Educated

PART ONE

Chapitre 1
Choose the Good

My strongest memory is not a memory. It's something I imagined,then came to remember as if it had happened. The memory wasformed when I was five, just before I turned six, from a story my fathertold in such detail that I and my brothers and had each conjuredour own cinematic version, with gunfire and shouts. Mine hadcrickets. That's the sound I hear as my family huddles in the kitchen,lights off, hiding from the Feds who've surrounded the house. Awoman reaches for a glass of water and her silhouette is lighted by themoon. A shot echoes like the lash of a whip and she falls. In mymemory it's always Mother who falls, and she has a baby in her arms. The baby doesn't make sense—I'm the youngest of my mother'sseven children—but like I said, none of this happened.

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A YEAR AFTER MY FATHER told us that story, we gathered one evening tohear him read aloud from Isaiah, a prophecy about Immanuel. He saton our mustard-colored sofa, a large Bible open in his lap. Mother wasnext to him. The rest of us were strewn across the shaggy brown carpet. "Butter and honey shall he eat," Dad droned, low and monotone, weary from a long day hauling scrap. "That he may know to refuse theevil, and choose the good." There was a heavy pause. We sat quietly.My father was not a tall man but he was able to command a room. He had a presence about him, the solemnity of an oracle. His handswere thick and leathery—the hands of a man who'd been hard at workall his life—and they grasped the Bible firmly. He read the passage aloud a second time, then a third, then a fourth.With each repetition the pitch of his voice climbed higher. His eyes,which moments before had been swollen with fatigue, were now wideand alert. There was a divine doctrine here, he said. He would inquireof the . The next morning Dad purged our fridge of milk, yogurt and cheese,and that evening when he came home, his truck was loaded with fiftygallons of honey. "Isaiah doesn't say which is evil, butter or honey," Dad said,grinning as my brothers lugged the white tubs to the basement. "But ifyou ask, the will tell you!" When Dad read the verse to his mother, she laughed in his face. "Igot some pennies in my purse," she said. "You better take them. They'llbe all the sense you got." Grandma had a thin, angular face and an endless store of fauxIndian jewelry, all silver and turquoise, which hung in clumps fromher spindly neck and fingers. Because she lived down the hill from us,near the highway, we called her Grandma-down-the-hill. This was todistinguish her from our mother's mother, who we called Grandma-over-in-town because she lived fifteen miles south, in the only town inthe county, which had a single stoplight and a grocery store. Dad and his mother got along like two cats with their tails tiedtogether. They could talk for a week and not agree about anything, butthey were tethered by their devotion to the mountain. My father'sfamily had been living at the base of Buck's Peak for half a century. Grandma's daughters had married and moved away, but my fatherstayed, building a shabby yellow house, which he would never quitefinish, just up the hill from his mother's, at the base of the mountain,and plunking a junkyard—one of several—next to her manicured lawn. They argued daily, about the mess from the junkyard but more oftenabout us kids. Grandma thought we should be in school and not, asshe put it, "roaming the mountain like savages." Dad said publicschool was a ploy by the Government to lead children away from God."I may as well surrender my kids to the devil himself," he said, "assend them down the road to that school." God told Dad to share the revelation with the people who lived andfarmed in the shadow of Buck's Peak. On Sundays, nearly everyonegathered at the church, a hickory-colored chapel just off the highwaywith the small, restrained steeple common to Mormon churches. Dadcornered fathers as they left their pews. He started with his cousinJim, who listened good-naturedly while Dad waved his Bible andexplained the sinfulness of milk. Jim grinned, then clapped Dad on theshoulder and said no righteous God would deprive a man ofhomemade strawberry ice cream on a hot summer afternoon. Jim'swife tugged on his arm. As he slid past us I caught a whiff of manure.Then I remembered: the big dairy farm a mile north of Buck's Peak,that was Jim's.

