Hillbilly Elegy

A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis

J.D. VANCE

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Dedication

For Mamaw and Papaw, my very own hillbilly terminators

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Introduction

My name is J.D. Vance, and I think I should start with a confession: I find the existence of the book you hold in your hands somewhat absurd. It says right there on the cover that it's a memoir, but I'm thirty-one years old, and I'll be the first to admit that I've accomplished nothing great in my life, certainly nothing that would justify a complete stranger paying money to read about it. The coolest thing I've done, at least on paper, is graduate from Yale Law School, something thirteen-year-old J.D. Vance would have considered ludicrous. But about two hundred people do the same thing every year, and trust me, you don't want to read about most of their lives. I am not a senator, a governor, or a former cabinet secretary. I haven't started a billion-dollar company or a world-changing nonprofit. I have a nice job, a happy marriage, a comfortable home, and two lively dogs.

So I didn't write this book because I've accomplished something extraordinary. I wrote this book because I've achieved something quite ordinary, which doesn't happen to most kids who grow up like me. You see, I grew up poor, in the Rust Belt, in an Ohio steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope for as long as I can remember. I have, to put it mildly, a complex relationship with my parents, one of whom has struggled with addiction for nearly my entire life. My grandparents, neither of whom graduated from high

manage to avoid welfare; and if they' re unlucky, they' ll die of a heroin overdose, as happened to dozens in my small hometown just last year.

I was one of those kids with a grim future. I almost failed out of high school. I nearly gave in to the deep anger and resentment harbored by everyone around me. Today people look at me, at my job and my Ivy League credentials, and assume that I' m some sort of genius, that only a truly extraordinary person could have made it to where I am today. With all due respect to those people, I think that theory is a load of bullshit. Whatever talents I have, I almost squandered until a handful of loving people rescued me.

That is the real story of my life, and that is why I wrote this book. I want people to know what it feels like to nearly give up on yourself and why you might do it. I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children. I want people to understand the American Dream as my family and I encountered it. I want people to understand how upward mobility really feels. And I want people to understand something I learned only recently: that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us.

There is an ethnic component lurking in the background of my story. In our race-conscious society, our vocabulary often extends no further than the color of someone' s skin — "black people," "Asians," "white privilege." Sometimes these broad categories are useful, but to understand my story, you have to delve into the details. I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition—their ancestors were day laborers in the Southern slave economy, sharecroppers after that, coal miners after that, and machinists and millworkers during more recent times. Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends, and family.

The Scots-Irish are one of the most distinctive subgroups in America. As one observer noted, "In traveling across America, the Scots-Irish have consistently blown my mind as far and away the most persistent and unchanging regional subculture in the country. Their family structures, religion and politics, and social lives all remain unchanged compared to the wholesale abandonment of tradition that' s occurred nearly everywhere else." 1 This distinctive embrace of cultural tradition comes along with many good traits—an intense

they look, how they act, or, most important, how they talk. To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart.

If ethnicity is one side of the coin, then geography is the other. When the first wave of Scots-Irish immigrants landed in the New World in the eighteenth century, they were deeply attracted to the Appalachian Mountains. This region is admittedly huge—stretching from Alabama to Georgia in the South to Ohio to parts of New York in the North—but the culture of Greater Appalachia is remarkably cohesive. My family, from the hills of eastern Kentucky, describe themselves as hillbillies, but Hank Williams, Jr.—born in Louisiana and an Alabama resident—also identified himself as one in his rural white anthem "A Country Boy Can Survive." It was Greater Appalachia's political reorientation from Democrat to Republican that redefined American politics after Nixon. And it is in Greater Appalachia where the fortunes of working-class whites seem dimmest. From low social mobility to poverty to divorce and drug addiction, my home is a hub of misery.

It is unsurprising, then, that we're a pessimistic bunch. What is more surprising is that, as surveys have found, working-class whites are the most pessimistic group in America. More pessimistic than Latino immigrants, many of whom suffer unthinkable poverty. More pessimistic than black Americans, whose material prospects continue to lag behind those of whites. While reality permits some degree of cynicism, the fact that hillbillies like me are more down about the future than many other groups—some of whom are clearly more destitute than we are—suggests that something else is going on.

Indeed it is. We're more socially isolated than ever, and we pass that isolation down to our children. Our religion has changed—built around churches heavy on emotional rhetoric but light on the kind of social support necessary to enable poor kids to do well. Many of us have dropped out of the labor force or have chosen not to relocate for better opportunities. Our men suffer from a peculiar crisis of masculinity in which some of the very traits that our culture inculcates make it difficult to succeed in a changing world.

When I mention the plight of my community, I am often met with an explanation that goes something like this: "Of course the prospects for working-class whites have worsened, J.D., but you're putting the chicken before the egg. They're divorcing more, marrying less, and experiencing less happiness because their economic opportunities have declined. If they only had better access to jobs, other parts of their lives would improve as well."

I once held this opinion myself, and I very desperately wanted to believe it during my

out, the white working class has lost both its economic security and the stable home and family life that comes with it.

But experience can be a difficult teacher, and it taught me that this story of economic insecurity is, at best, incomplete. A few years ago, during the summer before I enrolled at Yale Law School, I was looking for full-time work in order to finance my move to New Haven, Connecticut. A family friend suggested that I work for him in a medium-sized floor tile distribution business near my hometown. Floor tile is extraordinarily heavy: Each piece weighs anywhere from three to six pounds, and it' s usually packaged in cartons of eight to twelve pieces. My primary duty was to lift the floor tile onto a shipping pallet and prepare that pallet for departure. It wasn' t easy, but it paid thirteen dollars an hour and I needed the money, so I took the job and collected as many overtime shifts and extra hours as I could.

The tile business employed about a dozen people, and most employees had worked there for many years. One guy worked two full-time jobs, but not because he had to: His second job at the tile business allowed him to pursue his dream of piloting an airplane. Thirteen dollars an hour was good money for a single guy in our hometown—a decent apartment costs about five hundred dollars a month—and the tile business offered steady raises. Every employee who worked there for a few years earned at least sixteen dollars an hour in a down economy, which provided an annual income of thirty-two thousand—well above the poverty line even for a family. Despite this relatively stable situation, the managers found it impossible to fill my warehouse position with a long-term employee. By the time I left, three guys worked in the warehouse; at twenty-six, I was by far the oldest.

One guy, I' ll call him Bob, joined the tile warehouse just a few months before I did. Bob was nineteen with a pregnant girlfriend. The manager kindly offered the girlfriend a clerical position answering phones. Both of them were terrible workers. The girlfriend missed about every third day of work and never gave advance notice. Though warned to change her habits repeatedly, the girlfriend lasted no more than a few months. Bob missed work about once a week, and he was chronically late. On top of that, he often took three or four daily bathroom breaks, each over half an hour. It became so bad that, by the end of my tenure, another employee and I made a game of it: We' d set a timer when he went to the bathroom and shout the major milestones through the warehouse— "Thirty-five minutes!" "Forty-five minutes!" "One hour!"

not alone: At least two other people, including Bob’ s cousin, lost their jobs or quit during my short time at the tile warehouse.

You can’ t ignore stories like this when you talk about equal opportunity. Nobel-winning economists worry about the decline of the industrial Midwest and the hollowing out of the economic core of working whites. What they mean is that manufacturing jobs have gone overseas and middle-class jobs are harder to come by for people without college degrees. Fair enough—I worry about those things, too. But this book is about something else: what goes on in the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It’ s about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It’ s about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.

The problems that I saw at the tile warehouse run far deeper than macroeconomic trends and policy. Too many young men immune to hard work. Good jobs impossible to fill for any length of time. And a young man with every reason to work—a wife-to-be to support and a baby on the way—carelessly tossing aside a good job with excellent health insurance. More troublingly, when it was all over, he thought something had been done to him . There is a lack of agency here—a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. This is distinct from the larger economic landscape of modern America.

It’ s worth noting that although I focus on the group of people I know—working-class whites with ties to Appalachia—I’ m not arguing that we deserve more sympathy than other folks. This is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group. That said, I do hope that readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism. To many analysts, terms like “welfare queen” conjure unfair images of the lazy black mom living on the dole. Readers of this book will realize quickly that there is little relationship between that specter and my argument: I have known many welfare queens; some were my neighbors, and all were white.

This book is not an academic study. In the past few years, William Julius Wilson, Charles Murray, Robert Putnam, and Raj Chetty have authored compelling, well-researched tracts demonstrating that upward mobility fell off in the 1970s and never really recovered, that some regions have fared much worse than others (shocker: Appalachia and the Rust Belt score poorly), and that many of the phenomena I saw in my own life exist across society. I

problem. My primary aim is to tell a true story about what that problem feels like when you were born with it hanging around your neck.

I cannot tell that story without appealing to the cast of characters who made up my life. So this book is not just a personal memoir but a family one—a history of opportunity and upward mobility viewed through the eyes of a group of hillbillies from Appalachia. Two generations ago, my grandparents were dirt-poor and in love. They got married and moved north in the hope of escaping the dreadful poverty around them. Their grandchild (me) graduated from one of the finest educational institutions in the world. That's the short version. The long version exists in the pages that follow.

Though I sometimes change the names of people to protect their privacy, this story is, to the best of my recollection, a fully accurate portrait of the world I've witnessed. There are no composite characters and no narrative shortcuts. Where possible, I corroborated the details with documentation—report cards, handwritten letters, notes on photographs—but I am sure this story is as fallible as any human memory. Indeed, when I asked my sister to read an earlier draft, that draft ignited a thirty-minute conversation about whether I had misplaced an event chronologically. I left my version in, not because I suspect my sister's memory is faulty (in fact, I imagine hers is better than mine), but because I think there is something to learn in how I've organized the events in my own mind.

Nor am I an unbiased observer. Nearly every person you will read about is deeply flawed. Some have tried to murder other people, and a few were successful. Some have abused their children, physically or emotionally. Many abused (and still abuse) drugs. But I love these people, even those to whom I avoid speaking for my own sanity. And if I leave you with the impression that there are bad people in my life, then I am sorry, both to you and to the people so portrayed. For there are no villains in this story. There's just a ragtag band of hillbillies struggling to find their way—both for their sake and, by the grace of God, for mine.

Chapter 1

Like most small children, I learned my home address so that if I got lost, I could tell a grown-up where to take me. In kindergarten, when the teacher asked me where I lived, I could recite the address without skipping a beat, even though my mother changed addresses frequently, for reasons I never understood as a child. Still, I always distinguished "my address" from "my home." My address was where I spent most of my time with

Jackson is a small town of about six thousand in the heart of southeastern Kentucky's coal country. Calling it a town is a bit charitable: There's a courthouse, a few restaurants—almost all of them fast-food chains—and a few other shops and stores. Most of the people live in the mountains surrounding Kentucky Highway 15, in trailer parks, in government-subsidized housing, in small farmhouses, and in mountain homesteads like the one that served as the backdrop for the fondest memories of my childhood.

Jacksonians say hello to everyone, willingly skip their favorite pastimes to dig a stranger's car out of the snow, and—without exception—stop their cars, get out, and stand at attention every time a funeral motorcade drives past. It was that latter practice that made me aware of something special about Jackson and its people. Why, I'd ask my grandma—whom we all called Mamaw—did everyone stop for the passing hearse? "Because, honey, we're hill people. And we respect our dead."

My grandparents left Jackson in the late 1940s and raised their family in Middletown, Ohio, where I later grew up. But until I was twelve, I spent my summers and much of the rest of my time back in Jackson. I'd visit along with Mamaw, who wanted to see friends and family, ever conscious that time was shortening the list of her favorite people. And as time wore on, we made our trips for one reason above all: to take care of Mamaw's mother, whom we called Mamaw Blanton (to distinguish her, though somewhat confusingly, from Mamaw). We stayed with Mamaw Blanton in the house where she'd lived since before her husband left to fight the Japanese in the Pacific.

Mamaw Blanton's house was my favorite place in the world, though it was neither large nor luxurious. The house had three bedrooms. In the front were a small porch, a porch swing, and a large yard that stretched into a mountain on one side and to the head of the holler on the other. Though Mamaw Blanton owned some property, most of it was uninhabitable foliage. There wasn't a backyard to speak of, though there was a beautiful mountainside of rock and tree. There was always the holler, and the creek that ran alongside it; those were backyard enough. The kids all slept in a single upstairs room: a squad bay of about a dozen beds where my cousins and I played late into the night until our irritated grandma would frighten us into sleep.

The surrounding mountains were paradise to a child, and I spent much of my time terrorizing the Appalachian fauna: No turtle, snake, frog, fish, or squirrel was safe. I'd run around with my cousins, unaware of the ever-present poverty or Mamaw Blanton's

toughest woman anyone knew and the most skilled auto mechanic in town; in Ohio, I was the abandoned son of a man I hardly knew and a woman I wished I didn't. Mom visited Kentucky only for the annual family reunion or the occasional funeral, and when she did, Mamaw made sure she brought none of the drama. In Jackson, there would be no screaming, no fighting, no beating up on my sister, and especially "no men," as Mamaw would say. Mamaw hated Mom's various love interests and allowed none of them in Kentucky.

In Ohio, I had grown especially skillful at navigating various father figures. With Steve, a midlife-crisis sufferer with an earring to prove it, I pretended earrings were cool—so much so that he thought it appropriate to pierce my ear, too. With Chip, an alcoholic police officer who saw my earring as a sign of "girlieness," I had thick skin and loved police cars. With Ken, an odd man who proposed to Mom three days into their relationship, I was a kind brother to his two children. But none of these things were really true. I hated earrings, I hated police cars, and I knew that Ken's children would be out of my life by the next year. In Kentucky, I didn't have to pretend to be someone I wasn't, because the only men in my life—my grandmother's brothers and brothers-in-law—already knew me. Did I want to make them proud? Of course I did, but not because I pretended to like them; I genuinely loved them.

The oldest and meanest of the Blanton men was Uncle Teaberry, nicknamed for his favorite flavor of chewing gum. Uncle Teaberry, like his father, served in the navy during World War II. He died when I was four, so I have only two real memories of him. In the first, I'm running for my life, and Teaberry is close behind with a switchblade, assuring me that he'll feed my right ear to the dogs if he catches me. I leap into Mamaw Blanton's arms, and the terrifying game is over. But I know that I loved him, because my second memory is of throwing such a fit over not being allowed to visit him on his deathbed that my grandma was forced to don a hospital robe and smuggle me in. I remember clinging to her underneath that hospital robe, but I don't remember saying goodbye.

Uncle Pet came next. Uncle Pet was a tall man with a biting wit and a raunchy sense of humor. The most economically successful of the Blanton crew, Uncle Pet left home early and started some timber and construction businesses that made him enough money to race horses in his spare time. He seemed the nicest of the Blanton men, with the smooth charm of a successful businessman. But that charm masked a fierce temper. Once, when a

speak more carefully." When the driver—nicknamed Big Red because of his size and hair color—repeated the insult, Uncle Pet did what any rational business owner would do: He pulled the man from his truck, beat him unconscious, and ran an electric saw up and down his body. Big Red nearly bled to death but was rushed to the hospital and survived. Uncle Pet never went to jail, though. Apparently, Big Red was also an Appalachian man, and he refused to speak to the police about the incident or press charges. He knew what it meant to insult a man's mother.

Uncle David may have been the only one of Mamaw's brothers to care little for that honor culture. An old rebel with long, flowing hair and a longer beard, he loved everything but rules, which might explain why, when I found his giant marijuana plant in the backyard of the old homestead, he didn't try to explain it away. Shocked, I asked Uncle David what he planned to do with illegal drugs. So he got some cigarette papers and a lighter and showed me. I was twelve. I knew if Mamaw ever found out, she'd kill him.

I feared this because, according to family lore, Mamaw had nearly killed a man. When she was around twelve, Mamaw walked outside to see two men loading the family's cow—a prized possession in a world without running water—into the back of a truck. She ran inside, grabbed a rifle, and fired a few rounds. One of the men collapsed—the result of a shot to the leg—and the other jumped into the truck and squealed away. The would-be thief could barely crawl, so Mamaw approached him, raised the business end of her rifle to the man's head, and prepared to finish the job. Luckily for him, Uncle Pet intervened. Mamaw's first confirmed kill would have to wait for another day.

Even knowing what a pistol-packing lunatic Mamaw was, I find this story hard to believe. I polled members of my family, and about half had never heard the story. The part I believe is that she would have murdered the man if someone hadn't stopped her. She loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal. Each time someone stole a bike from our porch (three times, by my count), or broke into her car and took the loose change, or stole a delivery, she'd tell me, like a general giving his troops marching orders, "There is nothing lower than the poor stealing from the poor. It's hard enough as it is. We sure as hell don't need to make it even harder on each other."

Youngest of all the Blanton boys was Uncle Gary. He was the baby of the family and one of the sweetest men I knew. Uncle Gary left home young and built a successful roofing business in Indiana. A good husband and a better father, he'd always say to me, "We're

My grandma also had two younger sisters, Betty and Rose, whom I loved each very much, but I was obsessed with the Blanton men. I would sit among them and beg them to tell and retell their stories. These men were the gatekeepers to the family's oral tradition, and I was their best student.

Most of this tradition was far from child appropriate. Almost all of it involved the kind of violence that should land someone in jail. Much of it centered on how the county in which Jackson was situated—Breathitt—earned its alliterative nickname, "Bloody Breathitt." There were many explanations, but they all had one theme: The people of Breathitt hated certain things, and they didn't need the law to snuff them out.

One of the most common tales of Breathitt's gore revolved around an older man in town who was accused of raping a young girl. Mamaw told me that, days before his trial, the man was found facedown in a local lake with sixteen bullet wounds in his back. The authorities never investigated the murder, and the only mention of the incident appeared in the local newspaper on the morning his body was discovered. In an admirable display of journalistic pith, the paper reported: "Man found dead. Foul play expected." "Foul play expected?" my grandmother would roar. "You're goddamned right. Bloody Breathitt got to that son of a bitch."

Or there was that day when Uncle Teaberry overheard a young man state a desire to "eat her panties," a reference to his sister's (my Mamaw's) undergarments. Uncle Teaberry drove home, retrieved a pair of Mamaw's underwear, and forced the young man—at knifepoint—to consume the clothing.

Some people may conclude that I come from a clan of lunatics. But the stories made me feel like hillbilly royalty, because these were classic good-versus-evil stories, and my people were on the right side. My people were extreme, but extreme in the service of something—defending a sister's honor or ensuring that a criminal paid for his crimes. The Blanton men, like the tomboy Blanton sister whom I called Mamaw, were enforcers of hillbilly justice, and to me, that was the very best kind.

Despite their virtues, or perhaps because of them, the Blanton men were full of vice. A few of them left a trail of neglected children, cheated wives, or both. And I didn't even know them that well: I saw them only at large family reunions or during the holidays. Still, I loved and worshipped them. I once overheard Mamaw tell her mother that I loved the Blanton men because so many father figures had come and gone, but the Blanton men were always

As I grew older, my obsession with the Blanton men faded into appreciation, just as my view of Jackson as some sort of paradise matured. I will always think of Jackson as my home. It is unfathomably beautiful: When the leaves turn in October, it seems as if every mountain in town is on fire. But for all its beauty, and for all the fond memories, Jackson is a very harsh place. Jackson taught me that "hill people" and "poor people" usually meant the same thing. At Mamaw Blanton's, we'd eat scrambled eggs, ham, fried potatoes, and biscuits for breakfast; fried bologna sandwiches for lunch; and soup beans and cornbread for dinner. Many Jackson families couldn't say the same, and I knew this because, as I grew older, I overheard the adults speak about the pitiful children in the neighborhood who were starving and how the town could help them. Mamaw shielded me from the worst of Jackson, but you can keep reality at bay only so long.

