

E D U C A T E D

A M E M O I R

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R A N D O M H O U S E

N E W Y O R K

returned an hour later with two paper bags. Shopping was forbidden on the Sabbath—I’d never purchased so much as a stick of gum on a Sunday—but Mary casually unpacked eggs, milk and pasta without acknowledging that every item she was placing in our communal fridge was a violation of the Lord’s Commandments. When she withdrew a can of Diet Coke, which my father said was a violation of the Lord’s counsel for health, I again fled to my room.

THE NEXT MORNING, I got on the bus going the wrong direction. By the time I’d corrected my mistake, the lecture was nearly finished. I stood awkwardly in the back until the professor, a thin woman with delicate features, motioned for me to take the only available seat, which was near the front. I sat down, feeling the weight of everyone’s eyes. The course was on Shakespeare, and I’d chosen it because I’d heard of Shakespeare and thought that was a good sign. But now I was here I realized I knew nothing about him. It was a word I’d heard, that was all.

When the bell rang, the professor approached my desk. “You don’t belong here,” she said.

I stared at her, confused. Of course I didn’t belong, but how did she know? I was on the verge of confessing the whole thing—that I’d never gone to school, that I hadn’t really met the requirements to graduate—when she added, “This class is for seniors.”

“There are classes for seniors?” I said.

She rolled her eyes as if I were trying to be funny. “This is 382. You should be in 110.”

It took most of the walk across campus before I understood what she’d said, then I checked my course schedule and, for the first time, noticed the numbers next to the course names.

I went to the registrar’s office, where I was told that every freshman-level course was full. What I should do, they said, was check online every few hours and join if someone dropped. By the end of the week I’d managed to squeeze into introductory courses in English, American history, music and religion, but I was stuck in a junior-level course on art in Western civilization.

Freshman English was taught by a cheerful woman in her late twenties who kept talking about something called the “essay form,” which, she assured us, we had learned in high school.

My next class, American history, was held in an auditorium named for the prophet Joseph Smith. I’d thought American history would be easy because Dad had taught us about the Founding Fathers—I knew all about Washington, Jefferson, Madison. But the professor barely mentioned them at all, and instead talked about “philosophical underpinnings” and the writings of Cicero and Hume, names I’d never heard.

In the first lecture, we were told that the next class would begin with a quiz on the readings. For two days I tried to wrestle meaning from the textbook’s dense passages, but terms like “civic humanism” and “the Scottish Enlightenment” dotted the page like black holes, sucking all the other words into them. I took the quiz and missed every question.

That failure sat uneasily in my mind. It was the first indication of whether I would be okay, whether whatever I had in my head by way of education was enough. After the quiz, the answer seemed clear: it was not enough. On realizing this, I might have resented my upbringing but I didn’t. My loyalty to my father had increased in proportion to the miles between us. On the mountain, I could rebel. But here, in this loud, bright place, surrounded by gentiles disguised as saints, I clung to every truth, every doctrine he had given me. Doctors were Sons of Perdition. Homeschooling was a commandment from the Lord.

Failing a quiz did nothing to undermine my new devotion to an old creed, but a lecture on Western art did.

The classroom was bright when I arrived, the morning sun pouring in warmly through a high wall of windows. I chose a seat next to a girl in a high-necked blouse. Her name was Vanessa. “We should stick together,” she said. “I think we’re the only freshmen in the whole class.”

The lecture began when an old man with small eyes and a sharp nose shuttered the windows. He flipped a switch and a slide projector filled the room with white light. The image was of a painting. The professor discussed the composition, the brushstrokes, the history. Then he moved to the next painting, and the next and the next.

Then the projector showed a peculiar image, of a man in a faded hat

and overcoat. Behind him loomed a concrete wall. He held a small paper near his face but he wasn't looking at it. He was looking at us.

