school, and goes to coffee with two women one day a few weeks before Christmas. Tara has never had coffee before, as the Mormon church forbids it. While the women discuss feminism—a taboo, embarrassing topic back at BYU—Tara debates whether or not she should drink her coffee. She feels like these other girls are “behind glass.” After the coffee date, Tara returns to the library and begins researching feminism. She falls in love with the writings of early feminist figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, and finds comfort in knowing that she is not the only woman who has longed to break out of the role prescribed to her.

Tara flies home for Christmas, where her parents have started building an extension onto the house, just off the kitchen. A “single massive room the size of the chapel at church,” complete with a vaulted ceiling and decorated maniacally and without reason, Tara thinks the room suits her parents perfectly. Mother explains that the family is flush with cash from her essential oil business—though money is good, Mother has refused many offers of multimillion-dollar buyouts, emphasizing that healing is her life’s work.

Tara is both nourished and intimidated by life at Cambridge. In her lectures, she’s learning things that could help her in her personal life as well—but is too distracted by her insecurities to see how. Meanwhile, she remains drawn towards the comforts of home and family, even as it becomes clear that her family’s logic has grown more and more deranged and unstable.



Finally realizing that she needs to take charge of her own health and determine her own life, Tara resolves to begin making choices that reflect who she is now rather than who she once was.



Tara’s growth and education is unsteady and often uneasy. She’s constantly measuring her knowledge and successes against others, and the continual realization of how naïve she is makes her feel insecure and unworthy of her place at Cambridge. At the same time, the new things she’s learning are freeing and edifying, and she hungers for new knowledge and new experiences even in the face of her doubts.



Things at home are changing on the surface in some ways—like the new addition to the house—but for the most part, Tara’s family life is the same as ever. Mother and Dad are still ruled by their strange beliefs and allegiance to their faith, and make decisions that are incomprehensible to most other people.



Tara's brother Richard has come home for the holidays, too—and has brought his wife Kami and their infant son along. Richard is finishing up a chemistry degree at Idaho State, and his wife Kami, though Mormon, is “mainstream.” Kami and Richard's son was born in a hospital, and they live a “normal” life. Tara watches Richard try to “live in both worlds” and juggle his new beliefs with his desire to please Dad and keep from rocking the boat.

One night, in the middle of an “intense cold spell,” Tara is sitting in the living room with Mother, Dad, Kami, and Richard. Emily flies into the room through the back door—she has no coat or shoes despite the intense cold, and she is crying. As everyone tends to Emily, bundling her with blankets and helping her settle down, she explains that after she returned home from grocery shopping with the wrong kind of crackers, Shawn attacked Emily, flung her from their trailer into the snow, and locked the door on her.

As Tara watches her family tend to Emily, only Kami looks anxious and confused—Tara “resent[s]” Kami, an outsider, for bearing witness to her family's deep pain. Tara quietly approaches Kami and tries to explain to her that what is going on is “private,” and that they should all go to their rooms and let Mother and Dad handle Emily. Kami and Richard head to bed, but Tara sneaks back out to the kitchen to listen to what's going on. As Dad picks up the phone to call Shawn and tell him to “come get [his] wife,” Tara realizes that all of this has happened before—everyone knows their roles. Eventually, Shawn shuffles in and endures a “stern” lecture from Dad—but Tara knows that without a “revolution,” nothing in her family will change.

CHAPTER 31: TRAGEDY THEN FARCE

The day before returning to England, Tara drives to Audrey's house to pay her sister a visit. Audrey is homeschooling her children, still convinced of the corruption of public schools. Tara plays with her nieces and nephews and gives them the gift of a tea set, but when they start quarrelling over the pieces, Tara takes the set away and tells them that if they act like children, she'll treat them like children. She's immediately horrified to find herself paraphrasing Shawn's words—and shocked when Audrey, too, points out that Tara is using Shawn's language. Tara wonders if she has more in common with her sister than she's ever realized.

Richard's desire to please his “mainstream” wife and his radical, fundamentalist parents at the same time reflects the difficulty Tara is having in truly extricating herself from her family and their bizarre rules, ethics, and beliefs, while also cultivating her newfound independence and identity as a scholar.



Shawn's abuse is continuing even while Tara, safe in Cambridge, pursues her own happiness and education. This episode makes it clear that the violence Emily—and possibly other members of the Westover clan—are regularly subjected to has become normalized.



Tara's allegiances are split. She is just like Richard, trying to appease Mother and Dad while remaining allegiant to the choices she's made in getting away from them. Tara knows that what's happening is wrong, but feels powerless to stop it. Interestingly, Gene is also powerless to stop Shawn's abuse; it seems that Shawn is taking over Gene's role as the domineering, feared authority figure in the family.



Tara has been mostly silent about the abuse she's suffered at Shawn's hands. Now, she faces a double-edged realization: she has internalized some aspects of Shawn's cruel beliefs, but at the same time, may not be alone in the pain and suffering she's endured.



