Chapter 9

Mamaw knew little of how this arrangement affected me, partly by design. During a long Christmas break, just a couple of months after I'd moved in with my new stepfather, I called her to complain. But when she answered, I could hear the voices of family in the background—my aunt, I thought, and cousin Gail, and perhaps some others. The background noise suggested holiday merriment, and I didn't have the heart to tell her what I had called to say: that I loathed living with these strangers and that everything that had made my life to that point tolerable—the reprieve of her house, the company of my sister—had apparently vanished. I asked her to tell everyone whose voice I heard in the background that I loved them, and then I hung up the phone and marched upstairs to watch TV. I had never felt so alone. Happily, I continued to attend Middletown's schools, which kept me in touch with my school friends and gave me an excuse to spend a few hours at Mamaw's. During active school sessions, I saw her a few times a week, and every time I did, she reminded me of the importance of doing well academically. She often remarked that if anyone in our family "made it," it would be me. I didn't have the heart to tell her what was really happening. I was supposed to be a lawyer or a doctor or a businessman, not a high school dropout. But I was much closer to dropping out than I was to anything else.

She learned the truth when Mom came to me one morning demanding a jar of clean urine. I had stayed at Mamaw's the night before and was getting ready for school when Mom walked in, frantic and out of breath. She had to submit to random urinalyses from the nursing board in order to keep her license, and someone had called that morning demanding a sample by the end of the day. Mamaw's piss was dirtied with a half dozen prescription drugs, so I was the only candidate.

Mom's demand came with a strong air of entitlement. She had no remorse, no sense that she was asking me to do something wrong. Nor was there any guilt over the fact that she had broken yet another promise to never use drugs.

I refused. Sensing my resistance, Mom transitioned. She became apologetic and desperate. She cried and begged. "I promise I'll do better. I promise." I had heard it many times before, and I didn't believe it even a little. Lindsay once told me that, above all, Mom was a survivor. She survived her childhood, she survived the men who came and went. She

I exploded. I told Mom that if she wanted clean piss, she should stop fucking up her life and get it from her own bladder. I told Mamaw that enabling Mom made it worse and that if she had put her foot down thirty years earlier, then maybe Mom wouldn't be begging her son for clean piss. I told Mom that she was a shitty mother and I told Mamaw that she was a shitty mother, too. The color drained from Mamaw's face, and she refused to even look me in the eye. What I had said had clearly struck a nerve.

Though I meant these things, I also knew that my urine might not be clean. Mom collapsed onto the couch, crying quietly, but Mamaw wouldn't give in so easily, even though I'd wounded her with my criticism. I pulled Mamaw into the bathroom and whispered a confession—that I had smoked Ken's pot twice in the past few weeks. "I can't give it to her. If Mom takes my pee, we could both be in trouble."

First, Mamaw assuaged my fears. A couple of hits of pot over three weeks wouldn't show up on the screen, she told me. "Besides, you probably didn't know what the hell you were doing. You didn't inhale, even if you tried." Then she addressed the morality of it. "I know this isn't right, honey. But she's your mother and she's my daughter. And maybe, if we help her this time, she'll finally learn her lesson."

It was the eternal hope, the thing to which I couldn't say no. That hope drove me to voluntarily attend those many N.A. meetings, consume books on addiction, and participate in Mom's treatment to the fullest extent that I could. It had driven me to get in the car with her when I was twelve, knowing that her emotional state could lead her to do something she'd regret later. Mamaw never lost that hope, after more heartache and more disappointment than I could possibly fathom. Her life was a clinic in how to lose faith in people, but Mamaw always found a way to believe in the people she loved. So I don't regret relenting. Giving Mom that piss was wrong, but I'll never regret following Mamaw's lead. Her hope allowed her to forgive Papaw after the rough years of their marriage. And it convinced her to take me in when I needed her most.

Though I followed Mamaw's lead, something inside me broke that morning. I went to school red-eyed from crying and regretful that I'd helped. A few weeks earlier, I had sat with Mom at a Chinese buffet as she tried in vain to shovel food in her mouth. It's a memory that still makes my blood boil: Mom unable to open her eyes or close her mouth, spooning food in as it fell back on the plate. Other people stared at us, Ken was speechless, and Mom was oblivious. It was a prescription pain pill (or many of them) that had done this

The urine episode was the last straw for Mamaw, too. When I came home from school, Mamaw told me that she wanted me to stay with her permanently, with no more moving in between. Mom seemed not to care: She needed a "break," she said, I supposed from being a mother. She and Ken didn't last much longer. By the end of sophomore year, she had moved out of his house and I had moved in with Mamaw, never to return to the homes of Mom and her men. At least she passed her piss test.

I didn't even have to pack, because much of what I owned remained at Mamaw's as I bounced from place to place. She didn't approve of me taking too many of my belongings to Ken's house, convinced that he and his kids might steal my socks and shirts. (Neither Ken nor his children ever stole from me.) Though I loved living with her, my new home tested my patience on many levels. I still harbored the insecurity that I was burdening her. More important, she was a hard woman to live with, quick-witted and sharp-tongued. If I didn't take out the garbage, she told me to "stop being a lazy piece of shit." When I forgot to do my homework, she called me "shit for brains" and reminded me that unless I studied, I'd amount to nothing. She demanded that I play card games with her—usually gin rummy—and she never lost. "You are the worst fucking cardplayer I've ever met," she'd gloat. (That one didn't make me feel bad: She said it to everyone she beat, and she beat everyone at gin rummy.)

Years later, every single one of my relatives—Aunt Wee, Uncle Jimmy, even Lindsay—repeated some version of "Mamaw was really hard on you. Too hard." There were three rules in her house: Get good grades, get a job, and "get off your ass and help me." There was no set chore list; I just had to help her with whatever she was doing. And she never told me what to do—she just yelled at me if she did anything and I wasn't helping.

But we had a lot of fun. Mamaw had a much bigger bark than bite, at least with me. She once ordered me to watch a TV show with her on a Friday night, a creepy murder mystery, the type of show Mamaw loved to watch. At the climax of the show, during a moment designed to make the viewer jump, Mamaw flipped off the lights and screamed in my ear. She'd seen the episode before and knew what was coming. She made me sit there for forty-five minutes just so she could scare me at the appointed time.

The best part about living with Mamaw was that I began to understand what made her tick. Until then, I had resented how rarely we traveled to Kentucky after Mamaw Blanton's death. The decline in visits wasn't noticeable at first, but by the time I started middle

sort of family time share, while Rose had hoped that the house would go to her son and his family. Rose had a point: None of the siblings who lived in Ohio or Indiana visited often enough, so it made sense to give the house to someone who would use it. But Mamaw feared that without a home base, her children and grandchildren would have no place to stay during their visits to Jackson. She, too, had a point.

I started to understand that Mamaw saw returning to Jackson as a duty to endure rather than a source of enjoyment. To me, Jackson was about my uncles, and chasing turtles, and finding peace from the instability that plagued my Ohio existence. Jackson gave me a shared home with Mamaw, a three-hour road trip to tell and listen to stories, and a place where everyone knew me as the grandson of the famous Jim and Bonnie Vance. Jackson was something much different to her. It was the place where she sometimes went hungry as a child, from which she ran in the wake of a teenage pregnancy scandal, and where so many of her friends had given their lives in the mines. I wanted to escape to Jackson; she had escaped from it.

In her old age, with limited mobility, Mamaw loved to watch TV. She preferred raunchy humor and epic dramas, so she had a lot of options. But her favorite show by far was the HBO mob story The Sopranos . Looking back, it' s hardly surprising that a show about fiercely loyal, sometimes violent outsiders resonated with Mamaw. Change the names and dates, and the Italian Mafia starts to look a lot like the Hatfield-McCoy dispute back in Appalachia. The show' s main character, Tony Soprano, was a violent killer, an objectively terrible person by almost any standard. But Mamaw respected his loyalty and the fact that he would go to any length to protect the honor of his family. Though he murdered countless enemies and drank excessively, the only criticism she ever levied against him involved his infidelity. "He' s always sleeping around. I don' t like that."

I also saw for the first time Mamaw' s love of children, not as an object of her affection but as an observer of it. She often babysat for Lindsay' s or Aunt Wee' s young kids. One day she had both of Aunt Wee' s girls for the day and Aunt Wee' s dog in the backyard. When the dog barked, Mamaw screamed, "Shut up, you son of a bitch." My cousin Bonnie Rose ran to the back door and began screaming over and over, "Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!" Mamaw hobbled over to Bonnie Rose and scooped her up in her arms. "Shhh! You can' t say that or you' ll get me in trouble." But she was laughing so hard that she could barely get the words out. A few weeks later, I got home from school and

Regardless of how she felt, whether her emphysema made it difficult to breathe or her hip hurt so badly that she could barely walk, she never turned down an opportunity to "spend time with those babies," as she put it. Mamaw loved them, and I began to understand why she had always dreamed of becoming a lawyer for abused and neglected children.

At some point, Mamaw underwent major back surgery to help with the pain that made walking difficult. She landed in a nursing home for a few months to recover, forcing me to live alone, an experience that happily didn't last long. Every night she called Lindsay, Aunt Wee, or me and made the same request: "I hate the damned food here. Can you go to Taco Bell and get me a bean burrito?" Indeed, Mamaw hated everything about the nursing home and once asked me to promise that if she ever faced a permanent stay, I'd take her .44 Magnum and put a bullet in her head. "Mamaw, you can't ask me to do that. I'd go to jail for the rest of my life." "Well," she said, pausing for a moment to reflect, "then get your hands on some arsenic. That way no one will know." Her back surgery, it turned out, was completely unnecessary. She had a broken hip, and as soon as a surgeon repaired it, she was back on her feet, though she used a walker or cane from then on. Now that I'm a lawyer, I marvel that we never considered a medical malpractice suit against the doctor who operated unnecessarily on her back. But Mamaw wouldn't have allowed it: She didn't believe in using the legal system until you had to.

Sometimes I'd see Mom every few days, and sometimes I'd go a couple of weeks without hearing from her at all. After one breakup, she spent a few months on Mamaw's couch, and we both enjoyed her company. Mom tried, in her own way: When she was working, she'd always give me money on paydays, almost certainly more than she could afford. For reasons I never quite understood, Mom equated money with affection. Perhaps she felt that I would never appreciate that she loved me unless she offered a wad of spending money. But I never cared about the money. I just wanted her to be healthy.