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AFTER DAD TOOK UP preaching against milk, Grandma jammed herfridge full of it. She and Grandpa only drank skim but pretty soon itwas all there—two percent, whole, even chocolate. She seemed tobelieve this was an important line to hold. Breakfast became a test of loyalty. Every morning, my family sataround a large table of reworked red oak and ate either seven-graincereal, with honey and molasses, or seven-grain pancakes, also withhoney and molasses. Because there were nine of us, the pancakes werenever cooked all the way through. I didn't mind the cereal if I couldsoak it in milk, letting the cream gather up the grist and seep into the pellets, but since the revelation we'd been having it with water. It waslike eating a bowl of mud. It wasn't long before I began to think of all that milk spoiling inGrandma's fridge. Then I got into the habit of skipping breakfast eachmorning and going straight to the barn. I'd slop the pigs and fill thetrough for the cows and horses, then I'd hop over the corral fence, looparound the barn and step through Grandma's side door. On one such morning, as I sat at the counter watching Grandmapour a bowl of cornflakes, she said, "How would you like to go toschool?" "I wouldn't like it," I said."How do you know," she barked. "You ain't never tried it."She poured the milk and handed me the bowl, then she perched at the bar, directly across from me, and watched as I shoveled spoonfulsinto my mouth. "We're leaving tomorrow for Arizona," she told me, but I alreadyknew. She and Grandpa always went to Arizona when the weatherbegan to turn. Grandpa said he was too old for Idaho winters; the coldput an ache in his bones. "Get yourself up real early," Grandma said,"around five, and we'll take you with us. Put you in school." I shifted on my stool. I tried to imagine school but couldn't. InsteadI pictured Sunday school, which I attended each week and which Ihated. A boy named Aaron had told all the girls that I couldn't readbecause I didn't go to school, and now none of them would talk to me. "Dad said I can go?" I said."No," Grandma said. "But we'll be long gone by the time he realizes you're missing." She set my bowl in the sink and gazed out thewindow. Grandma was a force of nature—impatient, aggressive, self-possessed. To look at her was to take a step back. She dyed her hairblack and this intensified her already severe features, especially hereyebrows, which she smeared on each morning in thick, inky arches.She drew them too large and this made her face seem stretched. Theywere also drawn too high and draped the rest of her features into an expression of boredom, almost sarcasm."You should be in school," she said."Won't Dad just make you bring me back?" I said."Your dad can't make me do a damned thing." Grandma stood, squaring herself. "If he wants you, he'll have to come get you." Shehesitated, and for a moment looked ashamed. "I talked to himyesterday. He won't be able to fetch you back for a long while. He'sbehind on that shed he's building in town. He can't pack up and driveto Arizona, not while the weather holds and he and the boys can worklong days." Grandma's scheme was well plotted. Dad always worked from sunupuntil sundown in the weeks before the first snow, trying to stockpileenough money from hauling scrap and building barns to outlast thewinter, when jobs were scarce. Even if his mother ran off with hisyoungest child, he wouldn't be able to stop working, not until theforklift was encased in ice. "I'll need to feed the animals before we go," I said. "He'll notice I'mgone for sure if the cows break through the fence looking for water."

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I DIDN'T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. I sat on the kitchen floor and watched thehours tick by. One A.M. Two. Three. At four I stood and put my boots by the back door. They were cakedin manure, and I was sure Grandma wouldn't let them into her car. Ipictured them on her porch, abandoned, while I ran off shoeless toArizona. I imagined what would happen when my family discovered I wasmissing. My brother Richard and I often spent whole days on themountain, so it was likely no one would notice until sundown, whenRichard came home for dinner and I didn't. I pictured my brotherspushing out the door to search for me. They'd try the junkyard first,hefting iron slabs in case some stray sheet of metal had shifted andpinned me. Then they'd move outward, sweeping the farm, crawling up trees and into the barn attic. Finally, they'd turn to the mountain.It would be past dusk by then—that moment just before night sets in, when the landscape is visible only as darkness and lighter darkness,and you feel the world around you more than you see it. I imagined mybrothers spreading over the mountain, searching the black forests. Noone would talk; everyone's thoughts would be the same. Things couldgo horribly wrong on the mountain. Cliffs appeared suddenly. Feralhorses, belonging to my grandfather, ran wild over thick banks ofwater hemlock, and there were more than a few rattlesnakes. We'ddone this search before when a calf went missing from the barn. In thevalley you'd find an injured animal; on the mountain, a dead one. I imagined Mother standing by the back door, her eyes sweeping thedark ridge, when my father came home to tell her they hadn't foundme. My , Audrey, would suggest that someone ask Grandma, andMother would say Grandma had left that morning for Arizona. Thosewords would hang in the air for a moment, then everyone would knowwhere I'd gone. I imagined my father's face, his dark eyes shrinking,his mouth clamping into a frown as he turned to my mother. "Youthink she chose to go?" Low and sorrowful, his voice echoed. Then it was drowned out bysounds from another conjured remembrance—crickets, then gunfire,then silence.