Tara returns to Cambridge determined to try new things and remake herself entirely. She drinks wine for the first time and starts dressing more fashionably. She feels she finally fits in with everyone else. She even gets invited on a spring holiday to Rome with a group of friends. Traveling the ancient city with her sophisticated peers, Tara feels awed and happy—she realizes for the first time that she can “admire the past without being silenced by it.”

When Tara returns home she excitedly checks her email for a message from Drew, who has become her boyfriend. Instead, there is a long, typo-filled message from Audrey. The email describes Audrey’s own experiences suffering Shawn’s abuses over the years, and Audrey apologizes for not protecting Tara from their violent older brother. Audrey admits that she has tried to tell Mother about her horrible memories of Shawn, but Mother has insisted they must be “false, impossible.” Audrey says she wants to at last confront Shawn and the entire family—and hopes Tara will stand with her. As Tara reads the message, she is angry at Audrey for pulling her back from her happy new life into her miserable old one. Nevertheless, Tara writes back and tells Audrey she’ll support her—but asks her sister to wait to confront the family until Tara is back in Idaho.

Audrey apparently shows the emails to Mother, and soon Tara is emailing with Faye about Shawn’s abuse. Mother apologizes for refusing to see the ugliness Shawn brought into their home, and believing Shawn’s lies about Tara always picking the fights. Tara is shocked when Mother compares Shawn’s abuse to the effect Dad’s bipolar disorder has had on the family—it is the first time she’s heard Mother reference the possibility that Dad might be mentally ill. Mother tells Tara that she wants to help her daughters “rewrite the story” of their own family. She once again apologizes for not protecting Tara, and Tara is overcome with love and gratitude.

A week later when Tara talks to her mother, Faye assures her that Dad has been told about what’s going on, and that Shawn is going to get some help. Tara, relieved, puts the shame of her past from her mind and enjoys her happy present more intensely than ever before. She at last feels like she belongs at Cambridge, and begins telling her friends more and more of the truth about how she was raised. Tara realizes the shame she’s carried for so long has come from having parents who didn’t protect her when they should have. Now that Tara believes her family’s story is being “rewritten,” she’s confident that the past doesn’t matter—only the future does.

Tara has had a difficult trip home, and has had to bear witness to pain, suffering, and abuse. Back in her new life in Europe, she tries to forget all of that and learn how to hold both the person she is and the girl she once was in her head and heart.



Tara is relieved to finally have an ally in Audrey—but nervous that in such a delicate situation, one false step or preemptive move could spell difficulty, pain, and ostracism for both of them. Tara wants to stand up for what’s right and reveal the truth about Shawn to her family, but knows that she and Audrey must stand together as an allied front to do so—otherwise, they’ll have no chance against Mother and Dad’s endless excuses and Shawn’s manipulations.



Tara is elated when she realizes that not only is Audrey on her side, but Mother is too. Tara feels that she can at last begin to heal from the trauma of her past—she believes that everything will soon be out in the open, and that she will have love and support from her mother and her sister for the rest of her days.



The emails with Mother and Audrey have emboldened Tara to reframe her past. She is able to talk about where she comes from with her new friends because she believes that things are about to change for the better—it’s easier to share anecdotes about her homeschooling and days working in the junkyard when she believes she’ll soon be able to tell normal stories, too.



CHAPTER 32: A BRAWLING WOMAN IN A WIDE HOUSE

Tara returns home to Idaho in the fall—Grandma-down-the-hill is dying. Drew picks Tara up at the airport and drives her to the hospital where Grandma is staying. Grandma is happy to see Tara, and after their short visit, Drew drives Tara to Buck's Peak. The house is in chaos—Mother's kitchen is filled with her all-female employee force who don't recognize Tara and try to keep her from entering the house. When Tara at last finds Mother, she thinks she looks like "a celebrity in a crowded restaurant," surrounded by people desperate to talk to her. To escape the madness, Tara takes Drew for a walk on the mountain. By the time they get back to the house, things are somber and still—the hospital called to say that Grandma has died.

Dad slips into an angry depression, deflated and sad but still cruel and coarse to everyone around him. Even though Mother's business is bustling and in need of help, Dad only leaves the bed to speak at Grandma-down-the-hill's funeral—he delivers a twenty-minute sermon on God and Abraham, and mentions his mother only twice. After the service, as Mother chides Dad for refusing to write the thank-you cards and passing them off to her when she has important business matters to attend to, the two of them get into a horrible fight.

The next morning, Tara is surprised to see Dad in the kitchen trying to make pancakes. It is the first time she's ever seen him attempt to cook anything. Worried, she goes to check on Mother, who is in the bathroom, wrapped in a towel and sobbing. The two women embrace each other.

At home, Tara sees just how rapidly things are changing for her family. Mother's business is booming, and she's selling a vision of organic, faith-based healing to everyone around her—while Dad's mother languishes alone in a hospital with no visitors because most of her family is paranoid and delusional about the medical profession.



