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Excerpt from *Educated: A Memoir*.

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Editor's note

By the time Tara Westover arrived in Cambridge, she had already overcome formidable challenges. Entering Brigham Young University at the age of seventeen was, to her, the beginning of a new life in almost every respect. She had been “home schooled” in a highly idiosyncratic manner. In her first art history course, she asked the professor to explain a sentence in the textbook with the word “Holocaust”, which was totally unfamiliar to her. Tara’s dedication to her studies led her to an opportunity to spend a year abroad at Cambridge. The chapter which begins her association with Professor Steinberg is entitled “Pygmalion”.

Excerpt from *Educated: A Memoir*

TARA WESTOVER

I wanted the mind of a scholar, but it seemed that Dr. Kerry saw in me the mind of a roofer. The other students belonged in a library; I belonged in a crane.

The first week passed in a blur of lectures. In the second week, every student was assigned a supervisor to guide their research. My supervisor, I learned, was the eminent Professor Jonathan Steinberg, a former vice-master of a Cambridge college, who was much celebrated for his writings on the Holocaust.

My first meeting with Professor Steinberg took place a few days later. I waited at the porter’s lodge until a thin man appeared and, producing a set of heavy keys, unlocked a wooden door set into the stone. I followed him up a spiral staircase and into the clock tower itself, where there was a well-lit room with simple furnishings: two chairs and a wooden table.

I could hear the blood pounding behind my ears as I sat down. Professor Steinberg was in his seventies but I would not have described him as an old man. He was lithe, and his eyes moved about the room with probing energy. His speech was measured and fluid.

“I am Professor Steinberg,” he said. “What would you like to read?”

I mumbled something about historiography. I had decided to study not history, but historians. I suppose my interest came from the sense of groundlessness I’d felt since learning about the Holocaust and the civil

rights movement – since realizing that what a person knows about the past is limited, and will always be limited, to what they are told by others. I knew what it was to have a misconception corrected – a misconception of such magnitude that shifting it shifted the world. Now I needed to understand how the great gatekeepers of history had come to terms with their own ignorance and partiality. I thought if I could accept that what they had written was not absolute but was the result of a biased process of conversation and revision, maybe I could reconcile myself with the fact that the history most people agreed upon was not the history I had been taught. Dad could be wrong, and the great historians Carlyle and Macaulay and Trevelyan could be wrong, but from the ashes of their dispute I could construct a world to live in. In knowing the ground was not ground at all, I hoped I could stand on it.

I doubt I managed to communicate any of this. When I finished talking, Professor Steinberg eyed me for a moment, then said, “Tell me about your education. Where did you attend school?”

The air was immediately sucked from the room.

“I grew up in Idaho,” I said.

“And you attended school there?”

It occurs to me in retrospect that someone might have told Professor Steinberg about me, perhaps Dr. Kerry. Or perhaps he perceived that I was avoiding his question, and that made him curious. Whatever the reason, he wasn’t satisfied until I had admitted that I’d never been to school.

“How marvelous,” he said, smiling. “It’s as if I’ve stepped into Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.”

For two months I had weekly meetings with Professor Steinberg. I was never assigned readings. We read only what I asked to read, whether it was a book or a page.

None of my professors at BYU had examined my writing the way Professor Steinberg did. No comma, no period, no adjective or adverb was beneath his interest. He made no distinction between grammar and content, between form and substance. A poorly written sentence was a poorly conceived idea, and in his view the grammatical logic was as much in need of correction. “Tell me,” he would say, “why have you placed this comma here? What relationship between these phrases are you hoping to establish?” When I gave my explanation sometimes he would say, “Quite right,” and other times he would correct me with lengthy explanations of syntax.

After I’d been meeting with Professor Steinberg for a month, I wrote an

essay comparing Edmund Burke with Publius, the persona under which James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay had written *The Federalist Papers*. I barely slept for two weeks: every moment my eyes were open, I was either reading or thinking about those texts.