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THE EVENT WAS A FAMOUS ONE, I would later learn—like Wounded Kneeor Waco—but when my father first told us the story, it felt like no onein the world knew about it except us. It began near the end of canning season, which other kids probablycalled "summer." My family always spent the warm months bottlingfruit for storage, which Dad said we'd need in the Days ofAbomination. One evening, Dad was uneasy when he came in from thejunkyard. He paced the kitchen during dinner, hardly touching a bite.We had to get everything in order, he said. There was little time. We spent the next day boiling and skinning peaches. By sundown we'd filled dozens of Mason jars, which were set out in perfect rows,still warm from the pressure cooker. Dad surveyed our work, countingthe jars and muttering to himself, then he turned to Mother and said,"It's not enough." That night Dad called a family meeting, and we gathered around thekitchen table, because it was wide and long, and could seat all of us.We had a right to know what we were up against, he said. He wasstanding at the of the table; the rest of us perched on benches,studying the thick planks of red oak. "There's a family not far from here," Dad said. "They're freedomfighters. They wouldn't let the Government brainwash their kids inthem public schools, so the Feds came after them." Dad exhaled, longand slow. "The Feds surrounded the family's cabin, kept them lockedin there for weeks, and when a hungry child, a little boy, snuck out togo hunting, the Feds shot him dead." I scanned my brothers. I'd never seen fear on Luke's face before."They're still in the cabin," Dad said. "They keep the lights off, and they crawl on the floor, away from the doors and windows. I don'tknow how much food they got. Might be they'll starve before the Fedsgive up." No one spoke. Eventually Luke, who was twelve, asked if we couldhelp. "No," Dad said. "Nobody can. They're trapped in their own home.But they got their guns, you can bet that's why the Feds ain't chargedin." He paused to sit, folding himself onto the low bench in slow, stiffmovements. He looked old to my eyes, worn out. "We can't help them,but we can help ourselves. When the Feds come to Buck's Peak, we'llbe ready." That night, Dad dragged a pile of old army bags up from thebasement. He said they were our " for the hills" bags. We spentthat night packing them with supplies—herbal medicines, waterpurifiers, flint and steel. Dad had bought several boxes of militaryMREs—Meals Ready-to-Eat—and we put as many as we could fit intoour packs, imagining the moment when, having fled the house andhiding ourselves in the wild plum trees near the creek, we'd eat them.Some of my brothers stowed guns in their packs but I had only a small knife, and even so my pack was as big as me by the time we'd finished.I asked Luke to hoist it onto a shelf in my closet, but Dad told me tokeep it low, where I could fetch it quick, so I slept with it in my bed. I practiced slipping the bag onto my back and running with it—Ididn't want to be left behind. I imagined our escape, a midnight flightto the safety of the . The mountain, I understood, was our ally.To those who knew her she could be kind, but to intruders she waspure treachery, and this would give us an advantage. Then again, if wewere going to take cover on the mountain when the Feds came, I didn'understand why we were canning all these peaches. We couldn't haul athousand heavy Mason jars up the peak. Or did we need the peachesso we could bunker down in the house, like the Weavers, and fight itout? Fighting it out seemed likely, especially a few days later when Dadcame home with more than a dozen military-surplus rifles, mostlySKSs, their thin silver bayonets folded neatly under their barrels. Theguns arrived in narrow tin boxes and were packed in Cosmoline, abrownish substance the consistency of lard that had to be strippedaway. After they'd been cleaned, my brother Tyler chose one and set iton a sheet of black plastic, which he folded over the rifle, sealing itwith yards of silvery duct tape. Hoisting the bundle onto his shoulder,he carried it down the hill and dropped it next to the red railroad car.Then he began to dig. When the hole was wide and deep, he droppedthe rifle into it, and I watched him cover it with dirt, his musclesswelling from the exertion, his jaw clenched. Soon after, Dad bought a machine to manufacture bullets fromspent cartridges. Now we could last longer in a standoff, he said. Ithought of my " for the hills" bag, waiting in my bed, and of therifle hidden near the railcar, and began to worry about the bullet-making machine. It was bulky and bolted to an iron workstation in thebasement. If we were taken by surprise, I figured we wouldn't havetime to fetch it. I wondered if we should bury it, too, with the rifle. We kept on bottling peaches. I don't remember how many dayspassed or how many jars we'd added to our stores before Dad told usmore of the story. "Randy Weaver's been shot," Dad said, his voice thin and erratic."He left the cabin to fetch his son's body, and the Feds shot him." I'dnever seen my father cry, but now tears were dripping in a steadystream from his nose. He didn't wipe them, just let them spill onto hisshirt. "His wife heard the shot and ran to the window, holding theirbaby. Then came the second shot." Mother was sitting with her arms folded, one hand across her chest,the other clamped over her mouth. I stared at our speckled linoleumwhile Dad told us how the baby had been lifted from its mother's arms,its face smeared with her blood. Until that moment, some part of me had wanted the Feds to come,had craved the adventure. Now I felt real fear. I pictured my brotherscrouching in the dark, their sweaty hands slipping down their rifles. Ipictured Mother, tired and parched, drawing back away from thewindow. I pictured myself lying flat on the floor, still and silent,listening to the sharp chirp of crickets in the field. Then I saw Motherstand and reach for the kitchen tap. A white flash, the roar of gunfire,and she fell. I leapt to catch the baby. Dad never told us the end of the story. We didn't have a TV or radio,so perhaps he never learned how it ended himself. The last thing Iremember him saying about it was, "Next time, it could be us." Those words would stay with me. I would hear their echo in thechirp of crickets, in the squish of peaches dropping into a glass jar, inthe metallic chink of an SKS being cleaned. I would hear them everymorning when I passed the railroad car and paused over thechickweed and bull thistle growing where Tyler had buried the rifle.Long after Dad had forgotten about the revelation in Isaiah, andMother was again hefting plastic jugs of "Western Family 2%" into thefridge, I would remember the Weavers.