Dad's narcissism, cruelty, and paranoia only increase after the death of his mother. Tara's own mother, unable to handle his prideful, stubborn childishness at last stands up to him in a cataclysmic show of force.



Tara and her mother have both been broken down over the years by Dad's delusions and cruelty. When Tara encounters her mother in a vulnerable, miserable state, she doesn't know what to do but approach her as an equal and try to comfort her.



CHAPTER 33: SORcery OF PHYSICS

When it's time for Tara to leave Buck's Peak, Audrey begs her not to go. Audrey reveals that no one, after all, has believed her and Tara's words about Shawn, and that she feels all alone and powerless. Tara leaves for Cambridge anyway, and that night in her dorm room, writes a diary entry which ends: "Cambridge is less beautiful tonight." Drew has returned to Cambridge with Tara, newly admitted to a master's program there. Drew is the first boyfriend Tara has confided in about her family—the truth of her family—and as she tells him about Audrey, she asks him to watch out for her in case she "do[es] something crazy."

Tara feels for Audrey and wants to help her, but sees that things at home are so bad that she needs to flee back to her life in England. Tara is caught between wanting to help save her sister and wanting to save herself—she cannot do both, as she's been through an unspeakable amount of pain and learning when it comes to understanding how to prioritize herself.



The semester passes in a hurried blur—Tara is working on a piece of original academic research to qualify for a PhD, and with the support of her supervisor Dr. Runciman, she has decided to write about “echoes of Mormon theology in the great philosophers of the nineteenth century.” Tara feels closer to her friends than ever, and yet the more she begins to see her new friends as family, the guiltier she feels about abandoning her actual family. She buys a ticket to Idaho for Christmas, hoping to reconnect with everyone back home.

Tara arrives home to find the **Indian Princess** buried in snow atop the mountain. Tara barely recognizes her brother Luke, who has lost an eye in a paintball accident and grown a long, thick beard. Tara doesn't see Shawn until the third day she's home, when he comes into the house with Benjamin. As Benjamin brags about getting into a fight down in town, Shawn warns Benjamin to always watch his temper. Tara believes that Shawn has changed and cooled down, and agrees to take a ride into town with him to get milkshakes and catch up.

Shawn and Tara have a pleasant drive, but on the way back up the mountain, Shawn jerks the car onto a side road and drives towards the church, bringing the vehicle to a stop in the parking lot. Shawn asks if Tara has been “talk[ing] much” to Audrey, who is a “lying piece of shit.” Shawn tells Tara that he'd put a bullet in Audrey's head if she weren't such a “worthless bitch” and a waste of a good bullet. Tara refuses to look at Shawn as he unleashes this rant, staying still in hopes that she can have some “control” over the situation by not responding to it. Shawn starts the ignition and asks Tara if she wants to watch a movie. Tara simply nods, and as Shawn drives back up the mountain towards home, he chatters cheerfully about what they should watch.

CHAPTER 34: THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS

That night, Tara approaches Mother and Dad in the giant “chapel” room and tells her father what Shawn said about shooting Audrey. She reveals all her stories about Shawn's violence and abuse, but Dad demands proof. Tara tries to calmly tell him that he's already seen the proof with his own eyes, but Dad accuses Tara of coming home to “raise hell” and trying to put Shawn in prison. Mother is silent the entire time, unwilling to say a word on Tara's behalf. Tara begins sobbing and runs to the bathroom to be alone.

As Tara's happiness at school increases, she can't help but wonder and worry about the life she's left behind in Idaho. She's so entrapped by her family that she can't give them up, and keeps returning to Idaho even when it's clear that things at home are bad and getting worse.



The Indian Princess—a symbol of homecoming—is buried in snow, foreshadowing the fact that this trip home will be, for Tara, one marked by confusion and a sense of homelessness.



Tara has been telling herself for a while now that things are home are good and getting better, but it's all been a fantasy. In this passage, she realizes just how angry, unstable, and dangerous Shawn still is—and narrowly avoids being the subject of his terrible rage.



Tara's parents are so wrapped up in their own world—and so unwilling to admit that there are any flaws or patterns of abuse in the insular, isolated family they've created—that they attempt to undermine and attack her when she comes to them for help.



As Tara looks in the mirror, she remembers staring in the mirror as a young girl after Shawn would put her head in the toilet. She is devastated to realize that in spite of all she's seen and accomplished, she's right back where she started—in the filthy bathroom on Buck's Peak, trying not to cry. She wishes she could retrieve her sixteen-year-old self from inside the mirror and force the younger, stronger her to deal with her pain. Tara goes out to the chapel to tell her father she's going to bed, and will talk with him more about things tomorrow. Dad replies that they'll talk about it now—Shawn is on his way over.