Not even my closest friends knew that I lived in my grandma's house. I recognized that though many of my peers lacked the traditional American family, mine was more nontraditional than most. And we were poor, a status Mamaw wore like a badge of honor but one I'd hardly come to grips with. I didn't wear clothes from Abercrombie & Fitch or American Eagle unless I'd received them for Christmas. When Mamaw picked me up from school, I'd ask her not to get out of the car lest my friends see her—wearing her uniform of baggy jeans and a men's T-shirt—with a giant menthol cigarette hanging from her lip.

My junior year, I tested into the honors Advanced Math class—a hybrid of trigonometry, advanced algebra, and precalculus. The class' s instructor, Ron Selby, enjoyed legendary status among the students for his brilliance and high demands. In twenty years, he had never missed a day of school. According to Middletown High School legend, a student called in a bomb threat during one of Selby' s exams, hiding the explosive device in a bag in his locker. With the entire school evacuated outside, Selby marched into the school, retrieved the contents of the kid' s locker, marched outside, and threw those contents into a trash can. "I' ve had that kid in class; he' s not smart enough to make a functioning bomb," Selby told the police officers gathered at the school. "Now let my students go back to class to finish their exams."

Mamaw loved stories like this, and though she never met Selby, she admired him and encouraged me to follow his lead. Selby encouraged (but didn' t require) his students to obtain advanced graphing calculators—the Texas Instruments model 89 was the latest and greatest. We didn' t have cell phones, and we didn' t have nice clothes, but Mamaw made sure that I had one of those graphing calculators. This taught me an important lesson about Mamaw' s values, and it forced me to engage with school in a way I never had before. If Mamaw could drop $180 on a graphing calculator—she insisted that I spend none of my own money—then I had better take schoolwork more seriously. I owed it to her, and she reminded me of it constantly. "Have you finished your work for that Selby teacher?" "No, Mamaw, not yet." "You damn well better start. I didn' t spend every penny I had on that little computer so you could fuck around all day."

Those three years with Mamaw—uninterrupted and alone—saved me. I didn' t notice the causality of the change, how living with her turned my life around. I didn' t notice that my grades began to improve immediately after I moved in. And I couldn' t have known that I was making lifelong friends.

During that time, Mamaw and I started to talk about the problems in our community. Mamaw encouraged me to get a job—she told me that it would be good for me and that I needed to learn the value of a dollar. When her encouragement fell on deaf ears, she then demanded that I get a job, and so I did, as a cashier at Dillman' s, a local grocery store.

Working as a cashier turned me into an amateur sociologist. A frenetic stress animated so many of our customers. One of our neighbors would walk in and yell at me for the smallest of transgressions—not smiling at her, or bagging the groceries too heavy one day or too

while others consistently arrived at the checkout counter with carts piled high with fresh produce. The more harried a customer, the more they purchased precooked or frozen food, the more likely they were to be poor. And I knew they were poor because of the clothes they wore or because they purchased their food with food stamps. After a few months, I came home and asked Mamaw why only poor people bought baby formula. "Don't rich people have babies, too?" Mamaw had no answers, and it would be many years before I learned that rich folks are considerably more likely to breast-feed their children.

As my job taught me a little more about America's class divide, it also imbued me with a bit of resentment, directed toward both the wealthy and my own kind. The owners of Dillman's were old-fashioned, so they allowed people with good credit to run grocery tabs, some of which surpassed a thousand dollars. I knew that if any of my relatives walked in and ran up a bill of over a thousand dollars, they'd be asked to pay immediately. I hated the feeling that my boss counted my people as less trustworthy than those who took their groceries home in a Cadillac. But I got over it: One day, I told myself, I'll have my own damned tab.

I also learned how people gamed the welfare system. They'd buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They'd ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash. They'd regularly go through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones. I could never understand why our lives felt like a struggle while those living off of government largesse enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.

Mamaw listened intently to my experiences at Dillman's. We began to view much of our fellow working class with mistrust. Most of us were struggling to get by, but we made do, worked hard, and hoped for a better life. But a large minority was content to live off the dole. Every two weeks, I'd get a small paycheck and notice the line where federal and state income taxes were deducted from my wages. At least as often, our drug-addict neighbor would buy T-bone steaks, which I was too poor to buy for myself but was forced by Uncle Sam to buy for someone else. This was my mind-set when I was seventeen, and though I'm far less angry today than I was then, it was my first indication that the policies of Mamaw's "party of the working man"—the Democrats—weren't all they were cracked up to be.

movement. Others cite religious faith and the hold that social conservatism has on evangelicals in that region. A big part of the explanation lies in the fact that many in the white working class saw precisely what I did, working at Dillman's. As far back as the 1970s, the white working class began to turn to Richard Nixon because of a perception that, as one man put it, government was "payin' people who are on welfare today doin' nothin'! They're laughin' at our society! And we're all hardworkin' people and we're gettin' laughed at for workin' every day!" 20

At around that time, our neighbor—one of Mamaw and Papaw's oldest friends—registered the house next to ours for Section 8. Section 8 is a government program that offers low-income residents a voucher to rent housing. Mamaw's friend had little luck renting his property, but when he qualified his house for the Section 8 voucher, he virtually assured that would change. Mamaw saw it as a betrayal, ensuring that "bad" people would move into the neighborhood and drive down property values.

Despite our efforts to draw bright lines between the working and nonworking poor, Mamaw and I recognized that we shared a lot in common with those whom we thought gave our people a bad name. Those Section 8 recipients looked a lot like us. The matriarch of the first family to move in next door was born in Kentucky but moved north at a young age as her parents sought a better life. She'd gotten involved with a couple of men, each of whom had left her with a child but no support. She was nice, and so were her kids. But the drugs and the late-night fighting revealed troubles that too many hillbilly transplants knew too well. Confronted with such a realization of her own family's struggle, Mamaw grew frustrated and angry.

From that anger sprang Bonnie Vance the social policy expert: "She's a lazy whore, but she wouldn't be if she was forced to get a job"; "I hate those fuckers for giving these people the money to move into our neighborhood." She'd rant against the people we'd see in the grocery store: "I can't understand why people who've worked all their lives scrape by while these deadbeats buy liquor and cell phone coverage with our tax money."

These were bizarre views for my bleeding-heart grandma. And if she blasted the government for doing too much one day, she'd blast it for doing too little the next. The government, after all, was just helping poor people find a place to live, and my grandma loved the idea of anyone helping the poor. She had no philosophical objection to Section 8

aircraft carriers but not drug treatment facilities—like Mom's—for everyone. Sometimes she'd criticize the faceless rich, whom she saw as far too unwilling to carry their fair share of the social burden. Mamaw saw every ballot failure of the local school improvement tax (and there were many) as an indictment of our society's failure to provide a quality education to kids like me.

Mamaw's sentiments occupied wildly different parts of the political spectrum. Depending on her mood, Mamaw was a radical conservative or a European-style social Democrat. Because of this, I initially assumed that Mamaw was an unreformed simpleton and that as soon as she opened her mouth about policy or politics, I might as well close my ears. Yet I quickly realized that in Mamaw's contradictions lay great wisdom. I had spent so long just surviving my world, but now that I had a little space to observe it, I began to see the world as Mamaw did. I was scared, confused, angry, and heartbroken. I'd blame large businesses for closing up shop and moving overseas, and then I'd wonder if I might have done the same thing. I'd curse our government for not helping enough, and then I'd wonder if, in its attempts to help, it actually made the problem worse.

Mamaw could spew venom like a Marine Corps drill instructor, but what she saw in our community didn't just piss her off. It broke her heart. Behind the drugs, and the fighting matches, and the financial struggles, these were people with serious problems, and they were hurting. Our neighbors had a kind of desperate sadness in their lives. You'd see it in how the mother would grin but never really smile, or in the jokes that the teenage girl told about her mother "smacking the shit out of her." I knew what awkward humor like this was meant to conceal because I'd used it in the past. Grin and bear it, says the adage. If anyone appreciated this, Mamaw did.

The problems of our community hit close to home. Mom's struggles weren't some isolated incident. They were replicated, replayed, and relived by many of the people who, like us, had moved hundreds of miles in search of a better life. There was no end in sight. Mamaw had thought she escaped the poverty of the hills, but the poverty—emotional, if not financial—had followed her. Something had made her later years eerily similar to her earliest ones. What was happening? What were our neighbor's teenage daughter's prospects? Certainly the odds were against her, with a home life like that. This raised the question: What would happen to me?

I was unable to answer these questions in a way that didn't implicate something deep

around to smile and wave but never to load someone's mom or dad in the back of their cruiser.

So I wondered what was different about us—not just me and my family but our neighborhood and our town and everyone from Jackson to Middletown and beyond. When Mom was arrested a couple of years earlier, the neighborhood's porches and front yards filled with spectators; there's no embarrassment like waving to the neighbors right after the cops have carted your mother off. Mom's exploits were undoubtedly extreme, but all of us had seen the show before with different neighbors. These sorts of things had their own rhythm. A mild screaming match might invite a few cracked shutters or peeking eyes behind the shades. If things escalated a bit, bedrooms would illuminate as people awoke to investigate the commotion. And if things got out of hand, the police would come and take someone's drunk dad or unhinged mom down to the city building. That building housed the tax collector, the public utilities, and even a small museum, but all the kids in my neighborhood knew it as the home of Middletown's short-term jail.

I consumed books about social policy and the working poor. One book in particular, a study by eminent sociologist William Julius Wilson called The Truly Disadvantaged , struck a nerve. I was sixteen the first time I read it, and though I didn't fully understand it all, I grasped the core thesis. As millions migrated north to factory jobs, the communities that sprouted up around those factories were vibrant but fragile: When the factories shut their doors, the people left behind were trapped in towns and cities that could no longer support such large populations with high-quality work. Those who could—generally the well educated, wealthy, or well connected—left, leaving behind communities of poor people. These remaining folks were the "truly disadvantaged"—unable to find good jobs on their own and surrounded by communities that offered little in the way of connections or social support.

Wilson's book spoke to me. I wanted to write him a letter and tell him that he had described my home perfectly. That it resonated so personally is odd, however, because he wasn't writing about the hillbilly transplants from Appalachia—he was writing about black people in the inner cities. The same was true of Charles Murray's seminal Losing Ground , another book about black folks that could have been written about hillbillies—which addressed the way our government encouraged social decay through the welfare state.

Though insightful, neither of these books fully answered the questions that plagued me:

before I learned that no single book, or expert, or field could fully explain the problems of hillbillies in modern America. Our elegy is a sociological one, yes, but it is also about psychology and community and culture and faith.