I opened the picture book I'd purchased for the class so I could take a closer look. Something was written under the image in italics but I couldn't understand it. It had one of those black-hole words, right in the middle, devouring the rest. I'd seen other students ask questions, so I raised my hand.

The professor called on me, and I read the sentence aloud. When I came to the word, I paused. "I don't know this word," I said. "What does it mean?"

There was silence. Not a hush, not a muting of the noise, but utter, almost violent silence. No papers shuffled, no pencils scratched.

The professor's lips tightened. "Thanks for *that*," he said, then returned to his notes.

I scarcely moved for the rest of the lecture. I stared at my shoes, wondering what had happened, and why, whenever I looked up, there was always someone staring at me as if I was a freak. Of course I *was* a freak, and I knew it, but I didn't understand how *they* knew it.

When the bell rang, Vanessa shoved her notebook into her pack. Then she paused and said, "You shouldn't make fun of that. It's not a joke." She walked away before I could reply.

I stayed in my seat until everyone had gone, pretending the zipper on my coat was stuck so I could avoid looking anyone in the eye. Then I went straight to the computer lab to look up the word "Holocaust."

I don't know how long I sat there reading about it, but at some point I'd read enough. I leaned back and stared at the ceiling. I suppose I was in shock, but whether it was the shock of learning about something horrific, or the shock of learning about my own ignorance, I'm not sure. I do remember imagining for a moment, not the camps, not the pits or chambers of gas, but my mother's face. A wave of emotion took me, a feeling so intense, so unfamiliar, I wasn't sure what it was. It made me want to shout at her, at my own mother, and that frightened me.

I searched my memories. In some ways the word "Holocaust" wasn't wholly unfamiliar. Perhaps Mother *had* taught me about it, when we were picking rosehips or tincturing hawthorn. I did seem to have a vague

knowledge that Jews had been killed somewhere, long ago. But I'd thought it was a small conflict, like the Boston Massacre, which Dad talked about a lot, in which half a dozen people had been martyred by a tyrannical government. To have misunderstood it on this scale—five versus six million—seemed impossible.

I found Vanessa before the next lecture and apologized for the joke. I didn't explain, because I couldn't explain. I just said I was sorry and that I wouldn't do it again. To keep that promise, I didn't raise my hand for the rest of the semester.

THAT SATURDAY, I SAT at my desk with a stack of homework. Everything had to be finished that day because I could not violate the Sabbath.

I spent the morning and afternoon trying to decipher the history textbook, without much success. In the evening, I tried to write a personal essay for English, but I'd never written an essay before—except for the ones on sin and repentance, which no one had ever read—and I didn't know how. I had no idea what the teacher meant by the “essay form.” I scribbled a few sentences, crossed them out, then began again. I repeated this until it was past midnight.

I knew I should stop—this was the Lord's time—but I hadn't even started the assignment for music theory, which was due at seven A.M. on Monday. The Sabbath begins when I wake up, I reasoned, and kept working.

I awoke with my face pressed to the desk. The room was bright. I could hear Shannon and Mary in the kitchen. I put on my Sunday dress and the three of us walked to church. Because it was a congregation of students, everyone was sitting with their roommates, so I settled into a pew with mine. Shannon immediately began chatting with the girl behind us. I looked around the chapel and was again struck by how many women were wearing skirts cut above the knee.

The girl talking to Shannon said we should come over that afternoon to see a movie. Mary and Shannon agreed but I shook my head. I didn't watch movies on Sunday.

Shannon rolled her eyes. "She's *very* devout," she whispered.

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.

The service ended and we filed into Sunday school. Shannon and Mary chose seats near the front. They saved me one but I hesitated, thinking of how I'd broken the Sabbath. I'd been here less than a week, and already I had robbed the Lord of an hour. Perhaps *that* was why Dad hadn't wanted me to come: because he knew that by living with them, with people whose faith was *less*, I risked becoming like them.