Tara wants to run from the house, but Dad tells her to sit and wait for Shawn. When he at last enters the house, he silently approaches Tara and reaches for her hand. He pulls her fist open and drops a bloody knife into her palm. He crouches beside her and tells her that if she's "smart," she'll use the knife on herself before he can use it on her. Mother tells Shawn that that kind of speech is "uncalled for." Tara gapes at her mother, unable to grasp what is happening. Tara finds herself wishing she were the sixteen-year-old girl in the bathroom mirror—made of stone and able to withstand anything her brother threw at her.

As Dad begins lecturing, Tara, wanting to get out of the situation no matter the cost, begins telling Shawn that she never spoke a word against him to anyone, accusing Dad of lying about her accusations. The bloody knife is on the ground, now, and Tara wonders whose blood is on it. At the end of the dizzy lecture in which Dad blames the women in the family for not knowing how to handle themselves around its men, Shawn apologizes for hurting Tara and wraps her in a big hug.

Tara goes to her room and slides the bolt, locking the door. She calls Drew and tells him what has happened—he encourages her to leave the house immediately. Tara tells him she's afraid to run off in the middle of the night, and decides to wait until morning to go. At six, Tara packs her things. She finds Mother in the kitchen and explains that she needs to go meet Drew in Salt Lake City—something has "come up." She promises to return in a day or two and then drives away.

Halfway down the hill, outside of Shawn's trailer, Tara sees that the snow is stained with blood. Later, Tara will learn that Shawn had killed the family dog while his son looked on. Mother tries to explain that the dog had been eating chickens and needed to be put down, but Tara knows that slashing the dog with a knife was an act of pure violence and hatred.

The more Tara has learned about the world, the more complicated and sensitive she's become. She's learning to see that the violence in her family is not normal, and that there is a whole world beyond Buck's Peak—if she could only let her old life go. All of this is painful, though, and Tara finds herself wishing that she could be as tough, stony, and unemotional as she was at sixteen, when she still believed that her life was "normal."



Even when they directly witness Shawn making a violent and direct threat on Tara's life, Mother and Dad do nothing to separate the two of them, to punish Shawn, or to keep Tara safe. Their ambivalence will cause Tara, in the months and years to come, to question her own memories and her own beliefs, and wonder whether she is the one who is delusional.



In this passage, Tara enters survival mode. She has been threatened by Shawn—and watched her parents allow the threat to stand—and now tries to deny that she has attempted to go against Shawn. Shawn's classic-abuser behavior of showing care and empathy in the wake of a violent episode further confuses Tara, and convinces their parents that Shawn is good at heart.



Tara knows that she can't stay at home any longer—she simply isn't safe. At the same time, she can't tell her mother what's really going on, as it's clear that no one will offer her any support.



Tara's family will make any excuse possible to deny the violence, abuse, and senseless cruelty that has permeated their ranks—but Tara knows what's truly going on.



In the days that follow, Tara goes over the sickening, dreamlike events of the confrontation with Shawn over and over and realizes that Mother lied—she never confronted Dad, and Dad never confronted Shawn. No one had ever promised to help Tara and Audrey, or had even heard their stories. Tara feels betrayed and confused by her mother’s “hollow” promises.

Tara, who had been buoyed by the promise of her mother and sister’s support, now feels more alone in the world than ever before.



CHAPTER 35: WEST OF THE SUN

Back at Cambridge, Tara withdraws from her friends. She is waiting for Shawn to put the pieces of what happened over the holidays together and realize that she and Audrey have been trying to make their family see the truth about him. Just as Tara predicted, in early March, she gets an email from Shawn: a single Bible passage with the phrase “O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things?” bolded. An hour later, Shawn calls Tara. She picks up the phone, and he asks her if she can help him make a decision. He tells her that he’s trying to decide whether he should come to England and kill her himself or hire an assassin to do the job—he can’t tell which would be “cheaper.”

Tara, reeling from the trauma of her last trip home, is unable to focus on her studies, or on building the happy life she’s making for herself in Cambridge. She’s simply waiting around for the other shoe to drop—and when it does, it just confirms all of Tara’s worst fears. Shawn’s behavior is just as delusional and couched in high-minded religious superiority as Dad’s, but even more directly violent.



Tara hangs up the phone, but Shawn calls again and again, leaving messages to tell Tara that his assassins are coming for her. Tara calls Mother to tell her what’s going on, but Mother says only that Shawn “doesn’t have that kind of money.” Tara tries to tell Dad, but Dad demands proof and asks why Tara wouldn’t have recorded the calls. Shawn eventually stops calling, and sends Tara a thousand-word email announcing that he’s cutting her out of his life.

Tara’s parents are, again, profoundly unhelpful when she comes to them in fear for her life. They try to minimize her pain, and even accuse her of breaking up the family and inflicting pain on Shawn when things are the other way around entirely.