During my junior year of high school, our neighbor Pattie called her landlord to report a leaky roof. The landlord arrived and found Pattie topless, stoned, and unconscious on her living room couch. Upstairs the bathtub was overflowing—hence, the leaking roof. Pattie had apparently drawn herself a bath, taken a few prescription painkillers, and passed out. The top floor of her home and many of her family's possessions were ruined. This is the reality of our community. It's about a naked druggie destroying what little of value exists in her life. It's about children who lose their toys and clothes to a mother's addiction.

Another neighbor lived alone in a big pink house. She was a recluse, a neighborhood mystery. She came outside only to smoke. She never said hello, and her lights were always off. She and her husband had divorced, and her children had landed in jail. She was extremely obese—as a child, I used to wonder if she hated the outdoors because she was too heavy to move.

There were the neighbors down the street, a younger woman with a toddler and her middle-aged boyfriend. The boyfriend worked, and the woman spent her days watching The Young and the Restless . Her young son was adorable, and he loved Mamaw. At all times of the day—one time, past midnight—he would wander to her doorstep and ask for a snack. His mother had all the time in the world, but she couldn't keep a close enough watch on her child to prevent him from straying into the homes of strangers. Sometimes his diaper would need changing. Mamaw once called social services on the woman, hoping they'd somehow rescue the young boy. They did nothing. So Mamaw used my nephew's diapers and kept a watchful eye on the neighborhood, always looking for signs of her "little buddy."

My sister's friend lived in a small duplex with her mother (a welfare queen if one ever existed). She had seven siblings, most of them from the same father—which was, unfortunately, a rarity. Her mother had never held a job and seemed interested "only in breeding," as Mamaw put it. Her kids never had a chance. One ended up in an abusive relationship that produced a child before the mom was old enough to purchase cigarettes. The oldest overdosed on drugs and was arrested not long after he graduated from high school.

them for more spending money, and declare bankruptcy, often leaving them full of garbage in our wake. Thrift is inimical to our being. We spend to pretend that we're upper-class. And when the dust clears—when bankruptcy hits or a family member bails us out of our stupidity—there's nothing left over. Nothing for the kids' college tuition, no investment to grow our wealth, no rainy-day fund if someone loses her job. We know we shouldn't spend like this. Sometimes we beat ourselves up over it, but we do it anyway.

Our homes are a chaotic mess. We scream and yell at each other like we're spectators at a football game. At least one member of the family uses drugs—sometimes the father, sometimes the mother, sometimes both. At especially stressful times, we'll hit and punch each other, all in front of the rest of the family, including young children; much of the time, the neighbors hear what's happening. A bad day is when the neighbors call the police to stop the drama. Our kids go to foster care but never stay for long. We apologize to our kids. The kids believe we're really sorry, and we are. But then we act just as mean a few days later.

We don't study as children, and we don't make our kids study when we're parents. Our kids perform poorly in school. We might get angry with them, but we never give them the tools—like peace and quiet at home—to succeed. Even the best and brightest will likely go to college close to home, if they survive the war zone in their own home. "I don't care if you got into Notre Dame," we say. "You can get a fine, cheap education at the community college." The irony is that for poor people like us, an education at Notre Dame is both cheaper and finer.

We choose not to work when we should be looking for jobs. Sometimes we'll get a job, but it won't last. We'll get fired for tardiness, or for stealing merchandise and selling it on eBay, or for having a customer complain about the smell of alcohol on our breath, or for taking five thirty-minute restroom breaks per shift. We talk about the value of hard work but tell ourselves that the reason we're not working is some perceived unfairness: Obama shut down the coal mines, or all the jobs went to the Chinese. These are the lies we tell ourselves to solve the cognitive dissonance—the broken connection between the world we see and the values we preach.

We talk to our children about responsibility, but we never walk the walk. It's like this: For years I'd dreamed of owning a German shepherd puppy. Somehow Mom found me one. But he was our fourth dog, and I had no clue how to train him. Within a few years, all of

Our eating and exercise habits seem designed to send us to an early grave, and it's working: In certain parts of Kentucky, local life expectancy is sixty-seven, a full decade and a half below what it is in nearby Virginia. A recent study found that unique among all ethnic groups in the United States, the life expectancy of working-class white folks is going down. We eat Pillsbury cinnamon rolls for breakfast, Taco Bell for lunch, and McDonald's for dinner. We rarely cook, even though it's cheaper and better for the body and soul. Exercise is confined to the games we play as children. We see people jog on the streets only if we leave our homes for the military or for college in some distant place.

Not all of the white working class struggles. I knew even as a child that there were two separate sets of mores and social pressures. My grandparents embodied one type: old-fashioned, quietly faithful, self-reliant, hardworking. My mother and, increasingly, the entire neighborhood embodied another: consumerist, isolated, angry, distrustful.

There were (and remain) many who lived by my grandparents' code. Sometimes you saw it in the subtlest of ways: the old neighbor who diligently tended her garden even as her neighbors let their homes rot from the inside out; the young woman who grew up with my mom, who returned to the neighborhood every day to help her mother navigate old age. I say this not to romanticize my grandparents' way of life—which, as I've observed, was rife with problems—but to note that many in our community may have struggled but did so successfully. There are many intact families, many dinners shared in peaceful homes, many children studying hard and believing they'll claim their own American Dream. Many of my friends have built successful lives and happy families in Middletown or nearby. They are not the problem, and if you believe the statistics, the children of these intact homes have plenty of reason for optimism.

I always straddled those two worlds. Thanks to Mamaw, I never saw only the worst of what our community offered, and I believe that saved me. There was always a safe place and a loving embrace if ever I needed it. Our neighbors' kids couldn't say the same.

One Sunday, Mamaw agreed to watch Aunt Wee's kids for several hours. Aunt Wee dropped them off at ten. I had to work the dreaded eleven A.M. to eight P.M . shift at the grocery store. I hung out with the kids for about forty-five minutes, then left at ten-forty-five for work. I was unusually upset—devastated, even—to leave them. I wanted nothing more than to spend the day with Mamaw and the babies. I told Mamaw that, and instead of telling me to "quit your damn whining" like I expected, she told me she wished that I

preach and cuss and demand. She showed me what was possible—a peaceful Sunday afternoon with the people I loved—and made sure I knew how to get there.

Reams of social science attest to the positive effect of a loving and stable home. I could cite a dozen studies suggesting that Mamaw's home offered me not just a short-term haven but also hope for a better life. Entire volumes are devoted to the phenomenon of "resilient children"—kids who prosper despite an unstable home because they have the social support of a loving adult.

I know Mamaw was good for me not because some Harvard psychologist says so but because I felt it. Consider my life before I moved in with Mamaw. In the middle of third grade, we left Middletown and my grandparents to live in Preble County with Bob; at the end of fourth grade, we left Preble County to live in a Middletown duplex on the 200 block of McKinley Street; at the end of fifth grade, we left the 200 block of McKinley Street to move to the 300 block of McKinley Street, and by that time Chip was a regular in our home, though he never lived with us; at the end of sixth grade, we remained on the 300 block of McKinley Street, but Chip had been replaced by Steve (and there were many discussions about moving in with Steve); at the end of seventh grade, Matt had taken Steve's place, Mom was preparing to move in with Matt, and Mom hoped that I would join her in Dayton; at the end of eighth grade, she demanded that I move to Dayton, and after a brief detour at my dad's house, I acquiesced; at the end of ninth grade, I moved in with Ken—a complete stranger—and his three kids. On top of all that were the drugs, the domestic violence case, children's services prying into our lives, and Papaw dying.

Today, even remembering that period long enough to write it down invokes an intense, indescribable anxiety in me. Not long ago, I noticed that a Facebook friend (an acquaintance from high school with similarly deep hillbilly roots) was constantly changing boyfriends—going in and out of relationships, posting pictures of one guy one week and another three weeks later, fighting on social media with her new fling until the relationship publicly imploded. She is my age with four children, and when she posted that she had finally found a man who would treat her well (a refrain I'd seen many times before), her thirteen-year-old daughter commented: "Just stop. I just want you and this to stop." I wish I could hug that little girl, because I know how she feels. For seven long years, I just wanted it to stop. I didn't care so much about the fighting, the screaming, or even the drugs. I just wanted a home, and I wanted to stay there, and I wanted these goddamned

grade, I lived with Mamaw, in her house, with no one else. At the end of twelfth grade, I lived with Mamaw, in her house, with no one else. I could say that the peace of Mamaw's home gave me a safe space to do my homework. I could say that the absence of fighting and instability let me focus on school and my job. I could say that spending all of my time in the same house with the same person made it easier for me to form lasting friendships with people at school. I could say that having a job and learning a bit about the world helped clarify precisely what I wanted out of my own life. In hindsight, those explanations make sense, and I am certain that a bit of truth lies in each.

I'm sure that a sociologist and a psychologist, sitting in a room together, could explain why I lost interest in drugs, why my grades improved, why I aced the SAT, and why I found a couple of teachers who inspired me to love learning. But what I remember most of all is that I was happy —I no longer feared the school bell at the end of the day, I knew where I'd be living the next month, and no one's romantic decisions affected my life. And out of that happiness came so many of the opportunities I've had for the past twelve years.

Chapter 10

During my last year of high school, I tried out for the varsity golf team. For about a year, I'd taken golf lessons from an old golf pro. The summer before senior year, I got a job at a local golf course so I could practice for free. Mamaw never showed any interest in sports, but she encouraged me to learn golf because "that's where rich people do business." Though wise in her own way, Mamaw knew little about the business habits of rich people, and I told her as much. "Shut up, you fucker," she told me. "Everybody knows rich people love to golf." But when I practiced my swing in the house (I didn't use a ball, so the only damage I did was to the floor) she demanded that I stop ruining her carpet. "But, Mamaw," I protested sarcastically, "if you don't let me practice, I'll never get to do any business on the golf course. I might as well drop out of high school now and get a job bagging groceries." "You smart-ass. If I wasn't crippled, I'd get up right now and smack your head and ass together."

So she helped me pay for my lessons and asked her baby brother (my uncle Gary), the youngest of the Blanton boys, to find me some old clubs. He delivered a nice set of MacGregors, better than anything we could have afforded on our own, and I practiced as often as I could. By the time golf tryouts rolled around, I had mastered enough of a golf swing not to embarrass myself.

customers came from Middletown's working-class neighborhoods. On my first day of golf practice, I showed up in dress shoes, thinking that was what golf shoes were. When an enterprising young bully noticed before the first tee that I was wearing a pair of Kmart brown loafers, he proceeded to mock me mercilessly for the next four hours. I resisted the urge to bury my putter in his goddamned ear, remembering Mamaw's sage advice to "act like you've been there." (A note about hillbilly loyalty: Reminded of that story recently, Lindsay launched into a tirade about how much of a loser the kid was. The incident occurred thirteen years ago.)