From my father I had learned that books were to be either adored or exiled. Books that were of God – books written by the Mormon prophets or the Founding Fathers – were not to be studied so much as cherished, like a thing perfect in itself. I had been taught to read the words of men like Madison as a cast into which I ought to pour the plaster of my own mind, to be reshaped according to the contours of their faultless model. I read them to learn what to think, not how to think for myself. Books that were not of God were banished; they were a danger, powerful and irresistible in their cunning.

To write my essay I had to read books differently, without giving myself over to either fear or adoration. Because Burke had defended the British monarchy, Dad would have said he was an agent of tyranny. He wouldn't have wanted the book in the house. There was a thrill in trusting myself to read the words. I felt a similar thrill in reading Madison, Hamilton and Jay, especially on those occasions when I discarded their conclusions in favor of Burke's, or when it seemed to me that their ideas were not really different in substance, only in form. There were wonderful suppositions embedded in this method of reading: that books are not tricks, and that I was not feeble.

I finished the essay and sent it to Professor Steinberg. Two days later, when I arrived for our next meeting, he was subdued. He peered at me from across the table. I waited for him to say the essay was a disaster, the product of an ignorant mind, that it had overreached, drawn too many conclusions from too little material.

"I have been teaching in Cambridge for thirty years," he said. "And this is one of the best essays I've read."

I was prepared for insults but not for this.

Professor Steinberg must have said more about the essay but I heard nothing. My mind was consumed with a wrenching need to get out of that room. In that moment I was no longer in a clock tower in Cambridge. I was seventeen, in a red jeep, and a boy I loved had just touched my hand. I bolted.

I could tolerate any form of cruelty better than kindness. Praise was a poison to me; I choked on it. I wanted the professor to shout at me, wanted it so deeply I felt dizzy from the deprivation. The ugliness of me had to

be given expression. If it was not expressed in his voice, I would need to express it in mine.

I don't remember leaving the clock tower, or how I passed the afternoon. That evening there was a black-tie dinner. The hall was lit by candlelight, which was beautiful, but it cheered me for another reason: I wasn't wearing formal clothing, just a black shirt and black pants, and I thought people might not notice in the dim lighting. My friend Laura arrived late. She explained that her parents had visited and taken her to France. She had only just returned. She was wearing a dress of rich purple with crisp pleats in the skirt. The hemline bounced several inches above her knee, and for a moment I thought the dress was whorish, until she said her father had bought it for her in Paris. A gift from one's father could not be whorish. A gift from one's father seemed to me the definitive signal that a woman was not a whore. I struggled with this dissonance – a whorish dress, gifted to a loved daughter – until the meal had been finished and the plates cleared away.

At my next supervision, Professor Steinberg said that when I applied for graduate school, he would make sure I was accepted to whatever institution I chose. "Have you visited Harvard?" he said. "Or perhaps you prefer Cambridge?"

I imagined myself in Cambridge, a graduate student wearing a long black robe that swished as I strode through ancient corridors. Then I was hunching in a bathroom, my arm behind my back, my head in the toilet. I tried to focus on the student but I couldn't. I couldn't picture the girl in the whirling black gown without seeing that *other* girl. Scholar or whore, both could not be true. One was a lie.

"I can't go," I said. "I can't pay the fees."

"Let me worry about the fees," Professor Steinberg said.

In late August, on our last night in Cambridge, there was a final dinner in the great hall. The tables were set with more knives, forks and goblets than I'd ever seen; the paintings on the wall seemed ghostly in the candlelight. I felt exposed by the elegance and yet somehow made invisible by it. I stared at the other students as they passed, taking in every silk dress, every heavily lined eye. I obsessed over the beauty of them. At dinner I listened to the cheerful chatter of my friends while longing for the isolation of my room. Professor Steinberg was seated at the high table. Each time I glanced at him, I felt that old instinct at work in me, tensing my muscles, preparing me to take flight.