When Tara tells her parents about the email, they tell her he’s “justified” in his actions. Dad accuses Tara of hurling “thoughtless accusations when it was obvious [her] memory couldn’t be trusted.” Mother tells her that her anger on the night of the confrontation with Shawn was “twice as dangerous as Shawn has ever been.” Tara feels her reality becoming “fluid.” Months later, in another conversation with her mother about the confrontation, Mother denies there having been any knife in the room at all, and describes Tara’s memories as “warped.”

Tara’s parents may or may not be trying to deliberately warp and liquefy her memories for their own gain. Tara allows herself to be confused by her family’s cruel inversions of the truth, heading down a slippery slope that will make her question her memories, her identity, and her place in the world for years to come.



That summer, Tara receives a grant to study in Paris. Drew goes along with her, and Tara rejoices in having a “new life” somewhere else, just for a little bit. Her happiness comes crashing down, however, when she checks her email one day to discover a message from Audrey, explaining that after a lecture from Dad, she has decided to forgive Shawn and cut off Tara. Audrey accuses Tara of being “dangerous” and “controlled [...] by the Father of Fear, Lucifer.”

Tara’s family is abandoning her, one by one, finding it easier to believe the lies about Tara, who’s already on the fringes of the family, than to stand up for what’s true or right.



Tara feels she has lost her family. She knows that with the loss of Audrey's support, they will all turn against her—no one will ever believe her. Despite her despair, Tara receives a letter telling her she's won a visiting fellowship to Harvard. Despite the prestigious post, Tara accepts the news with "indifference." She has begun to "resent" what her education is costing her.

Tara's despondency over her fractured family life prevents her from feeling joy about her own accomplishments, even when she is admitted to yet another one of the most prestigious institutions in the world. She is pursuing her dreams—and achieving them—but the joy is dulled by her inescapable past.



Tara feels her memories of the past changing. She cannot picture any member of her family without feeling an "ominous, indicting" sensation overtaking her associations with them. Tara begins to believe she's going insane, and stops trusting her own memories. She relies on Drew to confirm simple facts about their lives together: whether they saw a certain friend the week before or two weeks ago, which block their favorite pastry shop sits on. Tara even begins questioning the detailed journals she's kept for years.

As a result of her family's emotional and psychological abuse—whether deliberate or incidental—Tara's own image of herself and confidence in her memory, beliefs, and choices begins breaking down. She is losing her grip on reality, unable to accept that her family—her only source of truth or knowledge for most of her life—could be so wrong.



Desperate to unravel the past she feels folding in on her, Tara emails Erin, one of Shawn's old girlfriends to ask whether her memories of Shawn's abuse are "deranged." Erin confirms that Shawn was violent and cruel, and tells Tara about a time he "ripped her from her house and slammed her head against a brick wall." In spite of Erin's vivid account, Tara finds herself questioning it, too—perhaps, she thinks, Erin is just as "crazy" as she is.

Even when she's able to secure another person's independent account of Shawn's abuse, Tara remains skeptical of her own memories. Her family's delusions and excuses have had such a profound effect on her psyche that she barely trusts herself anymore.



CHAPTER 36: FOUR LONG ARMS, WHIRLING

In September, Tara arrives at Harvard. Hoping for a new beginning, she throws herself into her studies and new hobbies to distract herself from the pain of the last year. Her past keeps catching up with her, however—Mother writes to tell her that she and Dad will be coming out to Harvard to visit, and want to stay in Tara's dorm with her. She also receives an instant message from her old friend Charles, and they briefly catch up. When she tells him that she's still struggling with her family and trying to make them see the truth about Shawn, Charles suggests she "let them go," but Tara says she can't. Charles tells Tara she sounds the same as she did when they were teenagers.

Even when Tara hopes to start over, have new experiences, and throw herself into a different way of living, her past manages to entrap and ensnare her. The exchange with Charles warns Tara that she can't outrun the things she hasn't truly confronted or healed from—as long as she avoids doing the hard thing, she'll always stay the same no matter where she moves or studies.



As the leaves begin to turn, Tara's parents arrive at Harvard. They all sleep in Tara's dorm room together, and she can hear Mom and Dad whispering late at night about how to "reconvert" her. Tara considers whether she'd be willing to accept an "exorcism" and be reborn, erasing all the trouble she's caused in the last year and blaming it on Lucifer. If she "swap[s] her] memories for theirs," she can have her family back.

Tara is so shaken by the isolation she feels from her family that she considers submitting to her parents' will and, just as she did in the confrontation with Shawn, recanting all of her personal beliefs in order to appease them.



Dad wants to visit a sacred forest grove in upstate New York, a spot where God had appeared to Joseph Smith according to Mormon doctrine. At the temple there, Dad commands Tara to touch the walls and be cleansed. She does so, but feels nothing. Dad begins “testifying” for two whole hours, declaring that Tara has been “taken by Lucifer.” During the entire rambling speech, Mother says nothing.