I knew in the back of my mind that decisions were coming about my future. All of my friends planned to go to college; that I had such motivated friends was due to Mamaw's influence. By the time I was in seventh grade, many of my neighborhood friends were already smoking weed. Mamaw found out and forbade me to see any of them. I recognize that most kids ignore instructions like these, but most kids don't receive them from the likes of Bonnie Vance. She promised that if she saw me in the presence of any person on the banned list, she would run him over with her car. "No one would ever find out," she whispered menacingly.

With my friends headed for college, I figured I'd do the same. I scored well enough on the SAT to overcome my earlier bad grades, and I knew that the only two schools I had any interest in attending—Ohio State and Miami University—would both accept me. A few months before I graduated, I had (admittedly, with little thought) settled on Ohio State. A large package arrived in the mail, filled with financial aid information from the university. There was talk of Pell Grants, subsidized loans, unsubsidized loans, scholarships, and something called "work-study." It was all so exciting, if only Mamaw and I could figure out what it meant. We puzzled over the forms for hours before concluding that I could purchase a decent home in Middletown with the debt I'd incur to go to college. We hadn't actually started the forms yet—that would require another herculean effort on another day.

Excitement turned to apprehension, but I reminded myself that college was an investment in my future. "It's the only damned thing worth spending money on right now," Mamaw said. She was right, but as I worried less about the financial aid forms, I began to worry for another reason: I wasn't ready. Not all investments are good investments. All of that debt, and for what? To get drunk all the time and earn terrible grades? Doing well in

toward the end of high school, C's in easy classes revealed a kid unprepared for the rigors of advanced education. In Mamaw's house, I was healing, yet as we combed through those financial aid papers, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had a long way to go.

Everything about the unstructured college experience terrified me—from feeding myself healthy food to paying my own bills. I'd never done any of those things. But I knew that I wanted more out of my life. I knew that I wanted to excel in college, get a good job, and give my family the things I'd never had. I just wasn't ready to start that journey. That's when my cousin Rachael—a Marine Corps veteran—advised that I consider the Corps: "They'll whip your ass into shape." Rachael was Uncle Jimmy's oldest daughter, and thus the dean of our generation of grandchildren. All of us, even Lindsay, looked up to Rachael, so her advice carried enormous weight.

The 9/11 attacks had occurred only a year earlier, during my junior year of high school; like any self-respecting hillbilly, I considered heading to the Middle East to kill terrorists. But the prospect of military service—the screaming drill instructors, the constant exercise, the separation from my family—frightened me. Until Rachael told me to talk to a recruiter—implicitly arguing that she thought I could handle it—joining the Marines seemed as plausible as flying to Mars. Now, just weeks before I owed a tuition deposit to Ohio State, I could think of nothing but the Marine Corps.

So one Saturday in late March, I walked into a military recruiter's office and asked him about the Marine Corps. He didn't try to sell me on anything. He told me I'd make very little money and I might even go to war. "But they'll teach you about leadership, and they'll turn you into a disciplined young man." This piqued my interest, but the notion of J.D. the U.S. Marine still inspired disbelief. I was a pudgy, longhaired kid. When our gym teacher told us to run a mile, I'd walk at least half. I had never woken up before six A.M. And here was this organization promising that I'd rise regularly at five A.M. and run multiple miles per day.

I went home and considered my options. I reminded myself that my country needed me, and that I'd always regret not participating in America's newest war. I thought about the GI Bill and how it would help me trade indebtedness for financial freedom. I knew that, most of all, I had no other choice. There was college, or nothing, or the Marines, and I didn't like either of the first two options. Four years in the Marines, I told myself, would help me become the person I wanted to be. But I didn't want to leave home. Lindsay had

two weeks later, as the Iraq crisis turned into the Iraq war, I signed my name on a dotted line and promised the Marine Corps the first four years of my adult life.

At first my family scoffed. The Marines weren't for me, and people let me know it. Eventually, knowing I wouldn't change my mind, everyone came around, and a few even seemed excited. Everyone, that is, save Mamaw. She tried every manner of persuasion: "You're a fucking idiot; they'll chew you up and spit you out." "Who's going to take care of me?" "You're too stupid for the Marines." "You're too smart for the Marines." "With everything that's going on in the world, you'll get your head blown off." "Don't you want to be around for Lindsay's kids?" "I'm worried, and I don't want you to go." Though she came to accept the decision, she never liked it. Shortly before I left for boot camp, the recruiter visited to speak with my fragile grandmother. She met him outside, stood up as straight as she could, and glowered at him. "Set one foot on my fucking porch, and I'll blow it off," she advised. "I thought she might be serious," he later told me. So they had their talk while he stood in the front yard.

My greatest fear when I left for boot camp wasn't that I'd be killed in Iraq or that I'd fail to make the cut. I hardly worried about those things. But when Mom, Lindsay, and Aunt Wee drove me to the bus that would take me to the airport and on to boot camp from there, I imagined my life four years later. And I saw a world without my grandmother in it. Something inside me knew that she wouldn't survive my time in the Marines. I'd never come home again, at least not permanently. Home was Middletown with Mamaw in it. And by the time I finished with the Marines, Mamaw would be gone.

Marine Corps boot camp lasts thirteen weeks, each with a new training focus. The night I arrived in Parris Island, South Carolina, an angry drill instructor greeted my group as we disembarked from the plane. He ordered us onto a bus; after a short trip, another drill instructor ordered us off the bus and onto the famed "yellow footprints." Over the next six hours, I was poked and prodded by medical personnel, assigned equipment and uniforms, and lost all of my hair. We were allowed one phone call, so I naturally called Mamaw and read off of the card they gave me: "I have arrived safely at Parris Island. I will send my address soon. Goodbye." "Wait, you little shithead. Are you okay?" "Sorry, Mamaw, can't talk. But yes, I'm okay. I'll write as soon as I can." The drill instructor, overhearing my two extra lines of conversation, asked sarcastically whether I'd made enough time "for her to tell you a fucking story." That was the first day.

completing the rigors of boot camp—received a letter every day or two, I sometimes received a half dozen each night. Mamaw wrote every day, sometimes several times, offering extended thoughts on what was wrong with the world in some and few-sentence streams of consciousness in others. Most of all, Mamaw wanted to know how my days were going and reassure me. Recruiters told families that what most of us needed were words of encouragement, and Mamaw delivered that in spades. As I struggled with screaming drill instructors and physical fitness routines that pushed my out-of-shape body to its limits, I read every day that Mamaw was proud of me, that she loved me, and that she knew I wouldn't give up. Thanks to either my wisdom or inherited hoarder tendencies, I managed to keep nearly every one of the letters I received from my family.

Many of them shed an interesting light on the home I left behind. A letter from Mom, asking me what I might need and telling me how proud she is of me. "I was babysitting [Lindsay's kids]," she reports. "They played with slugs outside. They squeezed one and killed it. But I threw it away and told them they didn't because Kam got a little upset, thinking he killed it." This is Mom at her best: loving and funny, a woman who delighted in her grandchildren. In the same letter, a reference to Greg, likely a boyfriend who has since disappeared from my memory. And an insight into our sense of normalcy: "Mandy's husband Terry," she starts, referencing a friend of hers, "was arrested on a probation violation and sent to prison. So they are all doing OK."

Lindsay also wrote often, sending multiple letters in the same envelope, each on a different-colored piece of paper, with instructions on the back— "Read this one second; this is the last one." Every single letter contained some reference to her kids. I learned of my oldest niece's successful potty training; my nephew's soccer matches; my younger niece's early smiles and first efforts to reach for things. After a lifetime of shared triumphs and tragedies, we both adored her kids more than anything else. Almost all of the letters I sent home asked her to "kiss the babies and tell them that I love them."

Cut off for the first time from home and family, I learned a lot about myself and my culture. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the military is not a landing spot for low-income kids with no other options. The sixty-nine members of my boot camp platoon included black, white, and Hispanic kids; rich kids from upstate New York and poor kids from West Virginia; Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and even a few atheists.

I was naturally drawn to those like me. "The person I talk to most," I wrote to my family

he said, 'What's a Catholic?' And I told him that it was just another form of Christianity, and he said, 'I might have to try that out.' " Mamaw understood precisely where he came from. "Down in that part of Kentucky, everybody's a snake handler," she wrote back, only partially joking.

During my time away, Mamaw showed vulnerability that I'd never seen before. Whenever she received a letter from me, she would call my aunt or sister, demanding that someone come to her house immediately and interpret my chicken scratch. "I love you a big bunch and I miss you a bunch I forget you aren't here I think you will come down the stairs and I can holler at you it is just a feeling you aren't really gone. My hands hurt today that arthritis I guess. . . . I'll go for now write more later love you please take care." Mamaw's letters never contained the necessary punctuation and always included some articles, usually from Reader's Digest , to occupy my time.

She could still be classic Mamaw: mean and ferociously loyal. About a month into my training, I had a nasty exchange with a drill instructor, who took me aside for a half hour, forcing me to alternate jumping jacks, sit-ups, and short sprints until I was completely exhausted. It was par for the course in boot camp, something nearly everyone faced at one point or another. If anything, I was lucky to have avoided it for so long. "Dearest J.D.," Mamaw wrote when she learned of the incident, "I must say I have been waiting for them dick face bastards to start on you—and now they have. Words aren't invented to describe how they piss me off. . . . You just keep on doing the best you can do and keep thinking about this stupid asshole with an IQ of 2 thinking he is Bobby bad ass but he wears girls underwear. I hate all of them." When I read that outburst, I figured Mamaw had gotten it all off her chest. But the next day, she had more to say: "Hello sweet heart all I can think about is them dicks screaming at you that is my job not them fuckers. Just kidding I know you will be what ever you want to be because you are smart something they aren't and they know it I hate them all really hate their guts. Screaming is part of the game they play . . . you carry on as best you can you will come out ahead." I had the meanest old hillbilly staunchly in my corner, even if she was hundreds of miles away.

In boot camp, mealtime is a marvel of efficiency. You walk through a cafeteria line, holding your tray for the service staff. They drop all of the day's offerings on your plate, both because you're afraid to speak up about your least favorite items and because you're so hungry that you'd gladly eat a dead horse. You sit down, and without looking at your

process takes no longer than eight minutes, and if you're not quite full by the end, you certainly suffer from indigestion (which feels about the same).

The only discretionary part of the exercise is dessert, set aside on small plates at the end of the assembly line. During the first meal of boot camp, I grabbed the offered piece of cake and marched to my seat. If nothing else tastes good, I thought, this cake shall certainly be the exception. Then my drill instructor, a skinny white man with a Tennessee twang, stepped in front of me. He looked me up and down with his small, intense eyes and offered a query: "You really need that cake, don't you, fat-ass?" I prepared to answer, but the question was apparently rhetorical, as he smacked the cake out of my hands and moved on to his next victim. I never grabbed the cake again.