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IT WAS ALMOST FIVE A.M. I returned to my room, my full of crickets and gunfire. In thelower bunk, Audrey was snoring, a low, contented hum that invited me to do the same. Instead I climbed up to my bed, crossed my legs andlooked out the window. Five passed. Then six. At seven, Grandmaappeared and I watched her pace up and down her patio, turning everyfew moments to gaze up the hill at our house. Then she and Grandpastepped into their car and pulled onto the highway. When the car was gone, I got out of bed and ate a bowl of bran withwater. Outside I was greeted by Luke's goat, Kamikaze, who nibbledmy shirt as I walked to the barn. I passed the go-kart Richard wasbuilding from an old lawnmower. I slopped the pigs, filled the troughand moved Grandpa's horses to a new pasture. After I'd finished I climbed the railway car and looked out over thevalley. It was easy to pretend the car was moving, speeding away, thatany moment the valley might disappear behind me. I'd spent hoursplaying that fantasy through in my but today the reel wouldn'ttake. I turned west, away from the fields, and faced the peak. The was always brightest in spring, just after the conifersemerged from the snow, their deep green needles seeming almostblack against the fawny browns of soil and bark. It was autumn now. Icould still see her but she was fading: the reds and yellows of a dyingsummer obscured her dark form. Soon it would snow. In the valleythat first snow would melt but on the mountain it would linger,burying the until spring, when she would reappear, watchful.