Shannon waved to me and her V-neck plunged. I walked past her and folded myself into a corner, as far from Shannon and Mary as I could get. I was pleased by the familiarity of the arrangement: me, pressed into the corner, away from the other children, a precise reproduction of every Sunday school lesson from my childhood. It was the only sensation of familiarity I'd felt since coming to this place, and I relished it.

Blood and Feathers

AFTER THAT, I RARELY SPOKE TO SHANNON OR MARY AND THEY rarely spoke to me, except to remind me to do my share of the chores, which I never did. The apartment looked fine to me. So what if there were rotting peaches in the fridge and dirty dishes in the sink? So what if the smell slapped you in the face when you came through the door? To my mind if the stench was bearable, the house was clean, and I extended this philosophy to my person. I never used soap except when I showered, usually once or twice a week, and sometimes I didn't use it even then. When I left the bathroom in the morning, I marched right past the hallway sink where Shannon and Mary always—*always*—washed their hands. I saw their raised eyebrows and thought of Grandma-over-in-town. *Frivolous*, I told myself. *I don't pee on my hands.*

The atmosphere in the apartment was tense. Shannon looked at me like I was a rabid dog, and I did nothing to reassure her.

MY BANK ACCOUNT DECREASED steadily. I had been worried that I might not pass my classes, but a month into the semester, after I'd paid tuition and rent and bought food and books, I began to think that even if I did pass I wouldn't be coming back to school for one obvious reason:

I couldn't afford it. I looked up the requirements for a scholarship online. A full-tuition waiver would require a near-perfect GPA.

I was only a month into the semester, but even so I knew a scholarship was comically out of reach. American history was getting easier, but only in that I was no longer failing the quizzes outright. I was doing well in music theory, but I struggled in English. My teacher said I had a knack for writing but that my language was oddly formal and stilted. I didn't tell her that I'd learned to read and write by reading only the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and speeches by Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

The real trouble, however, was Western Civ. To me, the lectures were gibberish, probably because for most of January, I thought Europe was a country, not a continent, so very little of what the professor said made sense. And after the Holocaust incident, I wasn't about to ask for clarification.

Even so, it was my favorite class, because of Vanessa. We sat together for every lecture. I liked her because she seemed like the same kind of Mormon I was: she wore high-necked, loose-fitting clothing, and she'd told me that she never drank Coke or did homework on Sunday. She was the only person I'd met at the university who didn't seem like a gentile.

In February, the professor announced that instead of a single mid-term he would be giving monthly exams, the first of which would be the following week. I didn't know how to prepare. There wasn't a textbook for the class, just the picture book of paintings and a few CDs of classical compositions. I listened to the music while flipping through the paintings. I made a vague effort to remember who had painted or composed what, but I didn't memorize spelling. The ACT was the only exam I'd ever taken, and it had been multiple choice, so I assumed all exams were multiple choice.

The morning of the exam, the professor instructed everyone to take out their blue books. I barely had time to wonder what a blue book was before everyone produced one from their bags. The motion was fluid, synchronized, as if they had practiced it. I was the only dancer on the stage who seemed to have missed rehearsal. I asked Vanessa if she had a

spare, and she did. I opened it, expecting a multiple-choice exam, but it was blank.

The windows were shuttered; the projector flickered on, displaying a painting. We had sixty seconds to write the work's title and the artist's full name. My mind produced only a dull buzz. This continued through several questions: I sat completely still, giving no answers at all.

A Caravaggio flickered onto the screen—*Judith Beheading Holofernes*. I stared at the image, that of a young girl calmly drawing a sword toward her body, pulling the blade through a man's neck as she might have pulled a string through cheese. I'd beheaded chickens with Dad, clutching their scabby legs while he raised the ax and brought it down with a loud *thwack*, then tightening my grip, holding on with all I had, when the chicken convulsed with death, scattering feathers and spattering my jeans with blood. Remembering the chickens, I wondered at the plausibility of Caravaggio's scene: no one had *that* look on their face—that tranquil, disinterested expression—when taking off something's head.