On a recent trip to Jackson, I made sure to stop at Mamaw Blanton's old house, now inhabited by my second cousin Rick and his family. We talked about how things had changed. "Drugs have come in," Rick told me. "And nobody's interested in holding down a job." I hoped my beloved holler had escaped the worst, so I asked Rick's boys to take me on a walk. All around I saw the worst signs of Appalachian poverty.

Some of it was as heartbreaking as it was cliché: decrepit shacks rotting away, stray dogs begging for food, and old furniture strewn on the lawns. Some of it was far more troubling. While passing a small two-bedroom house, I noticed a frightened set of eyes looking at me from behind the curtains of a bedroom window. My curiosity piqued, I looked closer and counted no fewer than eight pairs of eyes, all looking at me from three windows with an unsettling combination of fear and longing. On the front porch was a thin man, no older than thirty-five, apparently the head of the household. Several ferocious, malnourished, chained-up dogs protected the furniture strewn about the barren front yard. When I asked Rick's son what the young father did for a living, he told me the man had no job and was proud of it. But, he added, "they're mean, so we just try to avoid them."

That house might be extreme, but it represents much about the lives of hill people in Jackson. Nearly a third of the town lives in poverty, a figure that includes about half of Jackson's children. And that doesn't count the large majority of Jacksonians who hover around the poverty line. An epidemic of prescription drug addiction has taken root. The public schools are so bad that the state of Kentucky recently seized control. Nevertheless, parents send their children to these schools because they have little extra money, and the

basic problems. Most important, they're mean about it—they will hesitate to open their lives up to others for the simple reason that they don't wish to be judged.

In 2009, ABC News ran a news report about Appalachian America, highlighting a phenomenon known locally as "Mountain Dew mouth": painful dental problems in young children, generally caused by too much sugary soda. In its broadcast, ABC featured a litany of stories about Appalachian children confronting poverty and deprivation. The news report was widely watched in the region but met with utter scorn. The consistent reaction: This is none of your damn business. "This has to be the most offensive thing I have ever heard and you should all be ashamed, ABC included," wrote one commenter online. Another added: "You should be ashamed of yourself for reinforcing old, false stereotypes and not giving a more accurate picture of Appalachia. This is an opinion shared among many in the actual rural towns of the mountains that I have met."

I knew this because my cousin took to Facebook to silence the critics—noting that only by admitting the region's problems could people hope to change them. Amber is uniquely positioned to comment on the problems of Appalachia: Unlike me, she spent her entire childhood in Jackson. She was an academic star in high school and later earned a college degree, the first in her nuclear family to do so. She saw the worst of Jackson's poverty firsthand and overcame it.

The angry reaction supports the academic literature on Appalachian Americans. In a December 2000 paper, sociologists Carol A. Markstrom, Sheila K. Marshall, and Robin J. Tryon found that avoidance and wishful-thinking forms of coping "significantly predicted resiliency" among Appalachian teens. Their paper suggests that hillbillies learn from an early age to deal with uncomfortable truths by avoiding them, or by pretending better truths exist. This tendency might make for psychological resilience, but it also makes it hard for Appalachians to look at themselves honestly.

We tend to overstate and to understate, to glorify the good and ignore the bad in ourselves. This is why the folks of Appalachia reacted strongly to an honest look at some of its most impoverished people. It's why I worshipped the Blanton men, and it's why I spent the first eighteen years of my life pretending that everything in the world was a problem except me.

The truth is hard, and the hardest truths for hill people are the ones they must tell about themselves. Jackson is undoubtedly full of the nicest people in the world; it is also full of

hardworking, except of course for the many food stamp recipients who show little interest in honest work. Jackson, like the Blanton men, is full of contradictions.

Things have gotten so bad that last summer, after my cousin Mike buried his mother, his thoughts turned immediately to selling her house. "I can't live here, and I can't leave it untended," he said. "The drug addicts will ransack it." Jackson has always been poor, but it was never a place where a man feared leaving his mother's home alone. The place I call home has taken a worrisome turn.

If there is any temptation to judge these problems as the narrow concern of backwoods hollers, a glimpse at my own life reveals that Jackson's plight has gone mainstream. Thanks to the massive migration from the poorer regions of Appalachia to places like Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, hillbilly values spread widely along with hillbilly people. Indeed, Kentucky transplants and their children are so prominent in Middletown, Ohio (where I grew up), that as kids we derisively called it "Middletucky."

My grandparents uprooted themselves from the real Kentucky and relocated to Middletucky in search of a better life, and in some ways they found it. In other ways, they never really escaped. The drug addiction that plagues Jackson has afflicted their older daughter for her entire adult life. Mountain Dew mouth may be especially bad in Jackson, but my grandparents fought it in Middletown, too: I was nine months old the first time Mamaw saw my mother put Pepsi in my bottle. Virtuous fathers are in short supply in Jackson, but they are equally scarce in the lives of my grandparents' grandchildren. People have struggled to get out of Jackson for decades; now they struggle to escape Middletown.

If the problems start in Jackson, it is not entirely clear where they end. What I realized many years ago, watching that funeral procession with Mamaw, is that I am a hill person. So is much of America's white working class. And we hill people aren't doing very well.

Chapter 2

Hillbillies like to add their own twist to many words. We call minnows "minners" and crayfish "crawdads." "Hollow" is defined as a "valley or basin," but I've never said the word "hollow" unless I've had to explain to a friend what I mean when I say "holler." Other people have all kinds of names for their grandparents: grandpa, nanna, pop-pop, grannie, and so on. Yet I've never heard anyone say "Mamaw"—pronounced ma'am-aw—or "Papaw" outside of our community. These names belong only to

me the value of love and stability and teaching me the life lessons that most people learn from their parents. Both did their part to ensure that I had the self-confidence and the right opportunities to get a fair shot at the American Dream. But I doubt that, as children, Jim Vance and Bonnie Blanton ever expected much out of their own lives. How could they? Appalachian hills and single-room, K–12 schoolhouses don't tend to foster big dreams.

We don't know much about Papaw's early years, and I doubt that will ever change. We do know that he was something of hillbilly royalty. Papaw's distant cousin—also Jim Vance—married into the Hatfield family and joined a group of former Confederate soldiers and sympathizers called the Wildcats. When Cousin Jim murdered former Union soldier Asa Harmon McCoy, he kicked off one of the most famous family feuds in American history.

Papaw was born James Lee Vance in 1929, his middle name a tribute to his father, Lee Vance. Lee died just a few months after Papaw's birth, so Papaw's overwhelmed mother, Goldie, sent him to live with her father, Pap Taulbee, a strict man with a small timber business. Though Goldie sent money occasionally, she rarely visited her young son. Papaw would live with Taulbee in Jackson, Kentucky, for the first seventeen years of his life.

Pap Taulbee had a tiny two-room house just a few hundred yards from the Blantons—Blaine and Hattie and their eight children. Hattie felt sorry for the young motherless boy and became a surrogate mother to my grandfather. Jim soon became an extra member of the family: He spent most of his free time running around with the Blanton boys, and he ate most of his meals in Hattie's kitchen. It was only natural that he'd eventually marry her oldest daughter.

Jim married into a rowdy crew. The Blantons were a famous group in Breathitt, and they had a feuding history nearly as illustrious as Papaw's. Mamaw's great-grandfather had been elected county judge at the beginning of the twentieth century, but only after her grandfather, Tilden (the son of the judge), killed a member of a rival family on Election Day. 2 In a New York Times story about the violent feud, two things leap out. The first is that Tilden never went to jail for the crime. 3 The second is that, as the Times reported, "complications [were] expected." I would imagine so.

When I first read this gruesome story in one of the country's most circulated newspapers, I felt one emotion above all the rest: pride. It's unlikely that any other ancestor of mine has ever appeared in The New York Times . Even if they had, I doubt that any deed would

I can’t imagine what Papaw was thinking. Mamaw came from a family that would shoot at you rather than argue with you. Her father was a scary old hillbilly with the mouth and war medals of a sailor. Her grandfather’s murderous exploits were impressive enough to make the pages of The New York Times . And as scary as her lineage was, Mamaw Bonnie herself was so terrifying that, many decades later, a Marine Corps recruiter would tell me that I’d find boot camp easier than living at home. “Those drill instructors are mean,” he said. “But not like that grandma of yours.” That meanness wasn’t enough to dissuade my grandfather. So Mamaw and Papaw were married as teenagers in Jackson, in 1947.

At that time, as the post–World War II euphoria wore off and people began to adjust to a world at peace, there were two types of people in Jackson: those who uprooted their lives and planted them in the industrial powerhouses of the new America, and those who didn’t. At the tender ages of fourteen and seventeen, my grandparents had to decide which group to join.

As Papaw once told me, the sole option for many of his friends was to work “in the mines”—mining coal not far from Jackson. Those who stayed in Jackson spent their lives on the edge of poverty, if not submerged in it. So, soon after marrying, Papaw uprooted his young family and moved to Middletown, a small Ohio town with a rapidly growing industrialized economy.

This is the story my grandparents told me, and like most family legends it’s largely true but plays fast and loose with the details. On a recent trip to visit family in Jackson, my great-uncle Arch—Mamaw’s brother-in-law and the last of that generation of Jacksonians—introduced me to Bonnie South, a woman who’d spent all of her eighty-four years a hundred yards from Mamaw’s childhood home. Until Mamaw left for Ohio, Bonnie South was her best friend. And by Bonnie South’s reckoning, Mamaw and Papaw’s departure involved a bit more scandal than any of us realized.

In 1946, Bonnie South and Papaw were lovers. I’m not sure what this meant in Jackson at the time—whether they were preparing for an engagement or just passing the time together. Bonnie had little to say of Papaw besides the fact that he was “very handsome.” The only other thing Bonnie South recalled was that, at some point in 1946, Papaw cheated on Bonnie with her best friend—Mamaw. Mamaw was thirteen and Papaw sixteen, but the affair produced a pregnancy. And that pregnancy added a number of

immediately knew all about Bonnie Blanton's pregnancy. Most important, Bonnie and Jim Vance would soon have another mouth to feed before they'd gotten used to feeding themselves. Mamaw and Papaw left abruptly for Dayton, Ohio, where they lived briefly before settling permanently in Middletown.

In later years, Mamaw sometimes spoke of a daughter who died in infancy, and she led us all to believe that the daughter was born sometime after Uncle Jimmy, Mamaw and Papaw's eldest child. Mamaw suffered eight miscarriages in the decade between Uncle Jimmy's birth and my mother's. But recently my sister discovered a birth certificate for "Infant" Vance, the aunt I never knew, who died so young that her birth certificate also lists her date of death. The baby who brought my grandparents to Ohio didn't survive her first week. On that birth certificate, the baby's brokenhearted mother lied about her age: Only fourteen at the time and with a seventeen-year-old husband, she couldn't tell the truth, lest they ship her back to Jackson or send Papaw to jail.

Mamaw's first foray into adulthood ended in tragedy. Today I often wonder: Without the baby, would she ever have left Jackson? Would she have run off with Jim Vance to foreign territory? Mamaw's entire life—and the trajectory of our family—may have changed for a baby who lived only six days.

Whatever mix of economic opportunity and family necessity catapulted my grandparents to Ohio, they were there, and there was no going back. So Papaw found a job at Armco, a large steel company that aggressively recruited in eastern Kentucky coal country. Armco representatives would descend on towns like Jackson and promise (truthfully) a better life for those willing to move north and work in the mills. A special policy encouraged wholesale migration: Applicants with a family member working at Armco would move to the top of the employment list. Armco didn't just hire the young men of Appalachian Kentucky; they actively encouraged those men to bring their extended families.

A number of industrial firms employed a similar strategy, and it appears to have worked. During that era, there were many Jacksons and many Middletowns. Researchers have documented two major waves of migration from Appalachia to the industrial powerhouse economies in the Midwest. The first happened after World War I, when returning veterans found it nearly impossible to find work in the not-yet-industrialized mountains of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee. It ended as the Great Depression hit Northern economies hard. 4 My grandparents were part of the second wave, composed of returning

mountains had only two products that the industrial economies of the North needed: coal and hill people. And Appalachia exported a lot of both.

Precise numbers are tough to pin down because studies typically measure "net out-migration"—as in the total number of people who left minus the number of people who came in. Many families constantly traveled back and forth, which skews the data. But it is certain that many millions of people traveled along the "hillbilly highway"—a metaphorical term that captured the opinion of Northerners who saw their cities and towns flooded with people like my grandparents. The scale of the migration was staggering. In the 1950s, thirteen of every one hundred Kentucky residents migrated out of the state. Some areas saw even greater emigration: Harlan County, for example, which was brought to fame in an Academy Award–winning documentary about coal strikes, lost 30 percent of its population to migration. In 1960, of Ohio's ten million residents, one million were born in Kentucky, West Virginia, or Tennessee. This doesn't count the large number of migrants from elsewhere in the southern Appalachian Mountains; nor does it include the children or grandchildren of migrants who were hill people to the core. There were undoubtedly many of these children and grandchildren, as hillbillies tended to have much higher birthrates than the native population. 6

In short, my grandparents' experience was extremely common. Significant parts of an entire region picked up shop and moved north. Need more proof? Hop on a northbound highway in Kentucky or Tennessee the day after Thanksgiving or Christmas, and virtually every license plate you see comes from Ohio, Indiana, or Michigan—cars full of hillbilly transplants returning home for the holidays.

Mamaw's family participated in the migratory flow with gusto. Of her seven siblings, Pet, Paul, and Gary moved to Indiana and worked in construction. Each owned a successful business and earned considerable wealth in the process. Rose, Betty, Teaberry, and David stayed behind. All of them struggled financially, though everyone but David managed a life of relative comfort by the standards of their community. The four who left died on a significantly higher rung of the socioeconomic ladder than the four who stayed. As Papaw knew when he was a young man, the best way up for the hillbilly was out.

It was probably uncommon for my grandparents to be alone in their new city. But if Mamaw and Papaw were isolated from their family, they were hardly segregated from Middletown's broader population. Most of the city's inhabitants had moved there for

Appalachian transplants and their families sprang up, virtually out of nowhere. As one study noted, "Migration did not so much destroy neighborhoods and families as transport them." 8 In 1950s Middletown, my grandparents found themselves in a situation both new and familiar. New because they were, for the first time, cut off from the extended Appalachian support network to which they were accustomed; familiar because they were still surrounded by hillbillies.

I'd like to tell you how my grandparents thrived in their new environment, how they raised a successful family, and how they retired comfortably middle-class. But that is a partial truth. The full truth is that my grandparents struggled in their new life, and they continued to do so for decades.

For starters, a remarkable stigma attached to people who left the hills of Kentucky for a better life. Hillbillies have a phrase— "too big for your britches" —to describe those who think they're better than the stock they came from. For a long time after my grandparents came to Ohio, they heard exactly that phrase from people back home. The sense that they had abandoned their families was acute, and it was expected that, whatever their responsibilities, they would return home regularly. This pattern was common among Appalachian migrants: More than nine in ten would make visits "home" during the course of their lives, and more than one in ten visited about once a month. 9 My grandparents returned to Jackson often, sometimes on consecutive weekends, despite the fact that the trip in the 1950s required about twenty hours of driving. Economic mobility came with a lot of pressures, and it came with a lot of new responsibilities.

That stigma came from both directions: Many of their new neighbors viewed them suspiciously. To the established middle class of white Ohioans, these hillbillies simply didn't belong. They had too many children, and they welcomed their extended families into their homes for too long. On several occasions, Mamaw's brothers and sisters lived with her and Papaw for months as they tried to find good work outside of the hills. In other words, many parts of their culture and customs met with roaring disapproval from native Middletonians. As one book, Appalachian Odyssey , notes about the influx of hill people to Detroit: "It was not simply that the Appalachian migrants, as rural strangers 'out of place' in the city, were upsetting to Midwestern, urban whites. Rather, these migrants disrupted a broad set of assumptions held by northern whites about how white people appeared, spoke, and behaved . . . the disturbing aspect of hillbillies was their racialness.

One of Papaw's good friends—a hillbilly from Kentucky whom he met in Ohio—became the mail carrier in their neighborhood. Not long after he moved, the mail carrier got embroiled in a battle with the Middletown government over the flock of chickens that he kept in his yard. He treated them just as Mamaw had treated her chickens back in the holler: Every morning he collected all the eggs, and when his chicken population grew too large, he'd take a few of the old ones, wring their necks, and carve them up for meat right in his backyard. You can just imagine a well-bred housewife watching out the window in horror as her Kentucky-born neighbor slaughtered squawking chickens just a few feet away. My sister and I still call the old mail carrier "the chicken man," and years later even a mention of how the city government ganged up on the chicken man could inspire Mamaw's trademark vitriol: "Fucking zoning laws. They can kiss my ruby-red asshole."

The move to Middletown created other problems, as well. In the mountain homes of Jackson, privacy was more theory than practice. Family, friends, and neighbors would barge into your home without much warning. Mothers would tell their daughters how to raise their children. Fathers would tell sons how to do their jobs. Brothers would tell brothers-in-law how to treat their wives. Family life was something people learned on the fly with a lot of help from their neighbors. In Middletown, a man's home was his castle.

However, that castle was empty for Mamaw and Papaw. They brought an ancient family structure from the hills and tried to make it work in a world of privacy and nuclear families. They were newlyweds, but they didn't have anyone to teach them about marriage. They were parents, but there were no grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins to help them with the workload. The only nearby close relative was Papaw's mother, Goldie. She was mostly a stranger to her own son, and Mamaw couldn't have held her in lower esteem for abandoning him.

After a few years, Mamaw and Papaw began to adapt. Mamaw became close friends with the "neighbor lady" (that was her word for the neighbors she liked) who lived in a nearby apartment; Papaw worked on cars in his spare time, and his coworkers slowly turned from colleagues to friends. In 1951 they welcomed a baby boy—my uncle Jimmy—and showered him with their new material comforts. Jimmy, Mamaw would tell me later, could sit up at two weeks, walk at four months, speak in complete sentences just after his first birthday, and read classic novels by age three ("A slight exaggeration," my uncle later admitted). They visited Mamaw's brothers in Indianapolis and picnicked with their new

Which is not to say that things always proceeded smoothly. Once, they traveled to the mall to buy Christmas presents with the holiday throng and let Jimmy roam so he could locate a toy he coveted. "They were advertising it on television," he told me recently. "It was a plastic console that looked like the dash of a jet fighter plane. You could shine a light or shoot darts. The whole idea was to pretend that you were a fighter pilot."

Jimmy wandered into a pharmacy that happened to sell the toy, so he picked it up and began to play with it. "The store clerk wasn't happy. He told me to put the toy down and get out." Chastised, young Jimmy stood outside in the cold until Mamaw and Papaw strolled by and asked if he'd like to go inside the pharmacy.