There was an important lesson here, but not one about food or self-control or nutrition. If you'd told me that I'd react to such an insult by cleaning up the cake and heading back to my seat, I'd never have believed you. The trials of my youth instilled a debilitating self-doubt. Instead of congratulating myself on having overcome some obstacles, I worried that I'd be overcome by the next ones. Marine Corps boot camp, with its barrage of challenges big and small, began to teach me I had underestimated myself.

Marine Corps boot camp is set up as a life-defining challenge. From the day you arrive, no one calls you by your first name. You're not allowed to say "I" because you're taught to mistrust your own individuality. Every question begins with "This recruit"—This recruit needs to use the head (the bathroom); This recruit needs to visit the corpsman (the doctor). The few idiots who arrive at boot camp with Marine Corps tattoos are mercilessly berated. At every turn, recruits are reminded that they are worthless until they finish boot camp and earn the title "marine." Our platoon started with eighty-three, and by the time we finished, sixty-nine remained. Those who dropped out—mostly for medical reasons—served to reinforce the worthiness of the challenge.

Every time the drill instructor screamed at me and I stood proudly; every time I thought I'd fall behind during a run and kept up; every time I learned to do something I thought impossible, like climb the rope, I came a little closer to believing in myself. Psychologists call it "learned helplessness" when a person believes, as I did during my youth, that the choices I made had no effect on the outcomes in my life. From Middletown's world of small expectations to the constant chaos of our home, life had taught me that I had no control. Mamaw and Papaw had saved me from succumbing entirely to that notion, and

The day I graduated from boot camp was the proudest of my life. An entire crew of hillbillies showed up for my graduation—eighteen in total—including Mamaw, sitting in a wheelchair, buried underneath a few blankets, looking frailer than I remembered. I showed everyone around base, feeling like I had just won the lottery, and when I was released for a ten-day leave the next day, we caravanned back to Middletown.

On my first day home from boot camp, I walked into the barbershop of my grandfather's old friend. Marines have to keep their hair short, and I didn't want to slack just because no one was watching. For the first time, the corner barber—a dying breed even though I didn't know it at the time—greeted me as an adult. I sat in his chair, told some dirty jokes (most of which I'd learned only weeks earlier), and shared some boot camp stories. When he was about my age, he was drafted into the army to fight in Korea, so we traded some barbs about the Army and the Marines. After the haircut, he refused to take my money and told me to stay safe. He'd cut my hair before, and I'd walked by his shop nearly every day for eighteen years. Yet it was the first time he'd ever shaken my hand and treated me as an equal.

I had a lot of those experiences shortly after boot camp. In those first days as a marine—all spent in Middletown—every interaction was a revelation. I'd shed forty-five pounds, so many of the people I knew barely recognized me. My friend Nate—who would later serve as one of my groomsmen—did a double take when I extended my hand at a local mall. Perhaps I carried myself a little differently. My old hometown seemed to think so.

The new perspective went both ways. Many of the foods that I ate once now violated the fitness standards of a marine. In Mamaw's house, everything was fried—chicken, pickles, tomatoes. That bologna sandwich on toast with crumbled potato chips as topping no longer appeared healthy. Blackberry cobbler, once considered as healthy as any dish built around fruit (blackberries) and grains (flour), lost its luster. I began asking questions I'd never asked before: Is there added sugar? Does this meat have a lot of saturated fat? How much salt? It was just food, but I was already realizing that I'd never look at Middletown the same way again. In a few short months, the Marine Corps had already changed my perspective.

I soon left home for a permanent assignment in the Marine Corps, and life at home continued on apace. I tried to return as often as I could, and with long weekends and generous Marine Corps leave, I usually saw my family every few months. The kids looked a

their families, were healthy and happy. My greatest fear before I left was that some tragedy would befall my family while I was away, and I'd be unable to help. Luckily, that wasn't happening.

In January 2005, I learned that my unit would head to Iraq a few months later. I was both excited and nervous. Mamaw fell silent when I called to tell her. After a few uncomfortable seconds of dead air, she said only that she hoped the war would end before I had to leave. Though we spoke on the phone every few days, we never spoke of Iraq, even as winter turned to spring and everyone knew I'd be leaving for war that summer. I could tell that Mamaw didn't want to talk or think about it, and I obliged.

Mamaw was old, frail, and sick. I no longer lived with her, and I was preparing to go fight a war. Though her health had improved somewhat since I'd left for the Marines, she still took a dozen medications and made quarterly trips to the hospital for various ailments. When AK Steel—which provided health care for Mamaw as Papaw's widow—announced that they were increasing her premiums, Mamaw simply couldn't afford them. She barely survived as it was, and she needed three hundred dollars extra per month. She told me as much one day, and I immediately volunteered to cover the costs. She had never accepted anything from me—not money from my paycheck at Dillman's; not a share of my boot camp earnings. But she accepted my three hundred a month, and that's how I knew she was desperate.

I didn't make a lot of money myself—probably a thousand dollars a month after taxes, though the Marines gave me a place to stay and food to eat, so that money went far. I also made extra money playing online poker. Poker was in my blood—I'd played with pennies and dimes with Papaw and my great-uncles as far back as I could remember—and the online poker craze at the time made it basically free money. I played ten hours a week on small-stakes tables, earning four hundred dollars a month. I had planned to save that money, but instead I gave it to Mamaw for her health insurance. Mamaw, naturally, worried that I had picked up a gambling habit and was playing cards in some mountain trailer with a bunch of card-sharking hillbillies, but I assured her that it was online and legitimate.

"Well, you know I don't understand the fucking Internet. Just don't turn to booze and women. That's always what happens to dipshits who get caught up in gambling."

Mamaw and I both loved the movie Terminator 2 . We probably watched it together five or six times. Mamaw saw Arnold Schwarzenegger as the embodiment of the American Dream:

goddamned terminator. No matter what life threw at me, I'd be okay because she was there to protect me.

Paying for her health insurance made me feel, for the first time in my life, like I was the protector. It gave me a sense of satisfaction that I'd never imagined—and how could I? I'd never had the money to help people before the Marines. When I came home, I was able to take Mom out to lunch, get ice cream for the kids, and buy nice Christmas presents for Lindsay. On one of my trips home, Mamaw and I took Lindsay's two oldest kids on a trip to Hocking Hills State Park, a beautiful region of Appalachian Ohio, to meet up with Aunt Wee and Dan. I drove the whole way, I paid for gas, and I bought everyone dinner (admittedly at Wendy's). I felt like such a man, a real grown-up. To laugh and joke with the people I loved most as they scarfed down the meal that I'd provided gave me a feeling of joy and accomplishment that words can't possibly describe.

For my entire life, I had oscillated between fear at my worst moments and a sense of safety and stability at my best. I was either being chased by the bad terminator or protected by the good one. But I had never felt empowered—never believed that I had the ability and the responsibility to care for those I loved. Mamaw could preach about responsibility and hard work, about making something of myself and not making excuses. No pep talk or speech could show me how it felt to transition from seeking shelter to providing it. I had to learn that for myself, and once I did, there was no going back.

Mamaw's seventy-second birthday was in April 2005. Just a couple of weeks before then, I stood in the waiting room of a Walmart Supercenter as car technicians changed my oil. I called Mamaw on the cell phone that I paid for myself, and she told me about babysitting Lindsay's kids that day. "Meghan is so damned cute," she told me. "I told her to shit in the pot, and for three hours she just kept on saying 'shit in the pot, shit in the pot, shit in the pot' over and over again. I told her she had to stop or I'd get in trouble, but she never did." I laughed, told Mamaw that I loved her, and let her know that her monthly three-hundred-dollar check was on the way. "J.D., thank you for helping me. I'm very proud of you, and I love you."

Two days later I awoke on a Sunday morning to a call from my sister, who said that Mamaw's lung had collapsed, that she was lying in the hospital in a coma, and that I should come home as quickly as possible. Two hours later, I was on the road. I packed my dress blue uniform, just in case I needed it for a funeral. On the way, a West Virginia police

wanted until then. I took my warning ticket, thanked him profusely, and drove 102 until I crossed the state line. I made the thirteen-hour trip in just under eleven hours.

When I arrived at Middletown Regional Hospital at eleven in the evening, my entire family was gathered around Mamaw's bed. She was unresponsive, and though her lung had been reinflated, the infection that had caused it to collapse showed no signs of responding to treatment. Until that happened, the doctor told us, it would be torture to wake her—if she could be awakened at all.

We waited a few days for signs that the infection was surrendering to the medication. But the signs showed the opposite: Her white blood cell count continued to rise, and some of her organs showed evidence of severe stress. Her doctor explained that she had no realistic chance of living without a ventilator and feeding tube. We all conferred and decided that if, after a day, Mamaw's white blood cell count increased further, we would pull the plug. Legally, it was Aunt Wee's sole decision, and I'll never forget when she tearfully asked whether I thought she was making a mistake. To this day, I'm convinced that she—and we—made the right decision. I guess it's impossible to know for sure. I wished at the time that we had a doctor in the family.

The doctor told us that without the ventilator Mamaw would die within fifteen minutes, an hour at most. She lasted instead for three hours, fighting to the very last minute. Everyone was present—Uncle Jimmy, Mom, and Aunt Wee; Lindsay, Kevin, and I—and we gathered around her bed, taking turns whispering in her ear and hoping that she heard us. As her heart rate dropped and we realized that her time drew near, I opened a Gideon's Bible to a random passage and began to read. It was First Corinthians, Chapter 13, Verse 12: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." A few minutes later, she was dead.

I didn't cry when Mamaw died, and I didn't cry for days thereafter. Aunt Wee and Lindsay grew frustrated with me, then worried: You're just so stoic, they said. You need to grieve like the rest of us or you'll burst.

I was grieving in my own way, but I sensed that our entire family was on the verge of collapse, and I wanted to give the impression of emotional strength. We all knew how Mom had reacted to Papaw's death, but Mamaw's death created new pressures: It was time to wind down the estate, figure out Mamaw's debts, dispose of her property, and disburse what remained. For the first time, Uncle Jimmy learned Mom's true financial

For those of us well acquainted with Mamaw's generosity, her financial position came as no surprise. Though Papaw had worked and saved for over four decades, the only thing of value that remained was the house he and Mamaw had purchased fifty years earlier. And Mamaw's debts were large enough to eat into a substantial portion of the home's equity. Lucky for us, this was 2005—the height of the real estate bubble. If she had died in 2008, Mamaw's estate likely would have been bankrupt.