I knew the painting was by Caravaggio but I remembered only the surname and even that I couldn't spell. I was certain the title was *Judith Beheading Someone* but could not have produced *Holofernes* even if it had been my neck behind the blade.

Thirty seconds left. Perhaps I could score a few points if I could just get something—anything—on the page, so I sounded out the name phonetically: “Carevajio.” That didn’t look right. One of the letters was doubled up, I remembered, so I scratched that out and wrote “Carreva-gio.” Wrong again. I auditioned different spellings, each worse than the last. Twenty seconds.

Next to me, Vanessa was scribbling steadily. Of course she was. She belonged here. Her handwriting was neat, and I could read what she'd written: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. And next to it, in equally pristine print, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Ten seconds. I copied the text, not including Caravaggio's full name because, in a selective display of integrity, I decided that would be cheating. The projector flashed to the next slide.

I glanced at Vanessa's paper a few more times during the exam but it

was hopeless. I couldn't copy her essays, and I lacked the factual and stylistic know-how to compose my own. In the absence of skill or knowledge, I must have scribbled down whatever occurred to me. I don't recall whether we were asked to evaluate *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, but if we were I'm sure I would have given my impressions: that the calm on the girl's face didn't sit well with my experience slaughtering chickens. Dressed in the right language this might have made a fantastic answer—something about the woman's serenity standing in powerful counterpoint to the general realism of the piece. But I doubt the professor was much impressed by my observation that, "When you chop a chicken's head off, you shouldn't smile because you might get blood and feathers in your mouth."

The exam ended. The shutters were opened. I walked outside and stood in the winter chill, gazing up at the pinnacles of the Wasatch Mountains. I wanted to stay. The mountains were as unfamiliar and menacing as ever, but I wanted to stay.

I waited a week for the exam results, and twice during that time I dreamed of Shawn, of finding him lifeless on the asphalt, of turning his body and seeing his face alight in crimson. Suspended between fear of the past and fear of the future, I recorded the dream in my journal. Then, without any explanation, as if the connection between the two were obvious, I wrote, *I don't understand why I wasn't allowed to get a decent education as a child.*

The results were handed back a few days later. I had failed.

ONE WINTER, WHEN I was very young, Luke found a great horned owl in the pasture, unconscious and half frozen. It was the color of soot, and seemed as big as me to my child eyes. Luke carried it into the house, where we marveled at its soft plumage and pitiless talons. I remember stroking its striped feathers, so smooth they were waterlike, as my father held its limp body. I knew that if it were conscious, I would never get this close. I was in defiance of nature just by touching it.

Its feathers were soaked in blood. A thorn had lanced its wing. "I'm not a vet," Mother said. "I treat *people*." But she removed the thorn and

cleaned the wound. Dad said the wing would take weeks to mend, and that the owl would wake up long before then. Finding itself trapped, surrounded by predators, it would beat itself to death trying to get free. It was wild, he said, and in the wild that wound was fatal.

We laid the owl on the linoleum by the back door and, when it awoke, told Mother to stay out of the kitchen. Mother said hell would freeze over before she surrendered her kitchen to an owl, then marched in and began slamming pots to make breakfast. The owl flopped about pathetically, its talons scratching the door, bashing its head in a panic. We cried, and Mother retreated. Two hours later Dad had blocked off half the kitchen with plywood sheets. The owl convalesced there for several weeks. We trapped mice to feed it, but sometimes it didn't eat them, and we couldn't clear away the carcasses. The smell of death was strong and foul.

The owl grew restless. When it began to refuse food, we opened the back door and let it escape. It wasn't fully healed, but Dad said its chances were better with the mountain than with us. It didn't belong. It couldn't be taught to belong.