"I can't," Jimmy told his father.

"Why?"

"I just can't."

"Tell me why right now."

He pointed at the store clerk. "That man got mad at me and told me to leave. I'm not allowed to go back inside."

Mamaw and Papaw stormed in, demanding an explanation for the clerk's rudeness. The clerk explained that Jimmy had been playing with an expensive toy. "This toy?" Papaw asked, picking up the toy. When the clerk nodded, Papaw smashed it on the ground. Utter chaos ensued. As Uncle Jimmy explained, "They went nuts. Dad threw another of the toys across the store and moved toward the clerk in a very menacing way; Mom started grabbing random shit off the shelves and throwing it all over the place. She's screaming, 'Kick his fucking ass! Kick his fucking ass!' And then Dad leans in to this clerk and says very clearly, 'If you say another word to my son, I will break your fucking neck.' This poor guy was completely terrified, and I just wanted to get the hell out of there." The man apologized, and the Vances continued with their Christmas shopping as if nothing had happened.

So, yes, even in their best times, Mamaw and Papaw struggled to adapt. Middletown was a different world. Papaw was supposed to go to work and complain politely to management about rude pharmacy employees. Mamaw was expected to cook dinner, do laundry, and take care of the children. But sewing circles, picnics, and door-to-door vacuum salesmen were not suited to a woman who had almost killed a man at the tender age of twelve. Mamaw had little help when the children were young and required constant supervision,

Mamaw had her dreams but never the opportunity to pursue them. Her greatest love was children, in both a specific sense (her children and grandchildren were the only things in the world she seemed to enjoy in old age) and a general one (she watched shows about abused, neglected, and missing kids and used what little spare money she had to purchase shoes and school supplies for the neighborhood's poorest children). She seemed to feel the pain of neglected kids in a deeply personal way and spoke often of how she hated people who mistreated children. I never understood where this sentiment came from—whether she herself was abused as a child, perhaps, or whether she just regretted that her childhood had ended so abruptly. There is a story there, though I'll likely never hear it.

Mamaw dreamed of turning that passion into a career as a children's attorney—serving as a voice for those who lacked one. She never pursued that dream, possibly because she didn't know what becoming an attorney took. Mamaw never spent a day in high school. She'd given birth to and buried a child before she could legally drive a car. Even if she'd known what was required, her new lifestyle offered little encouragement or opportunity for an aspiring law student with three children and a husband.

Despite the setbacks, both of my grandparents had an almost religious faith in hard work and the American Dream. Neither was under any illusions that wealth or privilege didn't matter in America. On politics, for example, Mamaw had one opinion— "They're all a bunch of crooks" —but Papaw became a committed Democrat. He had no problem with Armco, but he and everyone like him hated the coal companies in Kentucky thanks to a long history of labor strife. So, to Papaw and Mamaw, not all rich people were bad, but all bad people were rich. Papaw was a Democrat because that party protected the working people. This attitude carried over to Mamaw: All politicians might be crooks, but if there were any exceptions, they were undoubtedly members of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal coalition.

Still, Mamaw and Papaw believed that hard work mattered more. They knew that life was a struggle, and though the odds were a bit longer for people like them, that fact didn't excuse failure. "Never be like these fucking losers who think the deck is stacked against them," my grandma often told me. "You can do anything you want to."

Their community shared this faith, and in the 1950s that faith appeared well founded. Within two generations, the transplanted hillbillies had largely caught up to the native population in terms of income and poverty level. Yet their financial success masked their

homeland. They hated domesticated animals and had little use for "critters" that weren't for eating, yet they eventually relented to the children's demands for dogs and cats.

Their children, though, were different. My mom's generation was the first to grow up in the industrial Midwest, far from the deep twangs and one-room schools of the hills. They attended modern high schools with thousands of other students. To my grandparents, the goal was to get out of Kentucky and give their kids a head start. The kids, in turn, were expected to do something with that head start. It didn't quite work out that way.

Before Lyndon Johnson and the Appalachian Regional Commission brought new roads to southeastern Kentucky, the primary road from Jackson to Ohio was U.S. Route 23. So important was this road in the massive hillbilly migration that Dwight Yoakam penned a song about northerners who castigated Appalachian children for learning the wrong three R's: "Reading, Rightin', Rt. 23." Yoakam's song about his own move from southeastern Kentucky could have come from Mamaw's diary:

They thought readin', writin', Route 23 would take them to the good life that they had never seen;

They didn't know that old highway would lead them to a world of misery

Mamaw and Papaw may have made it out of Kentucky, but they and their children learned the hard way that Route 23 didn't lead where they hoped.

Chapter 3

Mamaw and Papaw had three kids—Jimmy, Bev (my mom), and Lori. Jimmy was born in 1951, when Mamaw and Papaw were integrating into their new lives. They wanted more children, so they tried and tried, through a heartbreaking period of terrible luck and numerous miscarriages. Mamaw carried the emotional scars of nine lost children for her entire life. In college I learned that extreme stress can cause miscarriages and that this is especially true during the early part of a pregnancy. I can't help but wonder how many additional aunts and uncles I'd have today were it not for my grandparents' difficult early transition, no doubt intensified by Papaw's years of hard drinking. Yet they persisted through a decade of failed pregnancies, and eventually it paid off: Mom was born on January 20, 1961—the day of John F. Kennedy's inauguration—and my aunt Lori came along less than two years later. For whatever reason, Mamaw and Papaw stopped there.

Uncle Jimmy once told me about the time before his sisters were born: "We were just a

as insane. Normal middle-class parents don't wreck pharmacies because a store clerk is mildly rude to their child. But that's probably the wrong standard to use. Destroying store merchandise and threatening a sales clerk were normal to Mamaw and Papaw: That's what Scots-Irish Appalachians do when people mess with your kid. "What I mean is that they were united, they were getting along with each other," Uncle Jimmy conceded when I later pressed him. "But yeah, like everyone else in our family, they could go from zero to murderous in a fucking heartbeat."

Whatever unity they possessed early in their marriage began to evaporate after their daughter Lori—whom I call Aunt Wee—was born in 1962. By the mid–1960s, Papaw's drinking had become habitual; Mamaw began to shut herself off from the outside world. Neighborhood kids warned the mailman to avoid the "evil witch" of McKinley Street. When the mailman ignored their advice, he met a large woman with an extra-long menthol cigarette hanging out of her mouth who told him to stay the fuck off of her property. "Hoarder" hadn't entered everyday parlance, but Mamaw fit the bill, and her tendencies only worsened as she withdrew from the world. Garbage piled up in the house, with an entire bedroom devoted to trinkets and debris that had no earthly value.

To hear of this period, one gets the sense that Mamaw and Papaw led two lives. There was the outward public life. It included work during the day and preparing the kids for school. This was the life that everyone else saw, and by all measures it was quite successful: My grandfather earned a wage that was almost unfathomable to friends back home; he liked his work and did it well; their children went to modern, well-funded schools; and my grandmother lived in a home that was, by Jackson standards, a mansion—two thousand square feet, four bedrooms, and modern plumbing.

Home life was different. "I didn't notice it at first as a teenager," Uncle Jimmy recalled. "At that age, you're just so wrapped up in your own stuff that you hardly recognize the change. But it was there. Dad stayed out more; Mom stopped keeping the house—dirty dishes and junk piled up everywhere. They fought a lot more. It was all around a rough time."

Hillbilly culture at the time (and maybe now) blended a robust sense of honor, devotion to family, and bizarre sexism into a sometimes explosive mix. Before Mamaw was married, her brothers had been willing to murder boys who disrespected their sister. Now that she was married to a man whom many of them considered more a brother than an outsider, they

about it, but I always did. It was that culture from back then that expected the men were going to go out and do what they wanted to do."

Mamaw felt disloyalty acutely. She loathed anything that smacked of a lack of complete devotion to family. In her own home, she'd say things like "I'm sorry I'm so damned mean" and "You know I love you, but I'm just a crazy bitch." But if she knew of anyone criticizing so much as her socks to an outsider, she'd fly off the handle. "I don't know those people. You never talk about family to some stranger. Never." My sister, Lindsay, and I could fight like cats and dogs in her home, and for the most part she'd let us figure things out alone. But if I told a friend that my sister was hateful and Mamaw overheard, she'd remember it and tell me the next time we were alone that I had committed the cardinal sin of disloyalty. "How dare you speak about your sister to some little shit? In five years you won't even remember his goddamned name. But your sister is the only true friend you'll ever have." Yet in her own life, with three children at home, the men who should have been most loyal to her—her brothers and husband—conspired against her.

Papaw seemed to resist the social expectations of a middle-class father, sometimes with hilarious results. He would announce that he was headed to the store and ask his kids if they needed anything; he'd come back with a new car. A new Chevrolet convertible one month. A luxurious Oldsmobile the next. "Where'd you get that?" they'd ask him. "It's mine, I traded for it," he'd reply nonchalantly.

But sometimes his failure to conform brought terrible consequences. My young aunt and mother would play a little game when their father came home from work. Some days he would carefully park his car, and the game would go well—their father would come inside, they'd have dinner together like a normal family, and they'd make one another laugh. Many days, however, he wouldn't park his car normally—he'd back into a spot too quickly, or sloppily leave his car on the road, or even sideswipe a telephone pole as he maneuvered. Those days the game was already lost. Mom and Aunt Wee would run inside and tell Mamaw that Papaw had come home drunk. Sometimes they'd run out the back door and stay the night with Mamaw's friends. Other times Mamaw would insist on staying, so Mom and Aunt Wee would brace for a long night. One Christmas Eve, Papaw came home drunk and demanded a fresh dinner. When that failed to materialize, he picked up the family Christmas tree and threw it out the back door. The next year he greeted a crowd at his daughter's birthday party and promptly coughed up a huge wad of phlegm

violent nondrunk. And she channeled her frustrations into the most productive activity imaginable: covert war. When Papaw passed out on the couch, she'd cut his pants with scissors so they'd burst at the seam when he next sat down. Or she'd steal his wallet and hide it in the oven just to piss him off. When he came home from work and demanded fresh dinner, she'd carefully prepare a plate of fresh garbage. If he was in a fighting mood, she'd fight back. In short, she devoted herself to making his drunken life a living hell.

If Jimmy's youth shielded him from the signs of their deteriorating marriage for a bit, the problem soon reached an obvious nadir. Uncle Jimmy recalled one fight: "I could hear the furniture bumping and bumping, and they were really getting into it. They were both screaming. I went downstairs to beg them to stop." But they didn't stop. Mamaw grabbed a flower vase, hurled it, and—she always had a hell of an arm—hit Papaw right between the eyes. "It split his forehead wide open, and he was bleeding really badly when he got in his car and drove off. That's what I went to school the next day thinking about."

Mamaw told Papaw after a particularly violent night of drinking that if he ever came home drunk again, she'd kill him. A week later, he came home drunk again and fell asleep on the couch. Mamaw, never one to tell a lie, calmly retrieved a gasoline canister from the garage, poured it all over her husband, lit a match, and dropped it on his chest. When Papaw burst into flames, their eleven-year-old daughter jumped into action to put out the fire and save his life. Miraculously, Papaw survived the episode with only mild burns.

Because they were hill people, they had to keep their two lives separate. No outsiders could know about the familial strife—with outsiders defined very broadly. When Jimmy turned eighteen, he took a job at Armco and moved out immediately. Not long after he left, Aunt Wee found herself in the middle of one particularly bad fight, and Papaw punched her in the face. The blow, though accidental, left a nasty black eye. When Jimmy—her own brother—returned home for a visit, Aunt Wee was made to hide in the basement. Because Jimmy didn't live with the family anymore, he was not to know about the inner workings of the house. "That's just how everyone, especially Mamaw, dealt with things," Aunt Wee said. "It was just too embarrassing."

It's not obvious to anyone why Mamaw and Papaw's marriage fell apart. Perhaps Papaw's alcoholism got the best of him. Uncle Jimmy suspects that he eventually "ran

Despite their violent marriage, Mamaw and Papaw always maintained a measured optimism about their children's futures. They reasoned that if they could go from a one-room schoolhouse in Jackson to a two-story suburban home with the comforts of the middle class, then their children (and grandchildren) should have no problem attending college and acquiring a share of the American Dream. They were unquestionably wealthier than the family members who had stayed in Kentucky. They visited the Atlantic Ocean and Niagara Falls as adults despite never traveling farther than Cincinnati as children. They believed that they had made it and that their children would go even further.

There was something deeply naive about that attitude, though. All three children were profoundly affected by their tumultuous home life. Papaw wanted Jimmy to get an education instead of slogging it out in the steel mill. He warned that if Jimmy got a full-time job out of high school, the money would be like a drug—it would feel good in the short term, but it would keep him from the things he ought to be doing. Papaw even prevented Jimmy from using him as a referral on his Armco application. What Papaw didn't appreciate was that Armco offered something more than money: the ability to get out of a house where your mother threw vases at your father's forehead.

Lori struggled in school, mostly because she never attended class. Mamaw used to joke that she'd drive her to school and drop her off, and somehow Lori would beat her home. During her sophomore year of high school, Lori's boyfriend stole some PCP, and the two of them returned to Mamaw's to indulge. "He told me that he should do more, since he was bigger. That was the last thing I remembered." Lori woke up when Mamaw and her friend Kathy placed Lori in a cold bathtub. Her boyfriend, meanwhile, wasn't responding. Kathy couldn't tell if the young man was breathing. Mamaw ordered her to drag him to the park across the street. "I don't want him to die in my fucking house," she said. Instead she called someone to take him to the hospital, where he spent five days in intensive care.

The next year, at sixteen, Lori dropped out of high school and married. She immediately found herself trapped in an abusive home just like the one she'd tried to escape. Her new husband would lock her in a bedroom to keep her from seeing her family. "It was almost like a prison," Aunt Wee later told me.

Fortunately, both Jimmy and Lori found their way. Jimmy worked his way through night school and landed a sales job with Johnson & Johnson. He was the first person in my

Unfortunately, the statistics caught up with the Vance family, and Bev (my mom) didn't fare so well. Like her siblings, she left home early. She was a promising student, but when she got pregnant at eighteen, she decided college had to wait. After high school, she married her boyfriend and tried to settle down. But settling down wasn't quite her thing: She had learned the lessons of her childhood all too well. When her new life developed the same fighting and drama so present in her old one, Mom filed for divorce and began life as a single mother. She was nineteen, with no degree, no husband, and a little girl—my sister, Lindsay.

Mamaw and Papaw eventually got their act together. Papaw quit drinking in 1983, a decision accompanied by no medical intervention and not much fanfare. He simply stopped and said little about it. He and Mamaw separated and then reconciled, and although they continued to live in separate houses, they spent nearly every waking hour together. And they tried to repair the damage they had wrought: They helped Lori break out of her abusive marriage. They lent money to Bev and helped her with child care. They offered her places to stay, supported her through rehab, and paid for her nursing school. Most important, they filled the gap when my mom was unwilling or unable to be the type of parent that they wished they'd been to her. Mamaw and Papaw may have failed Bev in her youth. But they spent the rest of their lives making up for it.

Chapter 4

I was born in late summer 1984, just a few months before Papaw cast his first and only vote for a Republican—Ronald Reagan. Winning large blocks of Rust Belt Democrats like Papaw, Reagan went on to the biggest electoral landslide in modern American history. "I never liked Reagan much," Papaw later told me. "But I hated that son of a bitch Mondale." Reagan's Democratic opponent, a well-educated Northern liberal, stood in stark cultural contrast to my hillbilly Papaw. Mondale never had a chance, and after he departed from the political scene, Papaw never again voted against his beloved "party of the workingman."

Jackson, Kentucky, would always have my heart, but Middletown, Ohio, had most of my time. In many ways, the town where I was born was largely the same as the one my grandparents had migrated to four decades earlier. Its population had changed little since the 1950s, when the flood of migrants on the hillbilly highway slowed to a dribble. My elementary school was built in the 1930s, before my grandparents left Jackson, and my

problems. “We saw ourselves as a really fine community, on par with Shaker Heights or Upper Arlington,” explained a decades-long veteran of the public schools, comparing the Middletown of yore to some of the most successful of Ohio’s suburbs. “Of course, none of us knew what would happen.”

Middletown is one of the older incorporated towns in Ohio, built during the 1800s thanks to its proximity to the Miami River, which empties directly into the Ohio. As kids, we joked that our hometown was so generic that they didn’t even bother to give it a real name: It’s in the middle of Cincinnati and Dayton, and it’s a town, so here we are. (It’s not alone: A few miles from Middletown is Centerville.) Middletown is generic in other ways. It exemplified the economic expansion of the manufacturing-based Rust Belt town. Socioeconomically, it is largely working-class. Racially, there are lots of white and black people (the latter the product of an analogous great migration) but few others. And culturally, it is very conservative, although cultural conservatism and political conservatism are not always aligned in Middletown.

The people I grew up around are not all that dissimilar from the people of Jackson. This is especially obvious at Armco, which employed a plurality of the town’s population. Indeed, the work environment once mirrored the Kentucky towns that many of the employees came from. One author reported that “a sign over a doorway between departments read, ‘Leave Morgan County and Enter Wolfe County.’ ” 11 Kentucky—down to its county rivalries—moved with the Appalachian migrants to town.

As a kid, I sorted Middletown into three basic geographic regions. First, the area surrounding the high school, which opened in 1969, Uncle Jimmy’s senior year. (Even in 2003, Mamaw called it the “new high school.”) The “rich” kids lived here. Large homes mixed comfortably with well-kept parks and office complexes. If your dad was a doctor, he almost certainly owned a home or had an office here, if not both. I dreamed that I’d own a house in Manchester Manor, a relatively new development not a mile from the high school, where a nice home went for less than a fifth of the price of a decent house in San Francisco. Next, the poor kids (the really poor kids) lived near Armco, where even the nice homes had been converted into multi-family apartment units. I didn’t know until recently that this neighborhood was actually two neighborhoods—one inhabited by Middletown’s working-class black population, the other by its poorest white population. Middletown’s few housing projects stood there.

"really poor" areas and my block were any different, or whether these divisions were the constructs of a mind that didn't want to believe it was really poor.

Across the street from our house was Miami Park, a single city block with a swing set, a tennis court, a baseball field, and a basketball court. As I grew up, I noticed that the tennis court lines faded with each passing month, and that the city had stopped filling in the cracks or replacing the nets on the basketball courts. I was still young when the tennis court became little more than a cement block littered with grass patches. I learned that our neighborhood had "gone downhill" after two bikes were stolen in the course of the week. For years, Mamaw said, her children had left their bikes unchained in the yard with no problems. Now her grandkids woke to find thick locks cracked in two by dead-bolt cutters. From that point forward, I walked.

If Middletown had changed little by the time I was born, the writing was on the wall almost immediately thereafter. It's easy even for residents to miss it because the change has been gradual—more erosion than mudslide. But it's obvious if you know where to look, and a common refrain for those of us who return intermittently is "Geez, Middletown is not looking good."