Tara’s parents return with her to Harvard and stay there for a week, refusing to move to a hotel. On their final night, Dad tries to offer Tara a “blessing” and welcome her back into his fold. Tara refuses his offer. Dad tries to explain to Tara that everything terrible that has happened to their family has been God’s will—they have been chosen to be made “living testament[s] of God’s power.” Mother speaks up, claiming that through muscle-testing and energy work, she has diagnosed—and cured—her own breast cancer. Dad tells Tara that something awful is coming for her, and offers her his blessing one last time. Tara rejects him once again, and Dad declares that Tara’s room is filled with an “evil presence.” Though their flight is not until the morning, Mother and Dad pack their things and leave for the airport.

CHAPTER 37: GAMBLING FOR REDEMPTION

After her parents’ visit, Tara begins sleepwalking and experiencing night terrors. She stops attending classes and spends all her time watching television in her room. She tries to read and keep up with her studies but can’t focus on the words in front of her. As the semester draws to a close, she realizes the damage she’s done to her life: she is in danger of failing her PhD and losing her family, too. Desperate to accept her father’s blessing and amends, she books a ticket home to Idaho for Christmas.

Tara tells Drew, who is studying in the Middle East, about her plans. He warns her not to go—if she gets into trouble or fights with Shawn and is wounded, no one will help her or take her to the hospital. He reminds her that she told him long ago to stop her if she ever tried to do something crazy, and that he’s trying to do that now—but Tara insists she can still fix things with her family, and boards the plane home.

Dad’s long-winded speeches are nothing new—but the fact that Tara’s parents have followed her all the way to the East Coast and are attempting to interfere with her new life by dragging her back into their warped worldview is more haunting, in a way, than anything else that’s come before.



Tara is being offered the chance to do exactly what it is she thought she wanted—give up her opinions, her life, and her education, and return to the fold of her family. At the moment of truth, though, she refuses to give up what she’s worked for, and chooses to sacrifice her family instead. Tara’s visit with her parents has shown her that no matter what she does, she’ll never be good or pure enough in their eyes—and she’ll be losing herself if she tries to be.



Tara’s life is being deeply derailed by her conflicting feelings of guilt, trauma, paranoia, and resentment for her family. She’s thrashing about, uncertain of what to do and unsafe even in her sleep. She has no idea what she truly wants, but decides that trying to rebuild her relationship with her family one last time is what she must do.



Tara’s friends—old and new—have tried time and time again to help her see that she is enough, and that returning to Buck’s Peak will only put her in the way of harm and danger. Tara, though, must learn that lesson and make that decision for herself.



Tara is shocked as she approaches Buck’s Peak—now that Grandma-down-the-hill is dead, the junkyard has expanded down the mountain, and the beautiful rolling hills are covered with rusted scrap. In spite of all that transpired back at Harvard, Mother is delighted to see Tara, and begins cooking her a large breakfast. As soon as Tara gets settled in, she writes Drew an email—she has promised to write him every two hours, so that if something goes wrong, he’ll know. As Tara opens the browser to start an email, she sees another exchange pulled up on the screen—a chain between Mother and Erin, in which Mother berates Tara for demonizing Shawn and Erin agrees that Tara is disturbed and delusional.

Having seen the emails, the stunned Tara at last accepts that Buck’s Peak is a maze designed to trap and confuse her. She realizes that she needs to go “before the walls shift” and box her in. Tara walks into the kitchen where Mother is preparing breakfast and announces that she’s going for a drive. Tara bids her parents goodbye, and they tell her that they love her. She responds that love has never been the issue—they are the last words she has ever spoken to her father.

As Tara drives to the airport to catch a flight back to Boston, Tyler calls. Apparently, shortly after she left the house, Mother caught on to what was happening and panicked. Afraid that Tara would call Tyler and tell him everything, Mother tried to catch him up on the events of the past year first, and tell him all about Tara’s confusion and damnation—but Tyler hung up the phone, knowing Tara had to be in the right. Now, he asks why she wouldn’t have called him or asked him for help. Tara wants to believe that Tyler is on her side, but is still haunted by Audrey’s betrayal, and fears that if forced to choose between Tara and the rest of the family, Tyler will choose them.

In the spring, Tara finishes her fellowship at Harvard and flies out to the Middle East to visit Drew. She tries to hide how bad things are, but cannot keep her night terrors from him. Back in England, at Cambridge, Tara continues to unravel. She develops migraines and hives and has her first-ever panic attack. She writes her parents a long, angry email explaining that she is cutting herself off from them for at least a year while she tries to make sense of her life.

Tara is happy to be home—but the external state of disarray and chaos reflects the emotional state within the house, and Tara soon realizes that her family is against her even as they “welcome” her back home. Realizing that her family doesn’t support her—and is actively working to cut her off from anyone who might try to—is a blow Tara must face down and deal with. She cannot bury her feelings or distract herself from the truth any longer.