In her will, Mamaw divided what remained between her three kids, with a twist: Mom's share was divided evenly between me and Lindsay. This undoubtedly contributed to Mom's inevitable emotional outburst. I was so caught up in the financial aspects of Mamaw's death and spending time with relatives I hadn't seen in months that I didn't realize Mom was slowly descending to the same place she'd traveled after Papaw's death. But it's hard to miss a freight train barreling down on you, so I noticed soon enough.

Like Papaw, Mamaw wanted a visitation in Middletown so that all of her friends from Ohio could gather and pay their respects. Like Papaw, she wanted a second visitation and funeral back home in Jackson, at Deaton's. After her funeral, the convoy departed for Keck, a holler not far from where Mamaw was born that housed our family's cemetery. In family lore, Keck held an even higher place of honor than Mamaw's birthplace. Her own mother—our beloved Mamaw Blanton—was born in Keck, and Mamaw Blanton's younger sister—Aunt Bonnie, nearly ninety herself—owned a beautiful log cabin on the same property. A short hike up the mountain from that log cabin is a relatively flat plot of land that serves as the final resting place for Papaw and Mamaw Blanton and a host of relatives, some born in the nineteenth century. That's where our convoy was headed, through the narrow mountain roads, to deliver Mamaw to the family who'd crossed over before her.

I've made that drive with a funeral convoy probably half a dozen times, and every turn reveals a landscape that inspires some memory of fonder times. It's impossible to sit in the car for the twenty-minute trip and not trade stories about the departed, all of which start out "Do you remember that time . . . ?" But after Mamaw's funeral, we didn't recall a series of fond memories about Mamaw and Papaw and Uncle Red and Teaberry and that time Uncle David drove off the side of the mountain, rolled a hundred yards down the hill, and walked away without a scratch. Lindsay and I instead listened to Mom tell us

I have never felt angrier at anyone for anything. For years, I had made excuses for Mom. I had tried to help manage her drug problem, read those stupid books about addiction, and accompanied her to N.A. meetings. I had endured, never complaining, a parade of father figures, all of whom left me feeling empty and mistrustful of men. I had agreed to ride in that car with her on the day she threatened to kill me, and then I had stood before a judge and lied to him to keep her out of jail. I had moved in with her and Matt, and then her and Ken, because I wanted her to get better and thought that if I played along, there was a chance she would. For years, Lindsay called me the "forgiving child"—the one who found the best in Mom, the one who made excuses, the one who believed. I opened my mouth to spew pure vitriol in Mom's direction, but Lindsay spoke first: "No, Mom. She was our mom, too." That said it all, so I continued to sit in silence.

The day after the funeral, I drove back to North Carolina to rejoin my Marine Corps unit. On the way back, on a narrow mountain back road in Virginia, I hit a wet patch of road coming around a turn, and the car began spinning out of control. I was moving fast, and my twisting car showed no signs of slowing as it hurtled towards the guardrail. I thought briefly that this was it—that I'd topple over that guardrail and join Mamaw just a bit sooner than I expected—when all of a sudden the car stopped. It is the closest I've ever come to a true supernatural event, and though I'm sure some law of friction can explain what happened, I imagined that Mamaw had stopped the car from toppling over the side of the mountain. I reoriented the car, returned to my lane, and then pulled off to the side. That was when I broke down and released the tears that I'd held back during the previous two weeks. I spoke to Lindsay and Aunt Wee before restarting my journey, and within a few hours I was back at the base.

My final two years in the Marines flew by and were largely uneventful, though two incidents stand out, each of which speaks to the way the Marine Corps changed my perspective. The first was a moment in time in Iraq, where I was lucky to escape any real fighting but which affected me deeply nonetheless. As a public affairs marine, I would attach to different units to get a sense of their daily routine. Sometimes I'd escort civilian press, but generally I'd take photos or write short stories about individual marines or their work. Early in my deployment, I attached to a civil affairs unit to do community outreach. Civil affairs missions were typically considered more dangerous, as a small number of marines would venture into unprotected Iraqi territory to meet with locals. On our

him a small eraser, his face briefly lit up with joy before he ran away to his family, holding his two-cent prize aloft in triumph. I have never seen such excitement on a child's face.

I don't believe in epiphanies. I don't believe in transformative moments, as transformation is harder than a moment. I've seen far too many people awash in a genuine desire to change only to lose their mettle when they realized just how difficult change actually is. But that moment, with that boy, was pretty close for me. For my entire life, I'd harbored resentment at the world. I was mad at my mother and father, mad that I rode the bus to school while other kids caught rides with friends, mad that my clothes didn't come from Abercrombie, mad that my grandfather died, mad that we lived in a small house. That resentment didn't vanish in an instant, but as I stood and surveyed the mass of children of a war-torn nation, their school without running water, and the overjoyed boy, I began to appreciate how lucky I was: born in the greatest country on earth, every modern convenience at my fingertips, supported by two loving hillbillies, and part of a family that, for all its quirks, loved me unconditionally. At that moment, I resolved to be the type of man who would smile when someone gave him an eraser. I haven't quite made it there, but without that day in Iraq, I wouldn't be trying.

The other life-altering component of my Marine Corps experience was constant. From the first day, with that scary drill instructor and a piece of cake, until the last, when I grabbed my discharge papers and sped home, the Marine Corps taught me how to live like an adult. The Marine Corps assumes maximum ignorance from its enlisted folks. It assumes that no one taught you anything about physical fitness, personal hygiene, or personal finances. I took mandatory classes about balancing a checkbook, saving, and investing. When I came home from boot camp with my fifteen-hundred-dollar earnings deposited in a mediocre regional bank, a senior enlisted marine drove me to Navy Federal—a respected credit union—and had me open an account. When I caught strep throat and tried to tough it out, my commanding officer noticed and ordered me to the doctor.

We used to complain constantly about the biggest perceived difference between our jobs and civilian jobs: In the civilian world, your boss wasn't able to control your life after you left work. In the Marines, my boss didn't just make sure I did a good job, he made sure I kept my room clean, kept my hair cut, and ironed my uniforms. He sent an older marine to supervise as I shopped for my first car so that I'd end up with a practical car, like a Toyota or a Honda, not the BMW I wanted. When I nearly agreed to finance that purchase directly

all the same. Shop around for a loan? I felt so lucky to even get a loan that I was ready to pull the trigger immediately. The Marine Corps demanded that I think strategically about these decisions, and then it taught me how to do so.

Just as important, the Marines changed the expectations that I had for myself. In boot camp, the thought of climbing the thirty-foot rope inspired terror; by the end of my first year, I could climb the rope using only one arm. Before I enlisted, I had never run a mile continuously. On my last physical fitness test, I ran three of them in nineteen minutes. It was in the Marine Corps where I first ordered grown men to do a job and watched them listen; where I learned that leadership depended far more on earning the respect of your subordinates than on bossing them around; where I discovered how to earn that respect; and where I saw that men and women of different social classes and races could work as a team and bond like family. It was the Marine Corps that first gave me an opportunity to truly fail, made me take that opportunity, and then, when I did fail, gave me another chance anyway.

When you work in public affairs, the most senior marines serve as liaisons with the press. The press is the holy grail of Marine Corps public affairs: the biggest audience and the highest stakes. Our media officer at Cherry Point was a captain who, for reasons I never understood, quickly fell out of favor with the base' s senior brass. Though he was a captain—eight pay grades higher than I was—because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no ready replacement when he got the ax. So my boss told me that for the next nine months (until my service ended) I would be the media relations officer for one of the largest military bases on the East Coast.

By then I' d grown accustomed to the sometimes random nature of Marine Corps assignments. This was something else entirely. As a friend joked, I had a face for radio, and I wasn' t prepared for live TV interviews about happenings on base. The Marine Corps threw me to the wolves. I struggled a bit at first—allowing some photographers to take photos of a classified aircraft; speaking out of turn at a meeting with senior officers—and I got my ass chewed. My boss, Shawn Haney, explained what I needed to do to correct myself. We discussed how to build relationships with the press, how to stay on message, and how to manage my time. I got better, and when hundreds of thousands flocked to our base for a biannual air show, our media relations worked so well that I earned a commendation medal.

face. I could stand in a room with majors, colonels, and generals and hold my own. I could do a captain's job even when I feared I couldn't.

For all my grandma's efforts, for all of her "You can do anything; don't be like those fuckers who think the deck is stacked against them" diatribes, the message had only partially set in before I enlisted. Surrounding me was another message: that I and the people like me weren't good enough; that the reason Middletown produced zero Ivy League graduates was some genetic or character defect. I couldn't possibly see how destructive that mentality was until I escaped it. The Marine Corps replaced it with something else, something that loathes excuses. "Giving it my all" was a catchphrase, something heard in health or gym class. When I first ran three miles, mildly impressed with my mediocre twenty-five-minute time, a terrifying senior drill instructor greeted me at the finish line: "If you're not puking, you're lazy! Stop being fucking lazy!" He then ordered me to sprint between him and a tree repeatedly. Just as I felt I might pass out, he relented. I was heaving, barely able to catch my breath. "That's how you should feel at the end of every run!" he yelled. In the Marines, giving it your all was a way of life.

I'm not saying ability doesn't matter. It certainly helps. But there's something powerful about realizing that you've undersold yourself—that somehow your mind confused lack of effort for inability. This is why, whenever people ask me what I'd most like to change about the white working class, I say, "The feeling that our choices don't matter." The Marine Corps excised that feeling like a surgeon does a tumor.

A few days after my twenty-third birthday, I hopped into the first major purchase I'd ever made—an old Honda Civic—grabbed my discharge papers, and drove one last time from Cherry Point, North Carolina, to Middletown, Ohio. During my four years in the Marines, I had seen, in Haiti, a level of poverty I never knew existed. I witnessed the fiery aftermath of an airplane crash into a residential neighborhood. I had watched Mamaw die and then gone to war a few months later. I had befriended a former crack dealer who turned out to be the hardest-working marine I knew.

When I joined the Marine Corps, I did so in part because I wasn't ready for adulthood. I didn't know how to balance a checkbook, much less how to complete the financial aid forms for college. Now I knew exactly what I wanted out of my life and how to get there. And in three weeks, I'd start classes at Ohio State.

Chapter 11

house that would soon be my Columbus home; the beautiful weather. I met with a guidance counselor who talked me through my first college schedule, which put me in class only four days per week, never before nine thirty in the morning. After the Marine Corps and its five thirty A.M. wake-ups, I couldn't believe my good fortune.