In the 1980s, Middletown had a proud, almost idyllic downtown: a bustling shopping center, restaurants that had operated since before World War II, and a few bars where men like Papaw would gather and have a beer (or many) after a hard day at the steel mill. My favorite store was the local Kmart, which was the main attraction in a strip mall, near a branch of Dillman's—a local grocer with three or four locations. Now the strip mall is mostly bare: Kmart stands empty, and the Dillman family closed that big store and all the rest, too. The last I checked, there was only an Arby's, a discount grocery store, and a Chinese buffet in what was once a Middletown center of commerce. The scene at that strip mall is hardly uncommon. Few Middletown businesses are doing well, and many have ceased operating altogether. Twenty years ago, there were two local malls. Now one of those malls is a parking lot, and the other serves as a walking course for the elderly (though it still has a few stores).

Today downtown Middletown is little more than a relic of American industrial glory. Abandoned shops with broken windows line the heart of downtown, where Central Avenue and Main Street meet. Richie's pawnshop has long since closed, though a hideous yellow and green sign still marks the site, so far as I know. Richie's isn't far from an old

"ST___L" because the letters in the middle were shattered and never replaced. If you need a payday lender or a cash-for-gold store, downtown Middletown is the place to be.

Not far from the main drag of empty shops and boarded-up windows is the Sorg Mansion. The Sorgs, a powerful and wealthy industrial family dating back to the nineteenth century, operated a large paper mill in Middletown. They donated enough money to put their names on the local opera house and helped build Middletown into a respectable enough city to attract Armco. Their mansion, a gigantic manor home, sits near a formerly proud Middletown country club. Despite its beauty, a Maryland couple recently purchased the mansion for $225,000, or about half of what a decent multi-room apartment sets you back in Washington, D.C.

Located quite literally on Main Street, the Sorg Mansion is just up the road from a number of opulent homes that housed Middletown's wealthy in their heyday. Most have fallen into disrepair. Those that haven't have been subdivided into small apartments for Middletown's poorest residents. A street that was once the pride of Middletown today serves as a meeting spot for druggies and dealers. Main Street is now the place you avoid after dark.

This change is a symptom of a new economic reality: rising residential segregation. The number of working-class whites in high-poverty neighborhoods is growing. In 1970, 25 percent of white children lived in a neighborhood with poverty rates above 10 percent. In 2000, that number was 40 percent. It's almost certainly even higher today. As a 2011 Brookings Institution study found, "compared to 2000, residents of extreme-poverty neighborhoods in 2005–09 were more likely to be white, native-born, high school or college graduates, homeowners, and not receiving public assistance." 12 In other words, bad neighborhoods no longer plague only urban ghettos; the bad neighborhoods have spread to the suburbs.

This has occurred for complicated reasons. Federal housing policy has actively encouraged homeownership, from Jimmy Carter's Community Reinvestment Act to George W. Bush's ownership society. But in the Middletowns of the world, homeownership comes at a steep social cost: As jobs disappear in a given area, declining home values trap people in certain neighborhoods. Even if you'd like to move, you can't, because the bottom has fallen out of the market—you now owe more than any buyer is willing to pay. The costs of moving are so high that many people stay put. Of course, the people trapped are usually

River, once a lovely place. For reasons I can't begin to fathom, the city's brain trust decided to turn our beautiful riverfront into Lake Middletown, an infrastructural project that apparently involved shoveling tons of dirt into the river and hoping something interesting would come of it. It accomplished nothing, though the river now features a man-made dirt island about the size of a city block.

Efforts to reinvent downtown Middletown always struck me as futile. People didn't leave because our downtown lacked trendy cultural amenities. The trendy cultural amenities left because there weren't enough consumers in Middletown to support them. And why weren't there enough well-paying consumers? Because there weren't enough jobs to employ those consumers. Downtown Middletown's struggles were a symptom of everything else happening to Middletown's people, especially the collapsing importance of Armco Kawasaki Steel.

AK Steel is the result of a 1989 merger between Armco Steel and Kawasaki—the same Japanese corporation that makes those small high-powered motorcycles ("crotch rockets," we called them as kids). Most people still call it Armco for two reasons. The first is that, as Mamaw used to say, "Armco built this fucking town." She wasn't lying: Many of the city's best parks and facilities were bought with Armco dollars. Armco's people sat on the boards of many of the important local organizations, and it helped to fund the schools. And it employed thousands of Middletonians who, like my grandfather, earned a good wage despite a lack of formal education.

Armco earned its reputation through careful design. "Until the 1950s," writes Chad Berry in his book Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles , "the 'big four' employers of the Miami Valley region—Procter and Gamble in Cincinnati, Champion Paper and Fiber in Hamilton, Armco Steel in Middletown, and National Cash Register in Dayton—had had serene labor relations, partly because they . . . [hired] family and friends of employees who were once migrants themselves. For example, Inland Container, in Middletown, had 220 Kentuckyians on its payroll, 117 of whom were from Wolfe County alone." While labor relations no doubt had declined by the 1980s, much of the goodwill built by Armco (and similar companies) remained.

The other reason most still call it Armco is that Kawasaki was a Japanese company, and in a town full of World War II vets and their families, you'd have thought that General Tojo himself had decided to set up shop in southwest Ohio when the merger was announced.

friends now. If we end up fighting any of those countries, it' ll be the goddamned Chinese."

The Kawasaki merger represented an inconvenient truth: Manufacturing in America was a tough business in the post-globalization world. If companies like Armco were going to survive, they would have to retool. Kawasaki gave Armco a chance, and Middletown' s flagship company probably would not have survived without it.

Growing up, my friends and I had no clue that the world had changed. Papaw had retired only a few years earlier, owned stock in Armco, and had a lucrative pension. Armco Park remained the nicest, most exclusive recreation spot in town, and access to the private park was a status symbol: It meant that your dad (or grandpa) was a man with a respected job. It never occurred to me that Armco wouldn' t be around forever, funding scholarships, building parks, and throwing free concerts.

Still, few of my friends had ambitions to work there. As small children, we had the same dreams that other kids did; we wanted to be astronauts or football players or action heroes. I wanted to be a professional puppy-player-wither, which at the time seemed eminently reasonable. By the sixth grade, we wanted to be veterinarians or doctors or preachers or businessmen. But not steelworkers. Even at Roosevelt Elementary—where, thanks to Middletown geography, most people' s parents lacked a college education—no one wanted to have a blue-collar career and its promise of a respectable middle-class life. We never considered that we' d be lucky to land a job at Armco; we took Armco for granted.

Many kids seem to feel that way today. A few years ago I spoke with Jennifer McGuffey, a Middletown High School teacher who works with at-risk youth. "A lot of students just don' t understand what' s out there," she told me, shaking her head. "You have the kids who plan on being baseball players but don' t even play on the high school team because the coach is mean to them. Then you have those who aren' t doing very well in school, and when you try to talk to them about what they' re going to do, they talk about AK. 'Oh, I can get a job at AK. My uncle works there.' It' s like they can' t make the connection between the situation in this town and the lack of jobs at AK." My initial reaction was: How could these kids not understand what the world was like? Didn' t they notice their town changing before their very eyes? But then I realized: We didn' t, so why would they?

companies transitioned away from steel-bodied cars, Papaw would stop at used-car dealerships whenever he saw an old Ford or Chevy. "Armco made this steel," he'd tell me. It was one of the few times that he ever betrayed a sense of genuine pride.

Despite that pride, he had no interest in my working there: "Your generation will make its living with their minds, not their hands," he once told me. The only acceptable career at Armco was as an engineer, not as a laborer in the weld shop. A lot of other Middletown parents and grandparents must have felt similarly: To them, the American Dream required forward momentum. Manual labor was honorable work, but it was their generation's work—we had to do something different. To move up was to move on. That required going to college.

And yet there was no sense that failing to achieve higher education would bring shame or any other consequences. The message wasn't explicit; teachers didn't tell us that we were too stupid or poor to make it. Nevertheless, it was all around us, like the air we breathed: No one in our families had gone to college; older friends and siblings were perfectly content to stay in Middletown, regardless of their career prospects; we knew no one at a prestigious out-of-state school; and everyone knew at least one young adult who was underemployed or didn't have a job at all.

In Middletown, 20 percent of the public high school's entering freshmen won't make it to graduation. Most won't graduate from college. Virtually no one will go to college out of state. Students don't expect much from themselves, because the people around them don't do very much. Many parents go along with this phenomenon. I don't remember ever being scolded for getting a bad grade until Mamaw began to take an interest in my grades in high school. When my sister or I struggled in school, I'd overhear things like "Well, maybe she's just not that great at fractions," or "J.D.'s more of a numbers kid, so I wouldn't worry about that spelling test."

There was, and still is, a sense that those who make it are of two varieties. The first are lucky: They come from wealthy families with connections, and their lives were set from the moment they were born. The second are the meritocratic: They were born with brains and couldn't fail if they tried. Because very few in Middletown fall into the former category, people assume that everyone who makes it is just really smart. To the average Middletonian, hard work doesn't matter as much as raw talent.

It's not like parents and teachers never mention hard work. Nor do they walk around

offering to trade food stamps for cash at a premium, she' d blather on about the importance of industriousness. "So many people abuse the system, it' s impossible for the hardworking people to get the help they need," she' d say. This was the construct she' d built in her head: Most of the beneficiaries of the system were extravagant moochers, but she—despite never having worked in her life—was an obvious exception.

People talk about hard work all the time in places like Middletown. You can walk through a town where 30 percent of the young men work fewer than twenty hours a week and find not a single person aware of his own laziness. During the 2012 election cycle, the Public Religion Institute, a left-leaning think tank, published a report on working-class whites. It found, among other things, that working-class whites worked more hours than college-educated whites. But the idea that the average working-class white works more hours is demonstrably false. 13 The Public Religion Institute based its results on surveys—essentially, they called around and asked people what they thought. 14 The only thing that report proves is that many folks talk about working more than they actually work.

Of course, the reasons poor people aren' t working as much as others are complicated, and it' s too easy to blame the problem on laziness. For many, part-time work is all they have access to, because the Armcos of the world are going out of business and their skill sets don' t fit well in the modern economy. But whatever the reasons, the rhetoric of hard work conflicts with the reality on the ground. The kids in Middletown absorb that conflict and struggle with it.

In this, as in so much else, the Scots-Irish migrants resemble their kin back in the holler. In an HBO documentary about eastern Kentucky hill people, the patriarch of a large Appalachian family introduces himself by drawing strict lines between work acceptable for men and work acceptable for women. While it' s obvious what he considers "women' s work," it' s not at all clear what work, if any, is acceptable for him. Apparently not paid employment, since the man has never worked a paying job in his life. Ultimately, the verdict of his own son is damning: "Daddy says he' s worked in his life. Only thing Daddy' s worked is his goddamned ass. Why not be straight about it, Pa? Daddy was an alcoholic. He would stay drunk, he didn' t bring food home. Mommy supported her young' uns. If it hadn' t been for Mommy, we' d have been dead." 15

Alongside these conflicting norms about the value of blue-collar work existed a massive ignorance about how to achieve white-collar work. We didn' t know that all across the

equation that produced the number. So if the number of the day was four, you could announce "two plus two" and claim a prize, usually a small piece of candy. One day the number was thirty. The students in front of me went through the easy answers— "twenty-nine plus one," "twenty-eight plus two," "fifteen plus fifteen." I was better than that. I was going to blow the teacher away.

When my turn came, I proudly announced, "Fifty minus twenty." The teacher gushed, and I received two pieces of candy for my foray into subtraction, a skill we'd learned only days before. A few moments later, while I beamed over my brilliance, another student announced, "Ten times three." I had no idea what that even meant. Times ? Who was this guy?

The teacher was even more impressed, and my competitor triumphantly collected not two but three pieces of candy. The teacher spoke briefly of multiplication and asked if anyone else knew such a thing existed. None of us raised a hand. For my part, I was crushed. I returned home and burst into tears. I was certain my ignorance was rooted in some failure of character. I just felt stupid .

It wasn't my fault that until that day I had never heard the word "multiplication." It wasn't something I'd learned in school, and my family didn't sit around and work on math problems. But to a little kid who wanted to do well in school, it was a crushing defeat. In my immature brain, I didn't understand the difference between intelligence and knowledge. So I assumed I was an idiot.

I may not have known multiplication that day, but when I came home and told Papaw about my heartbreak, he turned it into triumph. I learned multiplication and division before dinner. And for two years after that, my grandfather and I would practice increasingly complex math once a week, with an ice cream reward for solid performance. I would beat myself up when I didn't understand a concept, and storm off, defeated. But after I'd pout for a few minutes, Papaw was always ready to go again. Mom was never much of a math person, but she took me to the public library before I could read, got me a library card, showed me how to use it, and always made sure I had access to kids' books at home.

In other words, despite all of the environmental pressures from my neighborhood and community, I received a different message at home. And that just might have saved me.

Chapter 5

announced that I was the Incredible Hulk, and dove headfirst into the wall to prove that I was stronger than any building. (I was wrong.)

I remember being smuggled into the hospital to see Uncle Teaberry. I remember sitting on Mamaw Blanton's lap as she read Bible stories aloud before the sun came up, and I remember stroking the whiskers on her chin and wondering whether God gave all old women facial hair. I remember explaining to Ms. Hydorne in the holler that my name was "J.D., like jay-dot-dee-dot." I remember watching Joe Montana lead a TD-winning drive in the Super Bowl against the hometown Bengals. And I remember the early September day in kindergarten when Mom and Lindsay picked me up from school and told me that I'd never see my dad again. He was giving me up for adoption, they said. It was the saddest I had ever felt.

My father, Don Bowman, was Mom's second husband. Mom and Dad married in 1983 and split up around the time I started walking. Mom remarried a couple years after the divorce. Dad gave me up for adoption when I was six. After the adoption, he became kind of a phantom for the next six years. I had few memories of life with him. I knew that he loved Kentucky, its beautiful mountains, and its rolling green horse country. He drank RC Cola and had a clear Southern accent. He drank, but he stopped after he converted to Pentecostal Christianity. I always felt loved when I spent time with him, which was why I found it so shocking that he "didn't want me anymore," as Mom and Mamaw told me. He had a new wife, with two small children, and I'd been replaced.

Bob Hamel, my stepdad and eventual adoptive father, was a good guy in that he treated Lindsay and me kindly. Mamaw didn't care much for him. "He's a toothless fucking retard," she'd tell Mom, I suspect for reasons of class and culture: Mamaw had done everything in her power to be better than the circumstances of her birth. Though she was hardly rich, she wanted her kids to get an education, obtain white-collar work, and marry well-groomed middle-class folks—people, in other words, who were nothing like Mamaw and Papaw. Bob, however, was a walking hillbilly stereotype. He had little relationship with his own father and had learned the lessons of his own childhood well: He had two kids whom he barely saw, though they lived in Hamilton, a town ten miles south of Middletown. Half of his teeth had rotted out, and the other half were black, brown, and misshapen, the consequence of a lifetime of Mountain Dew consumption and presumably some missed dental checkups. He was a high school dropout who drove a truck for a living.

in America isn’t just about money. And her desire that her children do better than she had done extended past their education and employment and into the relationships they formed. When it came to spouses for her kids and parents for her grandkids, Mamaw felt, whether she knew it consciously, that she wasn’t good enough.

When Bob became my legal father, Mom changed my name from James Donald Bowman to James David Hamel. Until then, I’d borne my father’s first name as my middle name, and Mom used the adoption to erase any memory of his existence. She kept the D to preserve what had by then become a universal nickname—J.D. Mom told me that I was now named after Uncle David, Mamaw’s older, pot-smoking brother. This seemed a bit of a stretch even when I was six. Any old D name would have done, so long as it wasn’t Donald.

Our new life with Bob had a superficial, family-sitcom feel to it. Mom and Bob’s marriage seemed happy. They bought a house a few blocks away from Mamaw’s. (We were so close that if the bathrooms were occupied or I felt like a snack, I’d just walk over to Mamaw’s.) Mom had recently acquired her nursing license, and Bob made a great salary, so we had plenty of money. With our gun-toting, cigarette-smoking Mamaw up the street and a new legal father, we were an odd family but a happy one.

My life assumed a predictable cadence: I’d go to school and come home and eat dinner. I visited Mamaw and Papaw nearly every day. Papaw would sit on our porch to smoke, and I’d sit out there with him and listen to him grumble about politics or the steelworkers’ union. When I learned to read, Mom bought me my first chapter book—Space Brat —and heaped praise on me for finishing it quickly. I loved to read, and I loved to work on math problems with Papaw, and I loved the way that Mom seemed to delight in everything I did.

Mom and I bonded over other things, especially our favorite sport: football. I read every word I could about Joe Montana, the greatest quarterback of all time, watched every game, and wrote fan mail to the 49ers and later the Chiefs, Montana’s two teams. Mom checked out books on football strategy from the public library, and we built little models of the field with construction paper and loose change—pennies for the defense, nickels and dimes for the offense.

Mom didn’t want me to understand only the rules of football; she wanted me to understand the strategy. We practiced on our construction-paper football field, going over the various contingencies: What happened if a particular lineman (a shiny nickel) missed

More than anyone else in my family, Mom wanted us to be exposed to people from all walks of life. Her friend Scott was a kind old gay man who, she later told me, died unexpectedly. She made me watch a movie about Ryan White, a boy not that much older than I was, who contracted HIV through a blood transfusion and had to start a legal fight to return to school. Every time I complained about school, Mom reminded me of Ryan White and spoke about what a blessing it was to get an education. She was so overcome by White's story that she handwrote a letter to his mother after he died in 1990.

Mom believed deeply in the promise of education. She was the salutatorian of her high school class but never made it to college because Lindsay was born weeks after Mom graduated from high school. But she did return to a local community college and earn an associate's degree in nursing. I was probably seven or eight when she started working full-time as a nurse, and I liked to think that I had contributed in some small way: I "helped" her study by crawling all over her, and I let her practice drawing blood on my youthful veins.

Sometimes Mom's devotion to education arguably went a little too far. During my third-grade science fair project, Mom helped at every stage—from planning the project to assisting with lab notes to assembling the presentation. The night before everything was due, the project looked precisely how it deserved to look: like the work of a third-grader who had slacked off a bit. I went to bed expecting to wake up the next morning, give my mediocre presentation, and call it a day. The science fair was a competition, and I even thought that, with a little salesmanship, I could advance to the next round. But in the morning I discovered that Mom had revamped the entire presentation. It looked like a scientist and a professional artist had joined forces to create it. Though the judges were blown away, when they began to ask questions that I couldn't answer (but that the maker of the collage would have known), they realized something didn't fit. I didn't make it to the final round of the competition.

What that incident taught me—besides the fact that I needed to do my own work—was that Mom cared deeply about enterprises of the mind. Nothing brought her greater joy than when I finished a book or asked for another. Mom was, everyone told me, the smartest person they knew. And I believed it. She was definitely the smartest person I knew.

In the southwest Ohio of my youth, we learned to value loyalty, honor, and toughness. I

Papaw ensured that I knew the basic rules of fighting: You never start a fight; you always end the fight if someone else starts it; and even though you never start a fight, it's maybe okay to start one if a man insults your family. This last rule was unspoken but clear. Lindsay had a boyfriend named Derrick, maybe her first boyfriend, who broke up with her after a few days. She was heartbroken as only thirteen-year-olds can be, so I decided to confront Derrick when I saw him walking past our house one day. He had five years and about thirty-five pounds on me, but I came at him twice as he pushed me down easily. The third time I came at him, he'd had enough and proceeded to pound the shit out of me. I ran to Mamaw's house for some first aid, crying and a little bloody. She just smiled at me. "You did good, honey. You did real good."