It has taken many trips home to Buck’s Peak for Tara to realize the truth—that no matter how she contorts herself, denies the truth, or tries to fit in, she will always find herself trapped in a maze when it comes to her home life and her family. She makes the difficult choice to sever herself from her parents—but doesn’t tell them what’s happening, unable to bear another lecture, another sermon, and another horrible goodbye.



Tara’s mother knows that she’s in the wrong, and scrambles to get Tyler on her side before Tara can. When Tara learns of all the gossip and jockeying that’s going on behind her back, she worries that her relationship with Tyler is destined for the same end as her relationship with Audrey and even Erin. She fears that Mother and Dad’s confusing, manipulative rhetoric will take her very last possible ally away from her.



Tara is spiraling out of control, suffering physical pain due to the anxiety and misery she’s feeling just as she did her first year at BYU. She knows that her family is a trap she can never be free of as long as she remains attached to them, however marginally, and does the only thing she can do—she severs herself from them entirely.



CHAPTER 38: FAMILY

Tara is failing her PhD, but cannot find the words to explain to her supervisor, Dr. Runciman, the truth of what's happening to her. In a meeting, Runciman suggests Tara quit if she can't keep up with the program's demands—she hasn't sent him any work in over a year. Tara leaves the meeting and returns to her dorm room to binge-watch episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

That fall, Tyler calls Tara to tell her that his efforts to get Mother and Dad to try to confront Shawn have failed. Dad has threatened to “disown” Tyler if he presses the Shawn issue any further. More than that, Shawn has called Tyler and threatened to get him kicked out of the family “in two minutes”—and advised him to “just ask Tara” if he needs any proof of Shawn's power. As Tara half-listens to Tyler, unable to pull herself away from *Buffy*, she realizes that he is going to pick their family over her just like Audrey.

In October, Tara gets an email containing a letter from Tyler and Stefanie. Tyler tells her that he is forwarding a copy of it to their parents. Tara is afraid to read the email further, knowing that it will contain a rant against her. When Tara forces herself to read on, however, she sees that Tyler and his wife are choosing to condemn Mother and Dad and their “chains of abuse, manipulation, and control.” Grateful for the support of her brother and his wife, Tara begins finding the strength to better herself. She enrolls in university counseling, and spends more and more time on the phone with Tyler and Stefanie, talking through her problems with them. She feels guilty about having torn apart Tyler's relationship with their parents, but grateful to him for pulling her upward “just as [she] had decided to stop kicking and sink.”

It takes Tara many months to function normally, but by the end of the following summer, she is able to focus on her studies again. She decides to complete academic research on the nature of family and familial obligation. She realizes that this topic will become her dissertation—a year later, she has a completed piece of work on “The Family, Morality, and Social Science in Anglo-American Cooperative Thought, 1813-1890.” When she shows the paper to Dr. Runciman, he is deeply impressed, and tells Tara he'll be surprised if she doesn't earn her doctorate after all.

Tara is depressed and flattened by all she's been through—but still can't manage to ask for the help she needs from those who could give it to her. Instead, she retreats into herself—and educates herself in a very different way, catching up on the cultural moments she missed out on in childhood.



Tara is so numb to the world around her that she can't even bring herself to feel anything when she believes that her last connection to her home and family is about to be wiped out.



Tara is finally pulled out of her numb, isolating depression by the realization that she is not, after all, alone. Tyler and Stefanie give her the helping hand and the support she needs to rouse herself from her spiral of anxiety and misery and take control of her life again.



Tara synthesizes her religious background with her academic present to create something original and unforgettable. She has learned that she doesn't have to deny the past to enjoy the present, or give up her future to understand her past.



That September, Tara submits her dissertation for review. After a defense in December, she is awarded her PhD in January and becomes Dr. Westover. She is living in London with Drew and has a happy life—but something is missing. She knows that it is time to go home to Buck’s Peak and at last reclaim some of her and her family’s “shared history.”

Tara has managed to disentangle herself from her family, pull herself out of a deep well of trauma and depression, and achieve the highest level of education one can. Still, she feels that in order to truly be happy, she must reclaim her past, her memories, and her personal and shared history with those she’s left behind.



CHAPTER 39: WATCHING THE BUFFALO

Tara arrives home for the first time in years as spring comes to the mountain—the Princess atop Buck’s Peak is brighter than Tara has ever seen her. The Princess has been “haunting” Tara for weeks, “beckoning” from across the ocean. Tara has been worried that the Princess is “angry” with her for leaving, but sees now that she isn’t and never was—leaving, the Princess teaches, is a part of life.

Whereas the last time Tara returned home the Princess was buried in snow—signaling a blocked or confused homecoming—this time she is visible and clear, signaling that Tara’s relationship with the place she comes from is on the verge of being healed, at least somewhat.



Tara visits Grandma-over-in-town and Grandpa-over-in-town. Grandma is in the throes of Alzheimer’s and doesn’t recognize Tara, so Tara spends some time catching up with Grandpa. He tells Tara that her parents have become the most “powerful people in the valley,” renowned for the money they’ve made from the essential oil business. Even Grandpa has become convinced that God must be behind their “wondrous success.”