Ohio State's main campus in Columbus is about a hundred miles away from Middletown, meaning it was close enough for weekend visits to my family. For the first time in a few years, I could drop in on Middletown whenever I felt like it. And while Havelock (the North Carolina city closest to my Marine Corps base) was not too different from Middletown, Columbus felt like an urban paradise. It was (and remains) one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, powered in large part by the bustling university that was now my home. OSU grads were starting businesses, historic buildings were being converted into new restaurants and bars, and even the worst neighborhoods seemed to be undergoing significant revitalization. Not long after I moved to Columbus, one of my best friends began working as the promotions director for a local radio station, so I always knew what was happening around town and always had an in to the city's best events, from local festivals to VIP seating for the annual fireworks show.

In many ways, college was very familiar. I made a lot of new friends, but virtually all of them were from southwest Ohio. My six roommates included five graduates of Middletown High School and one graduate of Edgewood High School in nearby Trenton. They were a little younger (the Marine Corps had aged me past the age of the typical freshman), but I knew most of them from back home. My closest friends had already graduated or were about to, but many stayed in Columbus after graduation. Though I didn't know it, I was witnessing a phenomenon that social scientists call "brain drain"—people who are able to leave struggling cities often do, and when they find a new home with educational and work opportunities, they stay there. Years later, I looked at my wedding party of six groomsmen and realized that every single one of them had, like me, grown up in a small Ohio town before leaving for Ohio State. To a man, all of them had found careers outside of their hometowns, and none of them had any interest in ever going back.

By the time I started at Ohio State, the Marine Corps had instilled in me an incredible sense of invincibility. I'd go to classes, do my homework, study at the library, and make it home in time to drink well past midnight with my buddies, then wake up early to go running. My schedule was intense, but everything that had made me fear the independent college life

financial information of Bob Hamel (my legal father), I'd be guilty of fraud. The whole experience had made both of us painfully aware of how unfamiliar we were with the outside world. I had nearly failed out of high school, earning Ds and Fs in English I. Now I paid my own bills and earned As in every class I took at my state's flagship university. I felt completely in control of my destiny in a way that I never had before.

I knew that Ohio State was put-up-or-shut-up time. I had left the Marine Corps not just with a sense that I could do what I wanted but also with the capacity to plan. I wanted to go to law school, and I knew that to go to the best law school, I'd need good grades and to ace the infamous Law School Admissions Test, or LSAT. There was much I didn't know, of course. I couldn't really explain why I wanted to go to law school besides the fact that in Middletown the "rich kids" were born to either doctors or lawyers, and I didn't want to work with blood. I didn't know how much else was out there, but the little knowledge I had at least gave me direction, and that was all I needed.

I loathed debt and the sense of limitation it imposed. Though the GI Bill paid for a significant chunk of my education, and Ohio State charged relatively little to an in-state resident, I still needed to cover about twenty thousand dollars of expenses on my own. I took a job at the Ohio Statehouse, working for a remarkably kind senator from the Cincinnati area named Bob Schuler. He was a good man, and I liked his politics, so when constituents called and complained, I tried to explain his positions. I watched lobbyists come and go and overheard the senator and his staff debate whether a particular bill was good for his constituents, good for his state, or good for both. Observing the political process from the inside made me appreciate it in a way that watching cable news never had. Mamaw had thought all politicians were crooks, but I learned that, no matter their politics, that was largely untrue at the Ohio Statehouse.

After a few months at the Ohio Senate, as my bills piled up and I found fewer and fewer ways to make up the difference between my spending and my income (one can donate plasma only twice per week, I learned), I decided to get another job. One nonprofit advertised a part-time job that paid ten dollars an hour, but when I showed up for the interview in khakis, an ugly lime-green shirt, and Marine Corps combat boots (my only non-sneakers at the time) and saw the interviewer's reaction, I knew that I was out of luck. I barely noticed the rejection email a week later. A local nonprofit did work for abused and neglected children, and they also paid ten dollars an hour, so I went to Target, bought

With two jobs and a full-time class load, my schedule intensified, but I didn't mind. I didn't realize there was anything unusual about my commitments until a professor emailed me about meeting after class to discuss a writing assignment. When I sent him my schedule, he was aghast. He sternly told me that I should focus on my education and not let work distractions stand in my way. I smiled, shook his hand, and said thanks, but I did not heed his advice. I liked staying up late to work on assignments, waking up early after only three or four hours of sleep, and patting myself on the back for being able to do it. After so many years of fearing my own future, of worrying that I'd end up like many of my neighbors or family—addicted to drugs or alcohol, in prison, or with kids I couldn't or wouldn't take care of—I felt an incredible momentum. I knew the statistics. I had read the brochures in the social worker's office when I was a kid. I had recognized the look of pity from the hygienist at the low-income dental clinic. I wasn't supposed to make it, but I was doing just fine on my own.

Did I take it too far? Absolutely. I didn't sleep enough. I drank too much and ate Taco Bell at nearly every meal. A week into what I thought was just a really awful cold, a doctor told me that I had mono. I ignored him and kept on living as though NyQuil and DayQuil were magical elixirs. After a week of this, my urine turned a disgusting brown shade, and my temperature registered 103. I realized I might need to take care of myself, so I downed some Tylenol, drank a couple of beers, and went to sleep.

When Mom found out what was happening, she drove to Columbus and took me to the emergency room. She wasn't perfect, she wasn't even a practicing nurse, but she took it as a point of pride to supervise every interaction we had with the health care system. She asked the right questions, got annoyed with doctors when they didn't answer directly, and made sure I had what I needed. I spent two full days in the hospital as doctors emptied five bags of saline to rehydrate me and discovered that I had contracted a staph infection in addition to the mono, which explained why I grew so sick. The doctors released me to Mom, who wheeled me out of the hospital and took me home to recover.

My illness lasted another few weeks, which, happily, coincided with the break between Ohio State's spring and summer terms. When I was in Middletown, I split time between Aunt Wee's and Mom's; both of them cared for me and treated me like a son. It was my first real introduction to the competing emotional demands of Middletown in a post-Mamaw world: I didn't want to hurt Mom's feelings, but the past had created rifts that

sleep in her house meant talking to husband number five, a kind man but a stranger who would never be anything to me but the future ex–Mr. Mom. It meant looking at her furniture and remembering the time I hid behind it during one of her fights with Bob. It meant trying to understand how Mom could be such a contradiction—a woman who sat patiently with me at the hospital for days and an addict who would lie to her family to extract money from them a month later.

I knew that my increasingly close relationship with Aunt Wee hurt Mom's feelings. She talked about it all the time. "I'm your mother, not her," she'd repeat. To this day, I often wonder whether, if I'd had the courage as an adult that I'd had as a child, Mom might have gotten better. Addicts are at their weakest during emotionally trying times, and I knew that I had the power to save her from at least some bouts of sadness. But I couldn't do it any longer. I didn't know what had changed, but I wasn't that person anymore. Perhaps it was nothing more than self-preservation. Regardless, I couldn't pretend to feel at home with her.

After a few weeks of mono, I felt well enough to return to Columbus and my classes. I'd lost a lot of weight—twenty pounds over four weeks—but otherwise felt pretty good. With the hospital bills piling up, I got a third job (as an SAT tutor at the Princeton Review), which paid an incredible eighteen dollars an hour. Three jobs were too much, so I dropped the job I loved the most—my work at the Ohio senate—because it paid the least. I needed money and the financial freedom it provided, not rewarding work. That, I told myself, would come later.

Shortly before I left, the Ohio senate debated a measure that would significantly curb payday-lending practices. My senator opposed the bill (one of the few senators to do so), and though he never explained why, I liked to think that maybe he and I had something in common. The senators and policy staff debating the bill had little appreciation for the role of payday lenders in the shadow economy that people like me occupied. To them, payday lenders were predatory sharks, charging high interest rates on loans and exorbitant fees for cashed checks. The sooner they were snuffed out, the better.

To me, payday lenders could solve important financial problems. My credit was awful, thanks to a host of terrible financial decisions (some of which weren't my fault, many of which were), so credit cards weren't a possibility. If I wanted to take a girl out to dinner or needed a book for school and didn't have money in the bank, I didn't have many

cover the check, but I'd get paid that day and would be able to deposit the money after work. However, after a long day at the senate, I forgot to grab my paycheck before I left. By the time I realized the mistake, I was already home, and the Statehouse staff had left for the weekend. On that day, a three-day payday loan, with a few dollars of interest, enabled me to avoid a significant overdraft fee. The legislators debating the merits of payday lending didn't mention situations like that. The lesson? Powerful people sometimes do things to help people like me without really understanding people like me.

My second year of college started pretty much as my first year had, with a beautiful day and a lot of excitement. With the new job, I was a bit busier, but I didn't mind the work. What I did mind was the gnawing feeling that, at twenty-four, I was a little too old to be a second-year college student. But with four years in the Marine Corps behind me, more separated me from the other students than age. During an undergraduate seminar in foreign policy, I listened as a nineteen-year-old classmate with a hideous beard spouted off about the Iraq war. He explained that those fighting the war were typically less intelligent than those (like him) who immediately went to college. It showed, he argued, in the wanton way soldiers butchered and disrespected Iraqi civilians. It was an objectively terrible opinion—my friends from the Marine Corps spanned the political spectrum and held nearly every conceivable opinion about the war. Many of my Marine Corps friends were staunch liberals who had no love for our commander in chief—then George W. Bush—and felt that we had sacrificed too much for too little gain. But none of them had ever uttered such unreflective tripe.

As the student prattled on, I thought about the never-ending training on how to respect Iraqi culture—never show anyone the bottom of your foot, never address a woman in traditional Muslim garb without first speaking to a male relative. I thought about the security we provided for Iraqi poll workers, and how we studiously explained the importance of their mission without ever pushing our own political views on them. I thought about listening to a young Iraqi (who couldn't speak a word of English) flawlessly rap every single word of 50 Cent's "In Da Club" and laughing along with him and his friends. I thought about my friends who were covered in third-degree burns, "lucky" to have survived an IED attack in the Al-Qaim region of Iraq. And here was this dipshit in a spotty beard telling our class that we murdered people for sport.

I felt an immediate drive to finish college as quickly as possible. I met with a guidance

calendar and counted the number of days since I'd slept more than four hours in a day. The tally was thirty-nine. But I continued, and in August 2009, after one year and eleven months at Ohio State, I graduated with a double major, summa cum laude. I tried to skip my graduation ceremony, but my family wouldn't let me. So I sat in an uncomfortable chair for three hours before I walked across the podium and received my college diploma. When Gordon Gee, then president of the Ohio State University, paused for an unusually long photograph with the girl who stood in front of me in line, I extended my hand to his assistant, nonverbally asking for the diploma. She handed it to me, and I stepped behind Dr. Gee and down off the podium. I may have been the only graduating student that day to not shake his hand. On to the next one, I thought.