In fighting, as with many things, Mamaw taught me through experience. She never laid a hand on me punitively—she was anti-spanking in a way must have come from her own bad experiences—but when I asked her what it felt like to be punched in the head, she showed me. A swift blow, delivered by the meat of her hand, directly on my cheek. "That didn't feel so bad, did it?" And the answer was no. Getting hit in the face wasn't nearly as terrible as I'd imagined. This was one of her most important rules of fighting: Unless someone really knows how to hit, a punch in the face is no big deal. Better to take a blow to the face than to miss an opportunity to deliver your own. Her second tip was to stand sideways, with your left shoulder facing your opponent and your hands raised because "you're a much smaller target that way." Her third rule was to punch with your whole body, especially your hips. Very few people, Mamaw told me, appreciate how unimportant your fist is when it comes to hitting someone.

Despite her admonition not to start fights, our unspoken honor code made it easy to convince someone else to start a fight for you. If you really wanted to get into it with someone, all you needed to do was insult his mom. No amount of self-control could withstand a well-played maternal criticism. "Your mom's so fat that her ass has its own zip code"; "Your mom's such a hillbilly that her false teeth have cavities"; or a simple "Yo' mama!" These were fighting words, whether you wanted them to be or not. To shirk from avenging a string of insults was to lose your honor, your dignity, or even your friends. It was to go home and be afraid to tell your family that you had disgraced them.

I don't know why, but after a few years Mamaw's views evolved on fighting. I was in third grade, had just lost a race, and felt there was only one way to adequately deal with

of honor fighting only a few years earlier. "One time I got in a fight and you told me that I did good," I told her. She said, "Well, then, I was wrong. You shouldn't fight unless you have to." Now, that made an impression. Mamaw never admitted mistakes.

The next year, I noticed that a class bully had taken a particular interest in a specific victim, an odd kid I rarely spoke to. Thanks to my prior exploits, I was largely immune to bullying, and, like most kids, was usually content to avoid the bully's attention. One day, though, he said something about his victim that I overheard, and I felt a strong urge to stick up for the poor kid. There was something pathetic about the target, who seemed especially wounded by the bully's treatment.

When I spoke to Mamaw after school that day, I broke down in tears. I felt incredibly guilty that I hadn't had the courage to speak up for this poor kid—that I had just sat there and listened to someone else make his life a living hell. She asked whether I had spoken to the teacher about it, and I assured her that I had. "That bitch ought to be put in jail for sitting there and not doing anything." And then she said something that I will never forget: "Sometimes, honey, you have to fight, even when you're not defending yourself. Sometimes it's just the right thing to do. Tomorrow you need to stand up for that boy, and if you have to stand up for yourself, then do that, too." Then she taught me a move: a swift, hard (make sure to turn your hips) punch right to the gut. "If he starts in on you, make sure to punch him right in the belly button."

The next day at school, I felt nervous and hoped that the bully would take a day off. But in the predictable chaos as the class lined up for lunch, the bully—his name was Chris—asked my little charge whether he planned on crying that day. "Shut up," I said. "Just leave him alone." Chris approached me, pushed me, and asked what I planned to do about it. I walked right up to him, pivoted my right hip, and sucker-punched him right in the stomach. He immediately—and terrifyingly—dropped to his knees, seemingly unable to breathe. By the time I realized that I'd really injured him, he was alternately coughing and trying to catch his breath. He even spit up a small amount of blood.

Chris went to the school nurse, and after I confirmed that I hadn't killed him and would avoid the police, my thoughts immediately turned to the school justice system—whether I'd be suspended or expelled and for how long. While the other kids played at recess and Chris recovered with the nurse, the teacher brought me into the classroom. I thought she was going to tell me that she'd called my parents and I'd be kicked out of school.

discipline the class bully. At any rate, Mamaw found out about the fight directly from me and praised me for doing something really good. It was the last time I ever got in a fistfight.

While I recognized that things weren't perfect, I also recognized that our family shared a lot with most of the families I saw around me. Yes, my parents fought intensely, but so did everyone else's. Yes, my grandparents played as big a role in my life as Mom and Bob did, but that was the norm in hillbilly families. We didn't live a peaceful life in a small nuclear family. We lived a chaotic life in big groups of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. This was the life I'd been given, and I was a pretty happy kid.

When I was about nine years old, things began to unravel at home. Tired of Papaw's constant presence and Mamaw's "interference," Mom and Bob decided to move to Preble County, a sparsely populated part of Ohio farm country approximately thirty-five miles from Middletown. Even as a boy, I knew this was the very worst thing that could happen to me. Mamaw and Papaw were my best friends. They helped me with my homework and spoiled me with treats when I behaved correctly or finished a difficult school assignment. They were also the gatekeepers. They were the scariest people I knew—old hillbillies who carried loaded guns in their coat pockets and under their car seats, no matter the occasion. They kept the monsters at bay.

Bob was Mom's third husband, but the third time was not the charm. By the time we moved to Preble County, Mom and Bob had already begun to fight, and many of those fights would keep me up well past my bedtime. They said things friends and family should never say to each other: "Fuck you!" "Go back to your trailer park," Mom sometimes told Bob, a reference to his life before they were married. Sometimes Mom would take us to a local motel, where we'd hide out for a few days until Mamaw or Papaw convinced Mom to face her domestic problems.

Mom had a lot of Mamaw's fire, which meant that she never allowed herself to become a victim during domestic disputes. It also meant that she often escalated normal disagreements beyond where they should go. During one of my second-grade football games, a tall, overweight mother muttered about why I had been given the ball on the previous play. Mom, a bleacher row behind the woman, overheard the comment and told her that I'd been given the ball because, unlike her child, I wasn't a fat piece of shit who'd been raised by a fat piece-of-shit mother. By the time I observed the commotion

In Preble County, with Mamaw and Papaw over forty-five minutes away, the fights turned into screaming matches. Often the subject was money, though it made little sense for a rural Ohio family with a combined income of over a hundred thousand dollars to struggle with money. But fight they did, because they bought things they didn't need—new cars, new trucks, a swimming pool. By the time their short marriage fell apart, they were tens of thousands of dollars in debt, with nothing to show for it.

Finances were the least of our problems. Mom and Bob had never been violent with each other, but that slowly started to change. I awoke one night to the sound of breaking glass—Mom had lobbed plates at Bob—and ran downstairs to see what was up. He was holding her against the kitchen counter, and she was flailing and biting at him. When she dropped to the ground, I ran to her lap. When Bob moved closer, I stood up and punched him in the face. He reared back (to return the blow, I figured), and I collapsed on the ground with my arms over my head in anticipation. The blow never came—Bob never was physically abusive—and my intervention somehow ended the fight. He walked over to the couch and sat down silently, staring at the wall; Mom and I meekly walked upstairs to bed.

Mom and Bob's problems were my first introduction to marital conflict resolution. Here were the takeaways: Never speak at a reasonable volume when screaming will do; if the fight gets a little too intense, it's okay to slap and punch, so long as the man doesn't hit first; always express your feelings in a way that's insulting and hurtful to your partner; if all else fails, take the kids and the dog to a local motel, and don't tell your spouse where to find you—if he or she knows where the children are, he or she won't worry as much, and your departure won't be as effective.

I began to do poorly in school. Many nights I'd lie in bed, unable to sleep because of the noise—the furniture rocking, heavy stomping, yelling, sometimes glass shattering. The next morning I'd wake up tired and depressed, meandering through the school day, thinking constantly about what awaited at home. I just wanted to retreat to a place where I could sit in silence. I couldn't tell anyone what was going on, as that was far too embarrassing. And though I hated school, I hated home more. When the teacher announced that we had only a few minutes to clear our desks before the bell rang, my heart sank. I'd stare at the clock as if it were a ticking bomb. Not even Mamaw understood how terrible things had become. My slipping grades were the first indication.

Not every day was like that, of course. But even when the house was ostensibly peaceful,

transgression would send a plate or book flying across the room. It was like we were living among land mines—one wrong step, and kaboom .

Up to that point in my life, I was a perfectly fit and healthy child. I exercised constantly, and though I didn’t exactly watch what I ate, I didn’t have to. But I began to put on weight, and I was positively chubby by the time I started the fifth grade. I often felt sick and would complain of severe stomachaches to the school nurse. Though I didn’t realize it at the time, the trauma at home was clearly affecting my health. “Elementary students may show signs of distress through somatic complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, and pains,” reads one resource for school administrators who deal with children who suffer trauma at home. “These students may have a change in behavior, such as increased irritability, aggression, and anger. Their behaviors may be inconsistent. These students may show a change in school performance and have impaired attention and concentration and more school absences.” I just thought I was constipated or that I really hated my new hometown.

Mom and Bob weren’t that abnormal. It would be tough to chronicle all the outbursts and screaming matches I witnessed that had nothing to do with my family. My neighbor friend and I would play in his backyard until we heard screaming from his parents, and then we’d run into the alley and hide. Papaw’s neighbors would yell so loudly that we could hear it from inside his house, and it was so common that he’d always say, “Goddammit, there they go again.” I once saw a young couple’s argument at the local Chinese buffet escalate into a symphony of curse words and insults. Mamaw and I used to open the windows on one side of her house so we could hear the substance of the explosive fights between her neighbor Pattie and Pattie’s boyfriend. Seeing people insult, scream, and sometimes physically fight was just a part of our life. After a while, you didn’t even notice it.

I always thought it was how adults spoke to one another. When Lori married Dan, I learned of at least one exception. Mamaw told me that Dan and Aunt Wee never screamed at each other because Dan was different. “He’s a saint,” she’d say. As we got to know Dan’s entire family, I realized that they were just nicer to each other. They didn’t yell at each other in public. I got the distinct impression that they didn’t yell at each other much in private, either. I thought they were frauds. Aunt Wee saw it differently. “I just assumed they were really weird. I knew they were genuine. I just figured they were genuinely odd.”

wanted to do was get away from it—to hide from the fighting, go to Mamaw's, or disappear. I couldn't hide from it, because it was all around me.

Over time, I started to like the drama. Instead of hiding from it, I'd run downstairs or put my ear to the wall to get a better listen. My heart would still race, but in an anticipatory way, like it did when I was about to score in a basketball game. Even the fight that went too far—when I thought Bob was about to hit me—was less about a brave kid who intervened and more about a spectator who got a little too close to the action. This thing that I hated had become a sort of drug.

One day I came home from school to see Mamaw's car in the driveway. It was an ominous sign, as she never made unannounced visits to our Preble County home. She made an exception on this day because Mom was in the hospital, the result of a failed suicide attempt. For all the things I saw happening in the world around me, my eleven-year-old eyes missed so much. In her work at Middletown Hospital, Mom had met and fallen in love with a local fireman and begun a years-long affair. That morning Bob had confronted her about the affair and demanded a divorce. Mom had sped off in her brand-new minivan and intentionally crashed it into a telephone pole. That's what she said, at least. Mamaw had her own theory: that Mom had tried to detract attention from her cheating and financial problems. As Mamaw said, "Who tries to kill themselves by crashing a fucking car? If she wanted to kill herself, I've got plenty of guns."

Lindsay and I largely bought Mamaw's view of things, and we felt relief more than anything—that Mom hadn't really hurt herself, and that Mom's attempted suicide would be the end of our Preble County experiment. She spent only a couple days in the hospital. Within a month, we moved back to Middletown, one block closer to Mamaw than we'd been before, with one less man in tow.

Despite the return to a familiar home, Mom's behavior grew increasingly erratic. She was more roommate than parent, and of the three of us—Mom, Lindsay, and me—Mom was the roommate most prone to hard living. I'd go to bed only to wake up around midnight, when Lindsay got home from doing whatever teenagers do. I'd wake up again at two or three in the morning, when Mom got home. She had new friends, most of them younger and without kids. And she cycled through boyfriends, switching partners every few months. It was so bad that my best friend at the time commented on her "flavors of the month."

I'd grown accustomed to a certain amount of instability, but it was of a familiar type:

behavior was just strange. Though Mom had been many things, she hadn't been a partier. When we moved back to Middletown, that changed.

With partying came alcohol, and with alcohol came alcohol abuse and even more bizarre behavior. One day when I was about twelve, Mom said something that I don't remember now, but I recall running out the door without my shoes and going to Mamaw's house. For two days, I refused to speak to or see my mother. Papaw, worried about the disintegrating relationship between his daughter and her son, begged me to see her.

So I listened to the apology that I'd heard a million times before. Mom was always good at apologies. Maybe she had to be—if she didn't say "sorry," then Lindsay and I never would have spoken to her. But I think she really meant it. Deep down, she always felt guilty about the things that happened, and she probably even believed that—as promised—they'd "never happen again." They always did, though.

This time was no different. Mom was extra-apologetic because her sin was extra-bad. So her penance was extra-good: She promised to take me to the mall and buy me football cards. Football cards were my kryptonite, so I agreed to join her. It was probably the biggest mistake of my life.

We got on the highway, and I said something that ignited her temper. So she sped up to what seemed like a hundred miles per hour and told me that she was going to crash the car and kill us both. I jumped into the backseat, thinking that if I could use two seat belts at once, I'd be more likely to survive the impact. This infuriated her more, so she pulled over to beat the shit out of me. When she did, I leaped out of the car and ran for my life. We were in a rural part of the state, and I ran through a large field of grass, the tall blades slapping my ankles as I sped away. I happened upon a small house with an aboveground pool. The owner—an overweight woman about the same age as Mom—was floating on her back, enjoying the nice June weather.

"You have to call my mamaw!" I screamed. "Please help me. My mom is trying to kill me." The woman clambered out of the pool as I looked around fearfully, terrified of any sign of my mother. We went inside, and I called Mamaw and repeated the woman's address. "Please hurry up," I told her. "Mom is going to find me."

Mom did find me. She must have seen where I ran from the highway. She banged on the door and demanded that I come out. I begged the owner not to open the door, so she locked the doors and promised Mom that her two dogs—each no bigger than a medium-

watched, and I hated her for doing nothing. But she had in fact done something: In the minutes between my call to Mamaw and Mom's arrival, the woman had apparently dialed 911. So as Mom dragged me to her car, two police cruisers pulled up, and the cops who got out put Mom in handcuffs. She did not go quietly; they wrestled her into the back of a cruiser. Then she was gone.

The second cop put me in the back of his cruiser as we waited for Mamaw to arrive. I have never felt so lonely, watching that cop interview the homeowner—still in her soaking-wet bathing suit, flanked by two pint-sized guard dogs—unable to open the cruiser door from the inside, and unsure when I could expect Mamaw's arrival. I had begun to daydream when the car door swung open, and Lindsay crawled into the cruiser with me and clutched me to her chest so tightly that I couldn't breathe. We didn't cry; we said nothing. I just sat there being squeezed to death and feeling like all was right with the world.

When we got out of the car, Mamaw and Papaw hugged me and asked if I was okay. Mamaw spun me around to inspect me. Papaw spoke with the police officer about where to find his incarcerated daughter. Lindsay never let me out of her sight. It had been the scariest day of my life. But the hard part was over.

When we got home, none of us could talk. Mamaw wore a silent, terrifying anger. I hoped that she would calm down before Mom got out of jail. I was exhausted and wanted only to lie on the couch and watch TV. Lindsay went upstairs and took a nap. Papaw collected a food order for Wendy's. On his way to the front door, he stopped and stood over me on the couch. Mamaw had left the room temporarily. Papaw placed his hand on my forehead and began to sob. I was so afraid that I didn't even look up at his face. I had never heard of him crying, never seen him cry, and assumed he was so tough that he hadn't even cried as a baby. He held that pose for a little while, until we both heard Mamaw approaching the living room. At that point he collected himself, wiped his eyes, and left. Neither of us ever spoke of that moment.

Mom was released from jail on bond and prosecuted for a domestic violence misdemeanor. The case depended entirely on me. Yet during the hearing, when asked if Mom had ever threatened me, I said no. The reason was simple: My grandparents were paying a lot of money for the town's highest-powered lawyer. They were furious with my mother, but they didn't want their daughter in jail, either. The lawyer never explicitly encouraged dishonesty, but he did make it clear that what I said would either increase or

Mom would officially retain custody, but from that day forward I lived in her house only when I chose to—and Mamaw told me that if Mom had a problem with the arrangement, she could talk to the barrel of Mamaw's gun. This was hillbilly justice, and it didn't fail me.

I remember sitting in that busy courtroom, with half a dozen other families all around, and thinking they looked just like us. The moms and dads and grandparents didn't wear suits like the lawyers and judge. They wore sweatpants and stretchy pants and T-shirts. Their hair was a bit frizzy. And it was the first time I noticed "TV accents"—the neutral accent that so many news anchors had. The social workers and the judge and the lawyer all had TV accents. None of us did. The people who ran the courthouse were different from us. The people subjected to it were not.

Identity is an odd thing, and I didn't understand at the time why I felt such kinship with these strangers. A few months later, during my first trip to California, I began to understand. Uncle Jimmy flew Lindsay and me to his home in Napa, California. Knowing that I'd be visiting him, I told every person I could that I was headed to California in the summer and, what was more, flying for the first time. The main reaction was disbelief that my uncle had enough money to fly two people—neither of whom were his children—out to California. It is a testament to the class consciousness of my youth that my friends' thoughts drifted first to the cost of an airplane flight.

For my part, I was overjoyed to travel west and visit Uncle Jimmy, a man I idolized on par with my great-uncles, the Blanton men. Despite the early departure, I didn't sleep a wink on the six-hour flight from Cincinnati to San Francisco. Everything was just too exciting: the way the earth shrank during takeoff, the look of clouds from close up, the scope and size of the sky, and the way the mountains looked from the stratosphere. The flight attendant took notice, and by the time we hit Colorado, I was making regular visits to the cockpit (this was before 9/11), where the pilot gave me brief lessons in flying an airplane and updated me on our progress.

The adventure had just begun. I had traveled out of state before: I had joined my grandparents on road trips to South Carolina and Texas, and I visited Kentucky regularly. On those trips, I rarely spoke to anyone except family, and I never noticed anything all that different. Napa was like a different country. In California, every day included a new adventure with my teenage cousins and their friends. During one trip we went to the

exciting. Everyone I met thought I sounded like I was from Kentucky. Of course, I kind of was from Kentucky. And I loved that people thought I had a funny accent. That said, it became clear to me that California really was something else. I'd visited Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Columbus, and Lexington. I'd spent a considerable amount of time in South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Arkansas. So why was California so different?

The answer, I'd learn, was the same hillbilly highway that brought Mamaw and Papaw from eastern Kentucky to southwest Ohio. Despite the topographical differences and the different regional economies of the South and the industrial Midwest, my travels had been confined largely to places where the people looked and acted like my family. We ate the same foods, watched the same sports, and practiced the same religion. That's why I felt so much kinship with those people at the courthouse: They were hillbilly transplants in one way or another, just like me.