Tara’s maternal grandfather, who always looked down on Mother and Dad for their backwards ways, is now in awe of their wealth, and retroactively justifies their odd and dangerous behavior as God’s will.



Tara is planning on going to Tyler’s in Idaho Falls next, but writes her mother a quick email asking if she wants to meet up in town. Tara says she’s not ready to see Dad, but misses Mother after so many years apart. Mother replies with an ultimatum: Tara can see her and Dad together, or she will never see her mother again. Tara writes that as of the publication of her memoir her mother has “never recanted” this demand.

Tara longs for a relationship with Mother, even after all the woman has put her through—but is not willing to put herself through seeing her father again in order to attempt to pursue her relationship with Faye.



Tara is determined to lay eyes on her home before she leaves the valley, so she drives to the foot of Buck’s Peak. As she looks up the hill at the house, she sees how enormous it has grown in the wake of her parents’ many expansions. Tara wonders if her parents are using their money to continue preparations for the End of Days, and imagines Dad dragging solar panels and gallons of gas and water across the lawn.

Tara still feels drawn to and intrigued by the place where she was raised, in spite of all the suffering and strangeness associated with it. She can see it with clear eyes now, though, rather than feeling trapped or sucked in.



Several months later, when Grandma-over-in-town dies, Tara returns to Idaho for the funeral. She visits Faye's sister Angie who lives next door to Grandma and Grandpa-over-in-town. Angie, too, has been "cast aside" by the family after being fired from the family business and seeking unemployment, igniting Dad's paranoid beliefs that she was trying to put him on some sort of government watchlist. Tara and Angie bond over their shared ostracism, and at the funeral, Tara spends time with the other "outcasts" in her family—her mother's other sister Debbie, as well as Tyler and Stefanie.

At the funeral, Tara sits apart from most of her family. She catches glimpses of Luke and his giant "brood" of children; Richard, who has recently written to apologize for believing Dad over Tara, and offering her his support; Audrey, who clutches Tara's arm and tells her that to refuse to see Dad is a "great sin"; and at last Shawn, who does not look at Tara once during the service. As Tara gazes over her fractured family, she notices that the three siblings with educations—herself, Richard, and Tyler—have effectively split from the rest.

CHAPTER 40: EDUCATED

As a child, Tara writes, she was always waiting for her mind to grow, for her experiences to accumulate, and for her choices to solidify into "the likeness of a person." The person Tara once was "belonged" to the mountain, and she often worries, even now, that "the first shape a person takes is their only true shape."

Tara writes that she has not seen her parents in years. She speaks to Tyler, Richard, and Tony regularly, and still visits Debbie and Angie. She hears stories about the "ongoing drama on the mountain"—tales of violence, injuries, and betrayed and shifting loyalties. She doesn't know if she'll ever find her way back to the mountain—for now, the distance from it brings her peace.

Tara has learned to push aside her guilt over severing herself from her family and accept the decision on its own terms without "endlessly prosecuting [her] old grievances." Much of her pain and anger comes from Dad, and Tara has had to separate herself from him in order to love him. The "breach" between them is "too vast to be bridged," but now that she is away from his clutches and out of his shadows, she can see that while she is not the child her father hoped to raise, he is the father that raised the person she has become.

Tara has reached a point in her life where she's able to draw strength from her pain, and use it to connect with other members of her family who have endured the same kind of grief, loss, and suffering she has. Family is, for the first time in Tara's life, a source of refuge and solidarity.



Tara suggests, through this passage and the observations contained within it, that education is—for her family, at least—a line of demarcation. Those who become educated in the world beyond the mountain are unable to return there, while those who bury their head in the sand and live by the old ways can never understand the draw of the "real" world.



In spite of her accolades and accomplishments, Tara still suffers from imposter syndrome—the belief that she does not deserve all she's earned, and will always be the girl from the scrap yard on Buck's Peak.



Tara allowed herself to be roped into her family's dramas and conflicts for so much of her life that finally cutting her losses and accepting that she needed to move on has healed her in a way she never thought was possible.



Tara admits that she still has love for her father, in spite of all he's put her and her siblings through. She acknowledges that she would never have become the person she is without him—but also understands that there is a hurt between them that her father will never understand, and a "breach" between them that may never heal.



Tara often looks back on the night of the confrontation with Shawn, and the moments she spent staring into the mirror, wishing her sixteen-year-old self would crawl out of it. That night, when Tara called on her old self, her plea was not answered—the choices she made after that moment were entirely her own, the decisions of a new self. Her new self has suffered many things—transformation, falsity, and betrayal among them—but has, in spite of it all, received her education.

Tara concludes her memoir by declaring that her education has been difficult, painful, and nontraditional. As a young girl, she imagined education as a process that took place in the halls of a school or college; now, she sees that her entire life—good and bad—has been the source of her education.





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