I WANTED TO TELL SOMEONE I'd failed the exam, but something stopped me from calling Tyler. It might have been shame. Or it might have been that Tyler was preparing to be a father. He'd met his wife, Stefanie, at Purdue, and they'd married quickly. She didn't know anything about our family. To me, it felt as though he preferred his new life—his new family—to his old one.

I called home. Dad answered. Mother was delivering a baby, which she was doing more and more now the migraines had stopped.

"When will Mother be home?" I said.

"Don't know," said Dad. "Might as well ask the Lord as me, as He's the one deciding." He chuckled, then asked, "How's school?"

Dad and I hadn't spoken since he'd screamed at me about the VCR. I could tell he was trying to be supportive, but I didn't think I could admit to him that I was failing. I wanted to tell him it was going well. *So easy*, I imagined myself saying.

"Not great," I said instead. "I had no idea it would be this hard."

The line was silent, and I imagined Dad's stern face hardening. I waited for the jab I imagined he was preparing, but instead a quiet voice said, "It'll be okay, honey."

"It won't," I said. "There will be no scholarship. I'm not even going to pass." My voice was shaky now.

"If there's no scholarship, there's no scholarship," he said. "Maybe I can help with the money. We'll figure it out. Just be happy, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Come on home if you need."

I hung up, not sure what I'd just heard. I knew it wouldn't last, that the next time we spoke everything would be different, the tenderness of this moment forgotten, the endless struggle between us again in the foreground. But tonight he wanted to help. And that was something.

IN MARCH, THERE WAS ANOTHER exam in Western Civ. This time I made flash cards. I spent hours memorizing odd spellings, many of them French (France, I now understood, was a part of Europe). Jacques-Louis David and François Boucher: I couldn't say them but I could spell them.

My lecture notes were nonsensical, so I asked Vanessa if I could look at hers. She looked at me skeptically, and for a moment I wondered if she'd noticed me cheating off her exam. She said she wouldn't give me her notes but that we could study together, so after class I followed her to her dorm room. We sat on the floor with our legs crossed and our notebooks open in front of us.

I tried to read from my notes but the sentences were incomplete, scrambled. "Don't worry about your notes," Vanessa said. "They aren't as important as the textbook."

"What textbook?" I said.

"*The textbook*," Vanessa said. She laughed as if I were being funny. I tensed because I wasn't.

"I don't have a textbook," I said.

"Sure you do!" She held up the thick picture book I'd used to memorize titles and artists.

"Oh that," I said. "I looked at that."

"You *looked* at it? You didn't read it?"

I stared at her. I didn't understand. This was a class on music and art. We'd been given CDs with music to listen to, and a book with pictures of art to look at. It hadn't occurred to me to read the art book any more than it had to read the CDs.

"I thought we were just supposed to look at the pictures." This sounded stupid when said aloud.

"So when the syllabus assigned pages fifty through eighty-five, you didn't think you had to *read* anything?"

"I looked at the pictures," I said again. It sounded worse the second time.

Vanessa began thumbing through the book, which suddenly looked very much like a textbook.

"That's your problem then," she said. "You have to read the textbook." As she said this, her voice lilted with sarcasm, as if this blunder, after everything else—after joking about the Holocaust and glancing at her test—was too much and she was done with me. She said it was time for me to go; she had to study for another class. I picked up my notebook and left.

"Read the textbook" turned out to be excellent advice. On the next exam I scored a B, and by the end of the semester I was pulling A's. It was a miracle and I interpreted it as such. I continued to study until two or three A.M. each night, believing it was the price I had to pay to earn God's support. I did well in my history class, better in English, and best of all in music theory. A full-tuition scholarship was unlikely, but I could maybe get half.

During the final lecture in Western Civ, the professor announced that so many students had failed the first exam, he'd decided to drop it altogether. And *poof*. My failing grade was gone. I wanted to punch the air, give Vanessa a high five. Then I remembered that she didn't sit with me anymore.