Chapter 6

One of the questions I loathed, and that adults always asked, was whether I had any brothers or sisters. When you're a kid, you can't wave your hand, say, "It's complicated," and move on. And unless you're a particularly capable sociopath, dishonesty can only take you so far. So, for a time, I dutifully answered, walking people through the tangled web of familial relationships that I'd grown accustomed to. I had a biological half brother and half sister whom I never saw because my biological father had given me up for adoption. I had many stepbrothers and stepsisters by one measure, but only two if you limited the tally to the offspring of Mom's husband of the moment. Then there was my biological dad's wife, and she had at least one kid, so maybe I should count him, too. Sometimes I'd wax philosophical about the meaning of the word "sibling": Are the children of your mom's previous husbands still related to you? If so, what about the future children of your mom's previous husbands? By some metrics, I probably had about a dozen stepsiblings.

There was one person for whom the term "sibling" definitely applied: my sister, Lindsay. If any adjective ever preceded her introduction, it was always one of pride: "my full sister, Lindsay"; "my whole sister, Lindsay"; "my big sister, Lindsay." Lindsay was (and remains) the person I was proudest to know. The moment I learned that "half sister" had nothing to do with my affections and everything to do with the genetic nature of our relationship—that Lindsay, by virtue of having a different father, was just as much my half

Mamaw relented and agreed that henceforth no one would ever refer to Lindsay as my "half sister" again.

Lindsay Leigh was five years older than I was, born just two months after Mom graduated from high school. I was obsessed with her, both in the way that all children adore their older siblings and in a way that was unique to our circumstances. Her heroism on my behalf was the stuff of legend. One time after she and I argued over a soft pretzel, leading Mom to drop me off in an empty parking lot to show Lindsay what life without me would look like, it was my sister's fit of sorrow and rage that brought Mom back immediately. During explosive fights between Mom and whatever man she let into our home, it was Lindsay who withdrew to her bedroom to place a rescue call to Mamaw and Papaw. She fed me when I was hungry, changed my diaper when no one else did, and dragged me everywhere with her—even though, Mamaw and Aunt Wee told me, I weighed nearly as much as she did.

I always saw her as more adult than child. She never expressed her displeasure at her teenage boyfriends by storming off and slamming doors. When Mom worked late nights or otherwise didn't make it home, Lindsay ensured that we had something for dinner. I annoyed her, like all little brothers annoy their sisters, but she never yelled at me, screamed at me, or made me afraid of her. In one of my most shameful moments, I wrestled Lindsay to the ground for reasons I don't remember. I was ten or eleven, which would have made her about fifteen, and though I realized then that I'd outgrown her in terms of strength, I continued to think there was nothing childlike about her. She was above it all, the "one true adult in the house," as Papaw would say, and my first line of defense, even before Mamaw. She made dinner when she had to, did the laundry when no one else did, and rescued me from the backseat of that police cruiser. I depended on her so completely that I didn't see Lindsay for what she was: a young girl, not yet old enough to drive a car, learning to fend for herself and her little brother at the same time.

That began to change the day our family decided to give Lindsay a shot at her dreams. Lindsay had always been a beautiful girl. When my friends and I ranked the world's prettiest girls, I listed Lindsay first, just ahead of Demi Moore and Pam Anderson. Lindsay had learned of a modeling recruitment event at a Dayton hotel, so Mom, Mamaw, Lindsay, and I piled into Mamaw's Buick and headed north. Lindsay was bursting with excitement, and I was, too. This was going to be her big break and, by extension, our whole family's.

feet. I wondered how any talent agent could ever appreciate my sister's beauty. It was too damned dark.

Eventually we reached the front of the line, and the talent agent seemed optimistic about my sister. She said something about how cute she was and told her to go wait in another room. Surprisingly, she said that I was model material, too, and asked if I'd like to follow my sister and hear about our next step. I agreed enthusiastically.

After a little while in the holding room, Lindsay and I and the other selectees learned that we had made it to the next round, but another trial awaited us in New York City. The agency employees gave us brochures with more information and told us that we needed to RSVP within the next few weeks. On the way home, Lindsay and I were ecstatic. We were going to New York City to become famous models.

The fee for traveling to New York was hefty, and if someone had really wanted us as models, they likely would have paid for our audition. In hindsight, the cursory treatment they gave each individual—each "audition" was no longer than a few-sentence conversation—suggests that the whole event was more scam than talent search. But I don't know: Model audition protocol has never been my area of expertise.

What I do know is that our exuberance didn't survive the car ride. Mom began to worry aloud about the cost of the trip, causing Lindsay and me to bicker about which one of us should go (no doubt I was being a brat). Mom became progressively angrier and then snapped. What happened next was no surprise: There was a lot of screaming, some punching and driving, and then a stopped car on the side of the road, full of two sobbing kids. Mamaw intervened before things got out of hand, but it's a miracle we didn't crash and die: Mom driving and slapping the kids in the backseat; Mamaw on the passenger side, slapping and screaming at Mom. That was why the car stopped—though Mom was a multitasker, this was too much. We drove home in silence after Mamaw explained that if Mom lost her temper again, Mamaw would shoot her in the face. That night we stayed at Mamaw's house.

I'll never forget Lindsay's face as she marched upstairs to bed. It wore the pain of a defeat known by only a person who experiences the highest high and the lowest low in a matter of minutes. She had been on the cusp of achieving a childhood dream; now she was just another teenage girl with a broken heart. Mamaw turned to retire to her couch, where she would watch Law & Order , read the Bible, and fall asleep. I stood in the narrow

knew what she'd say, but I guess I just wanted reassurance. "Mamaw, does God love us?" She hung her head, gave me a hug, and began to cry.

The question wounded Mamaw because the Christian faith stood at the center of our lives, especially hers. We never went to church, except on rare occasions in Kentucky or when Mom decided that what we needed in our lives was religion. Nevertheless, Mamaw's was a deeply personal (albeit quirky) faith. She couldn't say "organized religion" without contempt. She saw churches as breeding grounds for perverts and money changers. And she hated what she called "the loud and proud"—people who wore their faith on their sleeve, always ready to let you know how pious they were. Still, she sent much of her spare income to churches in Jackson, Kentucky, especially those controlled by Reverend Donald Ison, an older man who bore a striking resemblance to the priest from The Exorcist .

By Mamaw's reckoning, God never left our side. He celebrated with us when times were good and comforted us when they weren't. During one of our many trips to Kentucky, Mamaw was trying to merge onto the highway after a brief stop for gas. She didn't pay attention to the signs, so we found ourselves headed the wrong way on a one-way exit ramp with angry motorists swerving out of our way. I was screaming in terror, but after a U-turn on a three-lane interstate, the only thing Mamaw said about the incident was "We're fine, goddammit. Don't you know Jesus rides in the car with me?"

The theology she taught was unsophisticated, but it provided a message I needed to hear. To coast through life was to squander my God-given talent, so I had to work hard. I had to take care of my family because Christian duty demanded it. I needed to forgive, not just for my mother's sake but for my own. I should never despair, for God had a plan.

Mamaw often told a parable: A young man was sitting at home when a terrible rainstorm began. Within hours, the man's house began to flood, and someone came to his door offering a ride to higher ground. The man declined, saying, "God will take care of me." A few hours later, as the waters engulfed the first floor of the man's home, a boat passed by, and the captain offered to take the man to safety. The man declined, saying, "God will take care of me." A few hours after that, as the man waited on his roof—his entire home flooded—a helicopter flew by, and the pilot offered transportation to dry land. Again the man declined, telling the pilot that God would care for him. Soon thereafter, the waters overcame the man, and as he stood before God in heaven, he protested his fate: "You promised that you'd help me so long as I was faithful." God replied, "I sent you a car, a

The fallen world described by the Christian religion matched the world I saw around me: one where a happy car ride could quickly turn to misery, one where individual misconduct rippled across a family's and a community's life. When I asked Mamaw if God loved us, I asked her to reassure me that this religion of ours could still make sense of the world we lived in. I needed reassurance of some deeper justice, some cadence or rhythm that lurked beneath the heartache and chaos.

Not long after Lindsay's childhood modeling dream went up in flames, I was in Jackson with Mamaw and my cousin Gail on August 2, my eleventh birthday. Late in the afternoon, Mamaw advised me to call Bob—still my legal father—because I hadn't heard from him yet. After we moved back to Middletown, he and Mom divorced, so it wasn't surprising that he rarely got in touch. But my birthday was obviously special, and I found it odd that he hadn't called. So I phoned and got the answering machine. A few hours later, I phoned once more with the same result, and I knew instinctively that I would never see Bob again.

Either because she felt bad for me or because she knew I loved dogs, Gail took me to the local pet store, where a brand-new litter of German shepherd puppies was on display. I desperately wanted one and had just enough birthday money to make the purchase. Gail reminded me that dogs were a lot of work and that my family (read: my mother) had a terrible history of getting dogs and then giving them away. When wisdom fell on deaf ears — "You're probably right, Gail, but they're soooo cute!" —authority kicked in: "Honey, I'm sorry, but I'm not letting you buy this dog." By the time we returned to Mamaw Blanton's house, I was more upset about the dog than about losing father number two.

I cared less about the fact that Bob was gone than about the disruption his departure would inevitably cause. He was just the latest casualty in a long line of failed paternal candidates. There was Steve, a soft-spoken man with a temperament to match. I used to pray that Mom would marry Steve because he was nice and had a good job. But they broke up, and she moved on to Chip, a local police officer. Chip was kind of a hillbilly himself: He loved cheap beer, country music, and catfish fishing, and we got along well until he, too, was gone.

One of the worst parts, honestly, was that Bob's departure would further complicate the tangled web of last names in our family. Lindsay was a Lewis (her dad's last name), Mom took the last name of whichever husband she was married to, Mamaw and Papaw were Vances, and all of Mamaw's brothers were Blantons. I shared a name with no one I really

father's last name is Hamel. You haven't met him because I don't see him. No, I don't know why I don't see him."

Of all the things that I hated about my childhood, nothing compared to the revolving door of father figures. To her credit, Mom had avoided abusive or neglectful partners, and I never felt mistreated by any of the men she brought into our home. But I hated the disruption. And I hated how often these boyfriends would walk out of my life just as I'd begun to like them. Lindsay, with the benefit of age and wisdom, viewed all of the men skeptically. She knew that at some point they'd be gone. With Bob's departure, I had learned the same lesson.

Mom brought these men into our lives for the right reasons. She often wondered aloud whether Chip or Bob or Steve made good "father figures." She would say: "He takes you fishing, which is really good" or "It's important to learn something about masculinity from someone closer to your age." When I heard her screaming at one of them, or weeping on the floor after an especially intense argument, or when I saw her mired in despair after a breakup, I felt guilty that she was going through this for my sake. After all, I thought, Papaw was plenty good as a father figure. I promised her after each breakup that we would be okay or that we'd get over this together or (echoing Mamaw) that we didn't need any damned men. I know Mom's motives were not entirely selfless: She (like all of us) was motivated by the desire for love and companionship. But she was looking out for us, too.

The road to hell, however, is paved with good intentions. Caught between various dad candidates, Lindsay and I never learned how a man should treat a woman. Chip may have taught me how to tie a fishing hook, but I learned little else about what masculinity required of me other than drinking beer and screaming at a woman when she screamed at you. In the end, the only lesson that took was that you can't depend on people. "I learned that men will disappear at the drop of a hat," Lindsay once said. "They don't care about their kids; they don't provide; they just disappear, and it's not that hard to make them go."

Mom perhaps sensed that Bob was regretting his decision to take on an additional child, because one day she called me into the living room to speak on the phone with Don Bowman, my biological father. It was a short but memorable conversation. He asked if I remembered wanting to have a farm with horses and cows and chickens, and I answered

I knew little about my biological father and barely recalled my life before Bob adopted me. I knew that Don had abandoned me because he didn't want to pay child support (or so Mom said). I knew that he was married to a woman named Cheryl, that he was tall, and that people thought I looked like him. And I knew that he was, in Mamaw's words, a "Holy Roller." That was the word she used for charismatic Christians who, she claimed, "handled snakes and screamed and wailed in church." This was enough to pique my curiosity: With little religious training, I was desperate for some exposure to a real church. I asked Mom if I could see him, and she agreed, so in the same summer that my legal father walked out of my life, my biological one walked back in. Mom had come full circle: Having cycled through a number of men in an effort to find me a father, she had settled on the original candidate.

Don Bowman had much more in common with Mom's side of the family than I expected. His father (and my grandfather), Don C. Bowman, also migrated from eastern Kentucky to southwest Ohio for work. After marrying and starting a family, my grandfather Bowman died suddenly, leaving behind two small children and a young wife. My grandmother remarried, and Dad spent much of his childhood in eastern Kentucky with his grandparents.

More than any other person, Dad understood what Kentucky meant to me, because it meant the same thing to him. His mom remarried early, and though her second husband was a good man, he was also very firm and an outsider—even the best stepparents take some getting used to. In Kentucky, among his people and with plenty of space, Dad could be himself. I felt the same way. There were two kinds of people: those whom I'd behave around because I wanted to impress them and those whom I'd behave around to avoid embarrassing myself. The latter people were outsiders, and Kentucky had none of them.

In many ways, Dad's life project was rebuilding for himself what he once had in Kentucky. When I first visited him, Dad had a modest house on a beautiful plot of land, fourteen acres in total. There was a medium-sized pond stocked with fish, a couple of fields for cows and horses, a barn, and a chicken coop. Every morning the kids would run to the chicken coop and grab the morning's haul of eggs—usually seven or eight, a perfect number for a family of five. During the day, we capered around the property with a dog in tow, caught frogs, and chased rabbits. It was exactly what Dad had done as a child, and exactly what I did with Mamaw in Kentucky.

collapsed from exhaustion and lay in the grass, Dannie' s head on my chest and my eyes staring at the blue sky. I don' t know that I had ever felt so content, so completely unworried about life and its stresses.

Dad had built a home with an almost jarring serenity. He and his wife argued, but they rarely raised their voices at each other and never resorted to the brutal insults that were commonplace in Mom' s house. None of their friends drank, not even socially. Even though they believed in corporal punishment, it was never doled out excessively or combined with verbal abuse—spanking was methodical and anger-free. My younger brother and sister clearly enjoyed their lives, even though they lacked pop music or R-rated movies.

What little I knew of Dad' s character during his marriage to Mom came mostly secondhand. Mamaw, Aunt Wee, Lindsay, and Mom all told varying degrees of the same story: that Dad was mean. He yelled a lot and sometimes hit Mom. Lindsay told me that, as a child, I had a peculiarly large and misshapen head, and she attributed that to a time when she saw Dad push Mom aggressively.

Dad denies ever physically abusing anyone, including Mom. I suspect that they were physically abusive to each other in the way that Mom and most of her men were: a bit of pushing, some plate throwing, but nothing more. What I do know is that between the end of his marriage with Mom and the beginning of his marriage with Cheryl—which occurred when I was four—Dad had changed for the better. He credits a more serious involvement with his faith. In this, Dad embodied a phenomenon social scientists have observed for decades: Religious folks are much happier. Regular church attendees commit fewer crimes, are in better health, live longer, make more money, drop out of high school less frequently, and finish college more frequently than those who don' t attend church at all. 16 MIT economist Jonathan Gruber even found that the relationship was causal : It' s not just that people who happen to live successful lives also go to church, it' s that church seems to promote good habits.

In his religious habits, Dad lived the stereotype of a culturally conservative Protestant with Southern roots, even though the stereotype is mostly inaccurate. Despite their reputation for clinging to their religion, the folks back home resembled Mamaw more than Dad: deeply religious but without any attachment to a real church community. Indeed, the only conservative Protestants I knew who attended church regularly were my dad and his family.

much of the space between Michigan and Montana. Oddly enough, we think we attend church more than we actually do. In a recent Gallup poll, Southerners and Midwesterners reported the highest rates of church attendance in the country. Yet actual church attendance is much lower in the South.

This pattern of deception has to do with cultural pressure. In southwestern Ohio, where I was born, both the Cincinnati and Dayton metropolitan regions have very low rates of church attendance, about the same as ultra-liberal San Francisco. No one I know in San Francisco would feel ashamed to admit that they don't go to church. (In fact, some of them might feel ashamed to admit that they do.) Ohio is the polar opposite. Even as a kid, I'd lie when people asked if I attended church regularly. According to Gallup, I wasn't alone in feeling that pressure.

The juxtaposition is jarring: Religious institutions remain a positive force in people's lives, but in a part of the country slammed by the decline of manufacturing, joblessness, addiction, and broken homes, church attendance has fallen off. Dad's church offered something desperately needed by people like me. For alcoholics, it gave them a community of support and a sense that they weren't fighting addiction alone. For expectant mothers, it offered a free home with job training and parenting classes. When someone needed a job, church friends could either provide one or make introductions. When Dad faced financial troubles, his church banded together and purchased a used car for the family. In the broken world I saw around me—and for the people struggling in that world—religion offered tangible assistance to keep the faithful on track.

Dad's faith attracted me even though I learned early on that it had played a significant role in the adoption that led to our long separation. While I really enjoyed the time we spent together, the pain of that adoption remained, and we spoke often of how and why it happened in the first place. For the first time, I heard his side of the story: that the adoption had nothing to do with a desire to avoid child support and that, far from simply "giving me away," as Mom and Mamaw had said, Dad had hired multiple lawyers and done everything within reason to keep me.

He worried that the custody war was destroying me. When I saw him during visitations before the adoption, I would hide under the bed for the first few hours, fearful that he would kidnap me and never let me see Mamaw again. Seeing his son in such a frightened state led him to reconsider his approach. Mamaw hated him, a fact I knew firsthand; but

court's child psychiatrist, he learned that I had begun acting out at school and was showing signs of emotional problems. (This I know to be true. After a few weeks in kindergarten, I was held back for a year. Two decades later, I ran into the teacher who had endured my first foray into kindergarten. She told me that I'd behaved so badly that she had nearly quit the profession—three weeks into her first year of teaching. That she remembered me twenty years later says a lot about my misbehavior.)

Eventually, Dad told me, he asked God for three signs that an adoption was in my best interest. Those signs apparently appeared, and I became the legal son of Bob, a man I'd known for barely a year. I don't doubt the truth of this account, and though I empathize with the obvious difficulty of the decision, I have never felt comfortable with the idea of leaving your child's fate to signs from God.

Yet this was a minor blip, all things considered. Just knowing that he had cared about me erased a lot of childhood pain. On balance, I loved my dad and his church. I'm not sure if I liked the structure or if I just wanted to share in something that was important to him—both, I suppose—but I became a devoted convert. I devoured books about young-earth creationism, and joined online chat rooms to challenge scientists on the theory of evolution. I learned about millennialist prophecy and convinced myself that the world would end in 2007. I even threw away my Black Sabbath CDs. Dad's church encouraged all of this because it doubted the wisdom of secular science and the morality of secular music.

Despite the lack of a legal relationship, I began spending a lot of time with Dad. I visited him on most holidays and spent every other weekend at his house. Though I loved seeing aunts, uncles, and cousins who hadn't been part of my life in years, the basic segregation of my two lives remained. Dad avoided Mom's side of the family, and vice versa. Lindsay and Mamaw appreciated Dad's new role in my life, but they continued to distrust him. To Mamaw, Dad was the "sperm donor" who had abandoned me at a critical juncture. Although I, too, resented Dad for the past, Mamaw's stubbornness didn't make things any easier.

Still, my relationship with Dad continued to develop, and so did my relationship with his church. The downside of his theology was that it promoted a certain segregation from the outside world. I couldn't listen to Eric Clapton at Dad's house—not because the lyrics were inappropriate but because Eric Clapton was influenced by demonic forces. I'd heard

These were quirks, and at first I understood them as little more than strict rules that I could either comply with or get around. Yet I was a curious kid, and the deeper I immersed myself in evangelical theology, the more I felt compelled to mistrust many sectors of society. Evolution and the Big Bang became ideologies to confront, not theories to understand. Many of the sermons I heard spent as much time criticizing other Christians as anything else. Theological battle lines were drawn, and those on the other side weren't just wrong about biblical interpretation, they were somehow unchristian. I admired my uncle Dan above all other men, but when he spoke of his Catholic acceptance of evolutionary theory, my admiration became tinged with suspicion. My new faith had put me on the lookout for heretics. Good friends who interpreted parts of the Bible differently were bad influences. Even Mamaw fell from favor because her religious views didn't conflict with her affinity for Bill Clinton.

As a young teenager thinking seriously for the first time about what I believed and why I believed it, I had an acute sense that the walls were closing in on "real" Christians. There was talk about the "war on Christmas"—which, as far as I could tell, consisted mainly of ACLU activists suing small towns for nativity displays. I read a book called Persecution by David Limbaugh about the various ways that Christians were discriminated against. The Internet was abuzz with talk of New York art displays that featured images of Christ or the Virgin Mary covered in feces. For the first time in my life, I felt like a persecuted minority.

All of this talk about Christians who weren't Christian enough, secularists indoctrinating our youth, art exhibits insulting our faith, and persecution by the elites made the world a scary and foreign place. Take gay rights, a particularly hot topic among conservative Protestants. I'll never forget the time I convinced myself that I was gay. I was eight or nine, maybe younger, and I stumbled upon a broadcast by some fire-and-brimstone preacher. The man spoke about the evils of homosexuals, how they had infiltrated our society, and how they were all destined for hell absent some serious repenting. At the time, the only thing I knew about gay men was that they preferred men to women. This described me perfectly: I disliked girls, and my best friend in the world was my buddy Bill. Oh no, I'm going to hell.

I broached this issue with Mamaw, confessing that I was gay and I was worried that I would burn in hell. She said, "Don't be a fucking idiot, how would you know that you're gay?" I explained my thought process. Mamaw chuckled and seemed to consider how she

dicks, that would be okay. God would still love you." That settled the matter. Apparently I didn't have to worry about being gay anymore. Now that I'm older, I recognize the profundity of her sentiment: Gay people, though unfamiliar, threatened nothing about Mamaw's being. There were more important things for a Christian to worry about.

In my new church, on the other hand, I heard more about the gay lobby and the war on Christmas than about any particular character trait that a Christian should aspire to have. I recalled that moment with Mamaw as an instance of secularist thinking rather than an act of Christian love. Morality was defined by not participating in this or that particular social malady: the gay agenda, evolutionary theory, Clintonian liberalism, or extramarital sex. Dad's church required so little of me. It was easy to be a Christian. The only affirmative teachings I remember drawing from church were that I shouldn't cheat on my wife and that I shouldn't be afraid to preach the gospel to others. So I planned a life of monogamy and tried to convert other people, even my seventh-grade science teacher, who was Muslim.

The world lurched toward moral corruption—slouching toward Gomorrah. The Rapture was coming, we thought. Apocalyptic imagery filled the weekly sermons and the Left Behind books (one of the best-selling fiction series of all time, which I devoured). Folks would discuss whether the Antichrist was already alive and, if so, which world leader it might be. Someone told me that he expected I'd marry a very pretty girl if the Lord hadn't come by the time I reached marrying age. The End Times were the natural finish for a culture sliding so quickly toward the abyss.

Other authors have noted the terrible retention rates of evangelical churches and blamed precisely that sort of theology for their decline. 19 I didn't appreciate it as a kid. Nor did I realize that the religious views I developed during my early years with Dad were sowing the seeds for an outright rejection of the Christian faith. What I did know is that, despite its downsides, I loved both my new church and the man who introduced me to it. The timing, it turned out, was impeccable: The next months would bring a desperate need for both a heavenly father and an earthly one.

Chapter 7

In the fall after I turned thirteen, Mom began dating Matt, a younger guy who worked as a firefighter. I adored Matt from the start—he was my favorite of all of Mom's men, and we still keep in touch. One night I was at home watching TV, waiting for Mom to get home

as Mom arrived. Shortly before I expected Mom, Mamaw called. "Where is your mother?"

"I don't know. What's wrong, Mamaw?"

Her response, more than anything I've ever heard, is seared in my memory. She was worried—scared, even. The hillbilly accent that she usually hid dripped from her lips. "No one has seen or heard from Papaw ." I told her I'd call as soon as Mom got home, which I expected would happen soon.

I figured Mamaw was overreacting. But then I considered the utter predictability of Papaw's schedule. He woke at six in the morning every day, without an alarm clock, then drove to McDonald's at seven to grab a coffee with his old Armco buddies. After a couple of hours of conversation, he would amble over to Mamaw's house and spend the morning watching TV or playing cards. If he left at all before dinnertime, he might briefly visit his friend Paul's hardware store. Without exception, he stayed at Mamaw's house to greet me when I came home from school. And if I didn't go to Mamaw's—if I went to Mom's, as I did when times were good—he'd usually come over and say goodbye before he went home for the evening. That he had missed all of these events meant that something was very wrong.

Mom walked in the door a few minutes after Mamaw called, and I was already sobbing. "Papaw . . . Papaw, I think he's dead." The rest is a blur: I think I relayed Mamaw's message; we picked her up down the street and sped over to Papaw's house, no more than a few minutes' drive away. I knocked on his door violently. Mom ran to the back door, screamed, and came around front, both to tell Mamaw that he was hunched over in his chair and to grab a rock. She then broke and went in through a window, unlocked and opened the door, and tended to her father. By then he had been dead for nearly a day.

Mom and Mamaw sobbed uncontrollably as we waited for an ambulance. I tried to hug Mamaw, but she was beside herself and unresponsive even to me. When she stopped crying, she clutched me to her chest and told me to go say goodbye before they took his body away. I tried, but the medical technician kneeling beside him gazed at me as if she thought I was creepy for wanting to look at a dead body. I didn't tell her the real reason I had walked back to my slouching Papaw.

After the ambulance took Papaw's body away, we drove immediately to Aunt Wee's house. I guessed Mom had called her, because she descended from her porch with tears in

reach. She wasn't answering the house phone, and none of her friends answered my calls. Mamaw's house sat literally five houses away from Mom's—313 McKinley to 303—so I listened to the adults make plans and watched out the window for signs of my sister's return. The adults spoke about funeral arrangements, where Papaw would want to be buried— "In Jackson, goddammit," Mamaw insisted—and who would call Uncle Jimmy and tell him to come home.

Lindsay returned home shortly before midnight. I trudged down the street and opened our door. She was walking down the stairs but stopped cold when she saw my face, red and blotchy from crying all day. "Papaw," I blurted out. "He's dead." Lindsay collapsed on the stairs, and I ran up and embraced her. We sat there for a few minutes, crying as two children do when they find out that the most important man in their lives has died. Lindsay said something then, and though I don't remember the exact phrase, I do remember that Papaw had just done some work on her car, and she was muttering something through the tears about taking advantage of him.

Lindsay was a teenager when Papaw died, at the height of that weird mixture of thinking you know everything and caring too much about how others perceive you. Papaw was many things, but he was never cool. He wore the same old T-shirt every day with a front pocket just big enough to fit a pack of cigarettes. He always smelled of mildew, because he washed his clothes but let them dry "naturally," meaning packed together in a washing machine. A lifetime of smoking had blessed him with an unlimited supply of phlegm, and he had no problem sharing that phlegm with everyone, no matter the time or occasion. He listened to Johnny Cash on perpetual repeat and drove an old El Camino—a car truck—everywhere he went. In other words, Papaw wasn't ideal company for a beautiful seventeen-year-old girl with an active social life. Thus, she took advantage of him in the same way that every young girl takes advantage of a father: She loved and admired him, she asked him for things that he sometimes gave her, and she didn't pay him a lot of attention when she was around her friends.

To this day, being able to "take advantage" of someone is the measure in my mind of having a parent. For me and Lindsay, the fear of imposing stalked our minds, infecting even the food we ate. We recognized instinctively that many of the people we depended on weren't supposed to play that role in our lives, so much so that it was one of the first things Lindsay thought of when she learned of Papaw's death. We were conditioned to

our lives. Mamaw and Papaw did everything they could to fight that instinct. On our rare trips to a nice restaurant, they would interrogate me about what I truly wanted until I'd confess that yes, I did want the steak. And then they'd order it for me over my protests. No matter how imposing, no figure could erase that feeling entirely. Papaw had come the closest, but he clearly hadn't succeeded all the way, and now he was gone.

Papaw died on a Tuesday, and I know this because when Mom's boyfriend, Matt, drove me to a local diner the next morning to pick up food for the whole family, the Lynyrd Skynyrd song "Tuesday's Gone" was playing on the radio. "But somehow I've got to carry on / Tuesday's gone with the wind." That was the moment it really hit me that Papaw was never coming back. The adults did what people do when a loved one dies: They planned a funeral, figured out how to pay for it, and hoped that they did the deceased some justice. We hosted a visitation in Middletown that Thursday so all the locals could pay their respects, then had a second visitation in Jackson on Friday before a Saturday funeral. Even in death, Papaw had one foot in Ohio and another in the holler.

Everyone I cared to see came to the funeral in Jackson—Uncle Jimmy and his kids, our extended family and friends, and all of the Blanton men who were still kicking. It occurred to me as I saw these titans of my family that, for the first eleven or so years of my life, I saw them during happy times—family reunions and holidays or lazy summers and long weekends—and in the two most recent years I'd seen them only at funerals.

At Papaw's funeral, as at other hillbilly funerals I've witnessed, the preacher invited everyone to stand up and say a few words about the deceased. As I sat next to Uncle Jimmy in the pew, I sobbed throughout the hour-long funeral, my eyes so irritated by the end that I could hardly see. Still, I knew this was it, and that if I didn't stand up and speak my piece, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

I thought about a moment nearly a decade earlier that I'd heard about but didn't remember. I was four or five, sitting in a church pew for a great-uncle's funeral in that same Deaton funeral home in Jackson. We had just arrived after a long drive from Middletown, and when the minister asked us to bow our heads and pray, I bowed my head and passed out. Mamaw's older brother Uncle Pet lay me on my side with a Bible as a pillow and thought nothing more of it. I was asleep for what happened next, but I've heard some version of it a hundred times. Even today, when I see someone who attended that funeral, they tell me about my hillbilly Mamaw and Papaw.

or California. Papaw hatched a plan: There were only two exits to Deaton's, and no one had driven away yet. Papaw ran to the car and grabbed a .44 Magnum for himself and a .38 Special for Mamaw. They manned the exits to the funeral home and checked every car. When they encountered an old friend, they explained the situation and enlisted help. When they met someone else, they searched the cars like goddamned DEA agents.

Uncle Pet approached, frustrated that Mamaw and Papaw were holding up traffic. When they explained, Pet howled with laughter: "He's asleep in the church pew, let me show you." After they found me, they allowed traffic to flow freely once again.

I thought about Papaw buying me a BB gun with a mounted scope. He placed the gun on his workbench with a vise to hold it in place and fired repeatedly at a target. After each shot, we adjusted the scope, aligning the crosshairs with where the BB impacted the target. And then he taught me how to shoot—how to focus on the sights and not the target, how to exhale before pulling the trigger. Years later, our marine boot camp marksmanship instructors would tell us that the kids who already "knew" how to shoot performed the worst, because they'd learned improper fundamentals. That was true with one exception: me. From Papaw, I had learned excellent fundamentals, and I qualified with an M16 rifle as an expert, the highest category, with one of the highest scores in my entire platoon.

Papaw was gruff to the point of absurdity. To every suggestion or behavior he didn't like, Papaw had one reply: "Bullshit." That was everyone's cue to shut the hell up. His hobby was cars: He loved buying, trading, and fixing them. One day not long after Papaw quit drinking, Uncle Jimmy came home to find him fixing an old automobile on the street. "He was cussing up a storm. 'These goddamned Japanese cars, cheap pieces of shit. What a stupid motherfucker who made this part.' I just listened to him, not knowing a single person was around, and he just kept carrying on and complaining. I thought he sounded miserable." Uncle Jimmy had recently started working and was eager to spend his money to help his dad out. So he offered to take the car to a shop and get it fixed. The suggestion caught Papaw completely off guard. "What? Why?" he asked innocently. "I love fixing cars."

Papaw had a beer belly and a chubby face but skinny arms and legs. He never apologized with words. While helping Aunt Wee move across the country, she admonished him for his earlier alcoholism and asked why they rarely had the chance to talk. "Well, talk now. We've got all fucking day in the car together." But he did apologize with deeds: The rare

Papaw was a terrifying hillbilly made for a different time and place. During that cross-country drive with Aunt Wee, they stopped at a highway rest stop in the early morning. Aunt Wee decided to comb her hair and brush her teeth and thus spent more time in the ladies' room than Papaw thought reasonable. He kicked open the door holding a loaded revolver, like a character in a Liam Neeson movie. He was sure, he explained, that she was being raped by some pervert. Years later, after Aunt Wee's dog growled at her infant baby, Papaw told her husband, Dan, that unless he got rid of the dog, Papaw would feed it a steak marinated in antifreeze. He wasn't joking: Three decades earlier, he had made the same promise to a neighbor after a dog nearly bit my mom. A week later that dog was dead. In that funeral home I thought about these things, too.

Most of all I thought about Papaw and me. I thought about the hours we spent practicing increasingly complex math problems. He taught me that lack of knowledge and lack of intelligence were not the same. The former could be remedied with a little patience and a lot of hard work. And the latter? "Well, I guess you're up shit creek without a paddle."

I thought about how Papaw would get on the ground with me and Aunt Wee's baby girls and play with us like a child. Despite his "bullshits" and his grouchiness, he never met a hug or a kiss that he didn't welcome. He bought Lindsay a crappy car and fixed it up, and after she wrecked it, he bought her another one and fixed that one up, too, just so she didn't feel like she "came from nothing." I thought about losing my temper with Mom or Lindsay or Mamaw, and how those were among the few times Papaw ever showed a mean streak, because, as he once told me, "the measure of a man is how he treats the women in his family." His wisdom came from experience, from his own earlier failures with treating the women in his family well.

I stood up in that funeral home, resolved to tell everyone just how important he was. "I never had a dad," I explained. "But Papaw was always there for me, and he taught me the things that men needed to know." Then I spoke the sum of his influence on my life: "He was the best dad that anyone could ever ask for."

After the funeral, a number of people told me that they appreciated my bravery and courage. Mom was not among them, which struck me as odd. When I located her in the crowd, she seemed trapped in some sort of trance: saying little, even to those who approached her; her movements slow and her body slouched.

Mamaw, too, seemed out of sorts. Kentucky was usually the one place where she was

mutter under her breath, chastened and uncomfortable. But at Bill's Family Diner, the only restaurant in Jackson worth sitting down at for a meal, she'd scream at the kitchen staff to "hurry the hell up" and they'd laugh and say, "Okay, Bonnie." Then she'd look at me and tell me, "You know I'm just fucking with them, right? They know I'm not a mean old bitch."

In Jackson, among old friends and real hillbillies, she needed no filter. At her brother's funeral a few years earlier, Mamaw and her niece Denise convinced themselves that one of the pallbearers was a pervert, so they broke into his funeral home office and searched through his belongings. They found an extensive magazine collection, including a few issues of Beaver Hunt (a periodical that I can assure you has nothing to do with aquatic mammals). Mamaw found it hilarious. "Fucking Beaver Hunt!" she'd roar. "Who comes up with this shit?" She and Denise hatched a plot to take the magazines home and mail them to the pallbearer's wife. After a short deliberation, she changed her mind. "With my luck," she told me, "we'll get in a crash on the way back to Ohio and the police will find these damned things in my trunk. I'll be damned if I'm going to go out with everyone thinking I was a lesbian—and a perverted one at that!" So they threw the magazines away to "teach that pervert a lesson" and never spoke of it again. This side of Mamaw rarely showed itself outside of Jackson.

Deaton's funeral home in Jackson—where she'd stolen those Beaver Hunts—was organized like a church. In the center of the building was a main sanctuary flanked by larger rooms with couches and tables. On the other two sides were hallways with exits to a few smaller rooms—offices for staff, a tiny kitchen, and bathrooms. I've spent much of my life in that tiny funeral home, saying goodbye to aunts and uncles and cousins and great-grandparents. And whether she went to Deaton's to bury an old friend, a brother, or her beloved mother, Mamaw greeted every guest, laughed loudly, and cursed proudly.

So it was a surprise to me when, during Papaw's visitation, I went searching for comfort and found Mamaw alone in a corner of the funeral home, recharging batteries that I never knew could go empty. She stared blankly at the floor, her fire replaced with something unfamiliar. I knelt before her and laid my head in her lap and said nothing. At that moment, I realized that Mamaw was not invincible.

In hindsight, it's clear that there was more than grief to both Mamaw's and Mom's behavior. Lindsay, Matt, and Mamaw did their best to hide it from me. Mamaw forbade me

I didn’t see at first that something had veered off course. Papaw was dead, and everyone processed it differently. Lindsay spent a lot of time with her friends and was always on the move. I stayed as close to Mamaw as possible and read the Bible a lot. Mom slept more than usual, and I figured this was her way of coping. At home, she lacked even a modicum of temper control. Lindsay failed to do the dishes properly, or forgot to take out the dog, and Mom’s anger poured out: “My dad was the only one who really understood me!” she’d scream. “I’ve lost him, and you’re not making this any easier!” Mom had always had a temper, though, so I dismissed even this.

Mom seemed bothered that anyone but her was grieving. Aunt Wee’s grief was unjustified, because Mom and Papaw had a special bond. So, too, was Mamaw’s, for she didn’t even like Papaw and chose not to live under the same roof. Lindsay and I needed to get over ourselves, for it was Mom’s father, not ours, who had just died. The first indication that our lives were about to change came one morning when I woke and strolled over to Mom’s house, where I knew Lindsay and Mom were sleeping. I went first to Lindsay’s room, but she was asleep in my room instead. I knelt beside her, woke her up, and she hugged me tightly. After a little while, she said earnestly, “We’ll get through this, J.” —that was her nickname for me— “I promise.” I still have no idea why she slept in my room that night, but I would soon learn what she promised we’d get through.

A few days after the funeral, I walked onto Mamaw’s front porch, looked down the street, and saw an incredible commotion. Mom was standing in a bath towel in her front yard, screaming at the only people who truly loved her: to Matt, “You’re a fucking loser nobody”; to Lindsay, “You’re a selfish bitch, he was my dad, not yours, so stop acting like you just lost your father”; to Tammy, her unbelievably kind friend who was secretly gay, “The only reason you act like my friend is because you want to fuck me.” I ran over and begged Mom to calm down, but by then a police cruiser was already on the scene. I arrived on the front porch as a police officer grabbed Mom’s shoulders and she collapsed on the ground, struggling and kicking. Then the officer grabbed Mom and carried her to the cruiser, and she fought the whole way. There was blood on the porch, and someone said that she had tried to cut her wrists. I don’t think the officer arrested her, though I don’t know what happened. Mamaw arrived on the scene and took Lindsay and me with her. I remember thinking that if Papaw were here, he would know what to do.

Papaw’s death cast light upon something that had previously lurked in the shadows. Only

Mamaw's occasional references to Mom "getting loaded" seemed like random comments of a woman known for her willingness to say anything, not a diagnosis of a deteriorating reality. Not long after Mom lost her job, during my trip to California, I heard from her just once. I had no idea that, behind the scenes, the adults—meaning Mamaw on the one hand and Uncle Jimmy and his wife, Aunt Donna, on the other—were debating whether I should move permanently to California.

Mom flailing and screaming in the street was the culmination of the things I hadn't seen. She'd begun taking prescription narcotics not long after we moved to Preble County. I believe the problem started with a legitimate prescription, but soon enough, Mom was stealing from her patients and getting so high that turning an emergency room into a skating rink seemed like a good idea. Papaw's death turned a semi-functioning addict into a woman unable to follow the basic norms of adult behavior.

In this way, Papaw's death permanently altered the trajectory of our family. Before his death, I had settled into the chaotic but happy routine of splitting time between Mom's and Mamaw's. Boyfriends came and went, Mom had good days and bad, but I always had an escape route. With Papaw gone and Mom in rehab at the Cincinnati Center for Addiction Treatment—or "the CAT house," as we called it—I began to feel myself a burden. Though she never said anything to make me feel unwanted, Mamaw's life had been a constant struggle: From the poverty of the holler to Papaw's abuse, from Aunt Wee's teenage marriage to Mom's rap sheet, Mamaw had spent the better part of her seven decades managing crises. And now, when most people her age were enjoying the fruits of retirement, she was raising two teenage grandchildren. Without Papaw to help her, that burden seemed twice as heavy. In the months after Papaw's death, I remembered the woman I found in an isolated corner of Deaton's funeral home and couldn't shake the feeling that, no matter what aura of strength Mamaw projected, that other woman lived somewhere inside her.

So instead of retreating to Mamaw's house, or calling her every time problems arose with Mom, I relied on Lindsay and on myself. Lindsay was a recent high school graduate, and I had just started seventh grade, but we made it work. Sometimes Matt or Tammy brought us food, but we largely fended for ourselves: Hamburger Helper, TV dinners, Pop-Tarts, and breakfast cereal. I'm not sure who paid the bills (probably Mamaw). We didn't have a lot of structure—Lindsay once came home from work to find me hanging out with a

We saw Mamaw often, and she asked about us constantly. But we both enjoyed the independence, and I think we enjoyed the feeling that we burdened no one except perhaps each other. Lindsay and I had grown so good at managing crises, so emotionally stoic even as the very planet seemed to lose its cool, that taking care of ourselves seemed easy. No matter how much we loved Mom, our lives were easier with one less person to care for.

Did we struggle? Certainly. We received one letter from the school district informing us that I had collected so many unexcused absences that my parents might be summoned before the school or even prosecuted by the city. We found this letter hilarious: One of my parents had already faced a prosecution of sorts and hardly possessed any walking-around liberty, while the other was sufficiently off the grid that "summoning" him would require some serious detective work. We also found it frightening: Without a legal guardian around to sign the letter, we didn't know what the hell to do. But as we had with other challenges, we improvised. Lindsay forged Mom's signature, and the school district stopped sending letters home.

On designated weekdays and weekends, we visited our mother at the CAT house. Between the hills of Kentucky, Mamaw and her guns, and Mom's outbursts, I thought that I had seen it all. But Mom's newest problem exposed me to the underworld of American addiction. Wednesdays were always dedicated to a group activity—some type of training for the family. All of the addicts and their families sat in a large room with each family assigned to an individual table, engaged in some discussion meant to teach us about addiction and its triggers. In one session, Mom explained that she used drugs to escape the stress of paying bills and to dull the pain of Papaw's death. In another, Lindsay and I learned that standard sibling conflict made it more difficult for Mom to resist temptation.

These sessions provoked little more than arguments and raw emotion, which I suppose was their purpose. On the nights when we sat in that giant hall with other families—all of whom were either black or Southern-accented whites like us—we heard screaming and fighting, children telling their parents that they hated them, sobbing parents begging forgiveness in one breath and then blaming their families in the next. It was there that I first heard Lindsay tell Mom how she resented having to play the caretaker in the wake of Papaw's death instead of grieving for him, how she hated watching me grow attached to some boyfriend of Mom's only to see him walk out on us. Perhaps it was the setting, or perhaps it was the fact that Lindsay was almost eighteen, but as my sister confronted my

Mom's rehab proceeded apace, and her condition apparently improved with time. Sundays were designated as unstructured family time: We couldn't take Mom off-site, but we were able to eat and watch TV and talk as normal. Sundays were usually happy, though Mom did angrily chide us during one visit because our relationship with Mamaw had grown too close. "I'm your mother, not her," she told us. I realized that Mom had begun to regret the seeds she'd sown with Lindsay and me.

When Mom came home a few months later, she brought a new vocabulary along with her. She regularly recited the Serenity Prayer, a staple of addiction circles in which the faithful ask God for the "serenity to accept the things [they] cannot change." Drug addiction was a disease, and just as I wouldn't judge a cancer patient for a tumor, so I shouldn't judge a narcotics addict for her behavior. At thirteen, I found this patently absurd, and Mom and I often argued over whether her newfound wisdom was scientific truth or an excuse for people whose decisions destroyed a family. Oddly enough, it's probably both: Research does reveal a genetic disposition to substance abuse, but those who believe their addiction is a disease show less of an inclination to resist it. Mom was telling herself the truth, but the truth was not setting her free.

I didn't believe in any of the slogans or sentiments, but I did believe she was trying. Addiction treatment seemed to give Mom a sense of purpose, and it gave us something to bond over. I read what I could on her "disease" and even made a habit of attending some of her Narcotics Anonymous meetings, which proceeded precisely as you'd expect: a depressing conference room, a dozen or so chairs, and a bunch of strangers sitting in a circle, introducing themselves as "Bob, and I'm an addict." I thought that if I participated, she might actually get better.

At one meeting a man walked in a few minutes late, smelling like a garbage can. His matted hair and dirty clothes evidenced a life on the streets, a truth he confirmed as soon as he opened his mouth. "My kids won't speak to me; no one will," he told us. "I scrounge together what money I can and spend it on smack. Tonight I couldn't find any money or any smack, so I came in here because it looked warm." The organizer asked if he'd be willing to try giving up the drugs for more than one night, and the man answered with admirable candor: "I could say yes, but honestly, probably not. I'll probably be back at it tomorrow night."

I never saw that man again. Before he left, someone did ask him where he was from.

geography to tell the man that he had been born no more than twenty miles from my grandparents' childhood home.

Chapter 8

By the time I finished eighth grade, Mom had been sober for at least a year, and she'd been dating Matt for two or three years. I was doing well in school, and Mamaw had taken a couple vacations—one trip to California to visit Uncle Jimmy and another to Las Vegas with her friend Kathy. Lindsay had married soon after Papaw's death. I loved her husband, Kevin, and still do, for a simple reason: He never mistreated her. That's all I ever wanted in a mate for my sister. Just under a year after their wedding, Lindsay gave birth to her son, Kameron. She was a mom, and a damn good one at that. I was proud of her, and I adored my new nephew. Aunt Wee also had two small children, which gave me three little kids to dote on. I saw all of this as a sign of family renewal. The summer before high school was thus a hopeful one.

That same summer, however, Mom announced that I'd be moving in with Matt in his Dayton home. I liked Matt, and by then Mom had lived in Dayton with him for a little while. But Dayton was a forty-five-minute drive from Mamaw's, and Mom made it clear that she wanted me to attend school in Dayton. I liked my life in Middletown—I wanted to attend the high school, I loved my friends, and although it was a bit unconventional, I enjoyed splitting time between Mom's and Mamaw's houses during the week and hanging out with Dad on the weekends. Importantly, I could always go to Mamaw's house if I needed to, and that made all the difference. I remembered life when I didn't have that safety valve, and I didn't want to go back to those days. Moreover, any move would be without Lindsay and Kameron. So when Mom made her announcement about moving in with Matt, I belted out, "Absolutely not," and stormed away.

Mom drew from this conversation that I had anger problems and scheduled a time for me to meet with her therapist. I didn't know she had a therapist or the money to afford one, but I agreed to meet with this lady. Our first meeting took place the following week in a musty old office near Dayton, Ohio, where a nondescript middle-aged woman, Mom, and I tried to understand why I was so angry. I recognized that human beings aren't very good at judging themselves: I may have been wrong that I was no angrier (in fact, considerably less so) than most of the people in my life. Maybe Mom was right and I did have some anger problems. I tried to keep an open mind. If nothing else, I thought, this woman might

mother and that I had to live with her by law. The therapist chronicled "outbursts" that I'd allegedly had, some going back to a time I couldn't remember—the time I threw a tantrum in a department store as a five-year-old, my fight with another child in school (the school bully, whom I didn't want to punch but did so at Mamaw's encouragement), the times I'd run from home to my grandparents' house because of Mom's "discipline." Clearly this woman had developed an impression of me based solely on what Mom had told her. If I didn't have an anger problem before, I did now.

"Do you have any idea what you're talking about?" I asked. At fourteen, I knew at least a little about professional ethics. "Aren't you supposed to ask me what I think about things and not just criticize me?" I launched into an hour-long summary of my life to that point. I didn't tell the whole story, since I knew I had to choose my words carefully: During Mom's domestic violence case a couple of years earlier, Lindsay and I had let slip some unsavory details about Mom's parenting, and because it counted as a new revelation of abuse, the family counselor was required to report it to child services. So I didn't miss the irony of lying to a therapist (to protect Mom) lest I ignite another intervention by the county children's services. I explained the situation well enough: After an hour, she said simply, "Perhaps we should meet alone."

I saw this woman as an obstacle to overcome—an obstacle placed by Mom—not as someone who might help. I explained only half of my feelings: that I had no interest in putting a forty-five-minute barrier between me and everyone I had ever depended on so I could replant myself with a man I knew would be sent packing. The therapist obviously understood. What I didn't tell her is that for the first time in my life, I felt trapped. There was no Papaw, and Mamaw—a longtime smoker with the emphysema to prove it—seemed too frail and exhausted to care for a fourteen-year-old boy. My aunt and uncle had two young kids. Lindsay was newly married and had a child of her own. I had nowhere to go. I'd seen chaos and fighting, violence, drugs, and a great deal of instability. But I'd never felt like I had no way out. When the therapist asked me what I'd do, I replied that I would probably go live with my dad. She said that this sounded like a good idea. When I walked out of her office, I thanked her for her time and knew that I'd never see her again.

Mom had a massive blind spot in the way that she perceived the world. That she would ask me to move with her to Dayton, that she seemed genuinely surprised by my resistance, and that she would subject me to such a one-sided introduction to a therapist meant that

it’s just the way she is, something she can’t change.” After the incident with the therapist, I knew that Lindsay was right.

Mamaw was unhappy when I told her that I planned to live with Dad, and so was everyone else. No one really understood it, and I felt unable to say much about it. I knew that if I told the truth, I’d have a few people offering their spare bedrooms, and all of them would submit to Mamaw’s demand that I live permanently with her. I also knew that living with Mamaw came with a lot of guilt, and a lot of questions about why I didn’t live with my mom or dad, and a lot of whispers from a lot of people to Mamaw that she just needed to take a break and enjoy her golden years. That feeling of being a burden to Mamaw wasn’t something I imagined; it came from a number of small cues, from the things she muttered under her breath, and from the weariness she wore like a dark piece of clothing. I didn’t want that, so I chose what seemed like the least bad option.

In some ways, I loved living with Dad. His life was normal in precisely the way I’d always wanted mine to be. My stepmom worked part-time but was usually home. Dad came home from work around the same time each day. One of them (usually my stepmom but sometimes Dad) made dinner every night, which we ate as a family. Before each meal, we’d say grace (something I’d always liked but had never done outside of Kentucky). On weeknights, we’d watch some family sitcom together. And Dad and Cheryl never screamed at each other. Once, I heard them raise their voices during an argument about money, but slightly elevated volumes were far different from screaming.

On my first weekend at Dad’s house—the first weekend I had ever spent with him when I knew that, come Monday, I wouldn’t be going somewhere else—my younger brother invited a friend to sleep over. We fished in Dad’s pond, fed horses, and grilled steaks for dinner. That night, we watched Indiana Jones movies until the early-morning hours. There was no fighting, no adults hurling insults at one another, no glass china shattering angrily against the wall or floor. It was a boring evening. And it epitomized what attracted me to Dad’s home.

What I never lost, though, was the sense of being on guard. When I moved in with my father, I’d known him for two years. I knew that he was a good man, a little quiet, a devout Christian from a very strict religious tradition. When we first reconnected, he made it clear that he didn’t care for my taste in classic rock, especially Led Zeppelin. He wasn’t mean about it—that wasn’t his style—and he didn’t tell me I couldn’t listen to my

its evil influence on young Christians. And as most teenagers do, I had so many questions about my faith—whether it was compatible with modern science, for instance, or whether this or that denomination was correct on particular doctrinal disputes.

I doubt he would have gotten upset if I'd asked those questions, but I never did because I didn't know how he'd respond. I didn't know whether he'd tell me I was a spawn of Satan and send me away. I didn't know how much of our new relationship was built on his sense that I was a good kid. I didn't know how he'd react if I listened to those Zeppelin CDs in his house with my younger siblings around. That not knowing gnawed at me to the point where I could no longer take it.

I think Mamaw understood what was going on in my head, even though I never told her explicitly. We spoke on the phone frequently, and one night she told me that I had to know she loved me more than anything and she wanted me to return home when I was ready. "This is your home, J.D., and always will be." The next day, I called Lindsay and asked her to come and get me. She had a job, a house, a husband, and a baby. But she said, "I'll be there in forty-five minutes." I apologized to Dad, who was heartbroken by my decision. But he understood: "You can't stay away from that crazy grandma of yours. I know she's good to you." It was a stunning admission from a man to whom Mamaw never said a nice word. And it was the first indication that Dad understood the complex and conflicting feelings I'd developed. That meant a great deal to me. When Lindsay and her family came to get me, I got in the car, sighed, and said to her, "Thanks for taking me home." I gave my infant nephew a kiss on the forehead and said nothing else until we got to Mamaw's.

I spent the rest of the summer mostly with Mamaw. A few weeks with Dad had given me no epiphanies: I still felt caught between a desire to stay with her and a fear that my presence was depriving her of the comforts of old age. So before my freshman year started, I told Mom that I'd live with her so long as I could stay in Middletown's schools and see Mamaw whenever I wanted. She said something about needing to transfer to a Dayton school after my freshman year, but I figured we'd cross that bridge in a year, when we had to.

Living with Mom and Matt was like having a front-row seat to the end of the world. The fighting was relatively normal by my standards (and Mom's), but I'm sure poor Matt kept asking himself how and when he'd hopped the express train to crazy town. It was

Given the state of Mom and Matt's relationship, I was surprised when I came home from school one day early during my sophomore year and Mom announced that she was getting married. Perhaps, I thought, things weren't quite as bad as I expected. "I honestly thought you and Matt were going to break up," I said. "You fight every day."

"Well," she replied, "I'm not getting married to him."

It was a story that even I found incredible. Mom had been working as a nurse at a local dialysis center, a job she'd held for a few months. Her boss, about ten years her senior, asked her out to dinner one night. She obliged, and with her relationship in shambles, she agreed to marry him a week later. She told me on a Thursday. On Saturday we moved into Ken's house. His home was my fourth in two years.

Ken was born in Korea but raised by an American veteran and his wife. During that first week in his house, I decided to inspect his small greenhouse and stumbled upon a relatively mature marijuana plant. I told Mom, who told Ken, and by the end of the day it had been replaced with a tomato plant. When I confronted Ken, he stammered a bit and finally said, "It's for medicinal purposes, don't worry about it."

Ken's three children—a young girl and two boys about the same age I was—found the new arrangement as strange as I did. The oldest boy fought constantly with Mom, which—thanks to the Appalachian honor code—meant that he fought constantly with me. Shortly before I went to bed one night, I came downstairs just as he called her a bitch. No self-respecting hillbilly could stand idly by, so I made it abundantly clear that I meant to beat my new stepbrother to within an inch of his life. So unquenchable was my appetite for violence that night that Mom and Ken decided that my new stepbrother and I should be separated. I wasn't even particularly angry. My desire to fight arose more out of a sense of duty. But it was a strong sense of duty, so Mom and I went to Mamaw's for the night.

I remember watching an episode of The West Wing about education in America, which the majority of people rightfully believe is the key to opportunity. In it, the fictional president debates whether he should push school vouchers (giving public money to schoolchildren so that they escape failing public schools) or instead focus exclusively on fixing those same failing schools. That debate is important, of course—for a long time, much of my failing school district qualified for vouchers—but it was striking that in an entire discussion about why poor kids struggled in school, the emphasis rested entirely on public institutions. As a teacher at my old high school told me recently, "They want us to be shepherds to these

assignment due that I never had the time to complete. What I do know is that I was a sophomore in high school, and I was miserable. The constant moving and fighting, the seemingly endless carousel of new people I had to meet, learn to love, and then forget—this, and not my subpar public school, was the real barrier to opportunity.

I didn't know it, but I was close to the precipice. I had nearly failed out of my freshmen year of high school, earning a 2.1 GPA. I didn't do my homework, I didn't study, and my attendance was abysmal. Some days I'd fake an illness, and others I'd just refuse to go. When I did go, I did so only to avoid a repeat of the letters the school had sent home a few years earlier—the ones that said if I didn't go to school, the administration would be forced to refer my case to county social services.

Along with my abysmal school record came drug experimentation—nothing hard, just what alcohol I could get my hands on and a stash of weed that Ken's son and I found. Final proof, I suppose, that I did know the difference between a tomato plant and marijuana.

For the first time in my life, I felt detached from Lindsay. She'd been married well over a year and had a toddler. There was something heroic about Lindsay's marriage—that after everything she'd witnessed, she'd ended up with someone who treated her well and had a decent job. Lindsay seemed genuinely happy. She was a good mom who doted on her young son. She had a little house not far from Mamaw's and seemed to be finding her way.

Though I felt happy for my sister, her new life heightened my sense of separation. For my entire existence, we had lived under the same roof, but now she lived in Middletown, and I lived with Ken about twenty miles away. While Lindsay built a life almost in opposition to the one she left behind—she would be a good mother, she would have a successful marriage (and only one)—I found myself mired in the things that both of us hated. While Lindsay and her new husband took trips to Florida and California, I was stuck in a stranger's house in Miamisburg, Ohio.

Next