I knew I'd go to law school later the next year (my August graduation precluded a 2009 start to law school), so I moved home to save money. Aunt Wee had taken Mamaw's place as the family matriarch: She put out the fires, hosted family gatherings, and kept us all from breaking apart. She had always provided me with a home base after Mamaw's death, but ten months seemed like an imposition; I didn't like the idea of disrupting her family's routine. But she insisted, "J.D., this is your home now. It's the only place for you to stay."

Those last months living in Middletown were among the happiest of my life. I was finally a college graduate, and I knew that I'd soon accomplish another dream—going to law school. I worked odd jobs to save money and grew closer to my aunt's two daughters. Every day I'd get home from work, dusty and sweaty from manual labor, and sit at the dinner table to hear my teenage cousins talk about their days at school and trials with friends. Sometimes I'd help with homework. On Fridays during Lent, I helped with the fish fries at the local Catholic church. That feeling I had in college—that I had survived decades of chaos and heartbreak and finally come out on the other side—deepened.

The incredible optimism I felt about my own life contrasted starkly with the pessimism of so many of my neighbors. Years of decline in the blue-collar economy manifested themselves in the material prospects of Middletown's residents. The Great Recession, and the not-great recovery that followed, had hastened Middletown's downward trajectory. But there was something almost spiritual about the cynicism of the community at large, something that went much deeper than a short-term recession.

As a culture, we had no heroes. Certainly not any politician—Barack Obama was then the

American moral decay, and Ronald Reagan was long dead. We loved the military but had no George S. Patton figure in the modern army. I doubt my neighbors could even name a high-ranking military officer. The space program, long a source of pride, had gone the way of the dodo, and with it the celebrity astronauts. Nothing united us with the core fabric of American society. We felt trapped in two seemingly unwinnable wars, in which a disproportionate share of the fighters came from our neighborhood, and in an economy that failed to deliver the most basic promise of the American Dream—a steady wage.

To understand the significance of this cultural detachment, you must appreciate that much of my family's, my neighborhood's, and my community's identity derives from our love of country. I couldn't tell you a single thing about Breathitt County's mayor, its health care services, or its famous residents. But I do know this: "Bloody Breathitt" allegedly earned its name because the county filled its World War I draft quota entirely with volunteers—the only county in the entire United States to do so. Nearly a century later, and that's the factoid about Breathitt that I remember best: It's the truth that everyone around me ensured I knew. I once interviewed Mamaw for a class project about World War II. After seventy years filled with marriage, children, grandchildren, death, poverty, and triumph, the thing about which Mamaw was unquestionably the proudest and most excited was that she and her family did their part during World War II. We spoke for minutes about everything else; we spoke for hours about war rations, Rosie the Riveter, her dad's wartime love letters to her mother from the Pacific, and the day "we dropped the bomb." Mamaw always had two gods: Jesus Christ and the United States of America. I was no different, and neither was anyone else I knew.

I'm the kind of patriot whom people on the Acela corridor laugh at. I choke up when I hear Lee Greenwood's cheesy anthem "Proud to Be an American." When I was sixteen, I vowed that every time I met a veteran, I would go out of my way to shake his or her hand, even if I had to awkwardly interject to do so. To this day, I refuse to watch Saving Private Ryan around anyone but my closest friends, because I can't stop from crying during the final scene.

Mamaw and Papaw taught me that we live in the best and greatest country on earth. This fact gave meaning to my childhood. Whenever times were tough—when I felt overwhelmed by the drama and the tumult of my youth—I knew that better days were ahead because I lived in a country that allowed me to make the good choices that others

friends and exciting new experiences—I feel overwhelming appreciation for these United States. I know it' s corny, but it' s the way I feel.

If Mamaw' s second God was the United States of America, then many people in my community were losing something akin to a religion. The tie that bound them to their neighbors, that inspired them in the way my patriotism had always inspired me, had seemingly vanished.

The symptoms are all around us. Significant percentages of white conservative voters—about one-third—believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim. In one poll, 32 percent of conservatives said that they believed Obama was foreign-born and another 19 percent said they were unsure—which means that a majority of white conservatives aren' t certain that Obama is even an American. I regularly hear from acquaintances or distant family members that Obama has ties to Islamic extremists, or is a traitor, or was born in some far-flung corner of the world.

Many of my new friends blame racism for this perception of the president. But the president feels like an alien to many Middletonians for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color. Recall that not a single one of my high school classmates attended an Ivy League school. Barack Obama attended two of them and excelled at both. He is brilliant, wealthy, and speaks like a constitutional law professor—which, of course, he is. Nothing about him bears any resemblance to the people I admired growing up: His accent—clean, perfect, neutral—is foreign; his credentials are so impressive that they' re frightening; he made his life in Chicago, a dense metropolis; and he conducts himself with a confidence that comes from knowing that the modern American meritocracy was built for him. Of course, Obama overcame adversity in his own right—adversity familiar to many of us—but that was long before any of us knew him.

President Obama came on the scene right as so many people in my community began to believe that the modern American meritocracy was not built for them . We know we' re not doing well. We see it every day: in the obituaries for teenage kids that conspicuously omit the cause of death (reading between the lines: overdose), in the deadbeats we watch our daughters waste their time with. Barack Obama strikes at the heart of our deepest insecurities. He is a good father while many of us aren' t. He wears suits to his job while we wear overalls, if we' re lucky enough to have a job at all. His wife tells us that we shouldn' t be feeding our children certain foods, and we hate her for it—not because we

manner of idiocy, from Obama's alleged religious leanings to his ancestry. But every major news organization, even the oft-maligned Fox News, has always told the truth about Obama's citizenship status and religious views. The people I know are well aware of what the major news organizations have to say about the issue; they simply don't believe them. Only 6 percent of American voters believe that the media is "very trustworthy." 21 To many of us, the free press—that bulwark of American democracy—is simply full of shit.

With little trust in the press, there's no check on the Internet conspiracy theories that rule the digital world. Barack Obama is a foreign alien actively trying to destroy our country. Everything the media tells us is a lie. Many in the white working class believe the worst about their society. Here's a small sample of emails or messages I've seen from friends or family:

- From right-wing radio talker Alex Jones on the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, a documentary about the "unanswered question" of the terrorist attacks, suggesting that the U.S. government played a role in the massacre of its own people.
- From an email chain, a story that the Obamacare legislation requires microchip implantation in new health care patients. This story carries extra bite because of the religious implications: Many believe that the End Times "mark of the beast" foretold in biblical prophecy will be an electronic device. Multiple friends warned others about this threat via social media.
- From the popular website WorldNetDaily, an editorial suggesting that the Newtown gun massacre was engineered by the federal government to turn public opinion on gun control measures.
- From multiple Internet sources, suggestions that Obama will soon implement martial law in order to secure power for a third presidential term.

The list goes on. It's impossible to know how many people believe one or many of these stories. But if a third of our community questions the president's origin—despite all evidence to the contrary—it's a good bet that the other conspiracies have broader currency than we'd like. This isn't some libertarian mistrust of government policy, which is healthy in any democracy. This is deep skepticism of the very institutions of our society. And it's becoming more and more mainstream.

We can't trust the evening news. We can't trust our politicians. Our universities, the gateway to a better life, are rigged against us. We can't get jobs. You can't believe these

similarly situated individuals. It's obvious why: If you believe that hard work pays off, then you work hard; if you think it's hard to get ahead even when you try, then why try at all?

Similarly, when people do fail, this mind-set allows them to look outward. I once ran into an old acquaintance at a Middletown bar who told me that he had recently quit his job because he was sick of waking up early. I later saw him complaining on Facebook about the "Obama economy" and how it had affected his life. I don't doubt that the Obama economy has affected many, but this man is assuredly not among them. His status in life is directly attributable to the choices he's made, and his life will improve only through better decisions. But for him to make better choices, he needs to live in an environment that forces him to ask tough questions about himself. There is a cultural movement in the white working class to blame problems on society or the government, and that movement gains adherents by the day.

Here is where the rhetoric of modern conservatives (and I say this as one of them) fails to meet the real challenges of their biggest constituents. Instead of encouraging engagement, conservatives increasingly foment the kind of detachment that has sapped the ambition of so many of my peers. I have watched some friends blossom into successful adults and others fall victim to the worst of Middletown's temptations—premature parenthood, drugs, incarceration. What separates the successful from the unsuccessful are the expectations that they had for their own lives. Yet the message of the right is increasingly: It's not your fault that you're a loser; it's the government's fault.

My dad, for example, has never disparaged hard work, but he mistrusts some of the most obvious paths to upward mobility. When he found out that I had decided to go to Yale Law, he asked whether, on my applications, I had "pretended to be black or liberal." This is how low the cultural expectations of working-class white Americans have fallen. We should hardly be surprised that as attitudes like this one spread, the number of people willing to work for a better life diminishes.

The Pew Economic Mobility Project studied how Americans evaluated their chances at economic betterment, and what they found was shocking. There is no group of Americans more pessimistic than working-class whites. Well over half of blacks, Latinos, and college-educated whites expect that their children will fare better economically than they have. Among working-class whites, only 44 percent share that expectation. Even more surprising, 42 percent of working-class whites—by far the highest number in the survey—report that

And what turned me into an alien was my optimism.

Chapter 12

During my first round of law school applications, I didn't even apply to Yale, Harvard, or Stanford—the mythical "top three" schools. I didn't think I had a chance at those places. More important, I didn't think it mattered; all lawyers get good jobs, I assumed. I just needed to get to any law school, and then I'd do fine: a nice salary, a respectable profession, and the American Dream. Then my best friend, Darrell, ran into one of his law school classmates at a popular D.C. restaurant. She was bussing tables, simply because that was the only job available to her. On the next round, I gave Yale and Harvard a try.

I didn't apply to Stanford—one of the very best schools in the country—and to know why is to understand that the lessons I learned as a kid were sometimes counterproductive. Stanford's law school application wasn't the standard combination of college transcript, LSAT score, and essays. It required a personal sign-off from the dean of your college: You had to submit a form, completed by the dean, attesting that you weren't a loser.

I didn't know the dean of my college at Ohio State. It's a big place. I'm sure she is a lovely person, and the form was clearly little more than a formality. But I just couldn't ask. I had never met this person, never taken a class with her, and, most of all, didn't trust her. Whatever virtues she possessed as a person, she was, in the abstract, an outsider. The professors I'd selected to write my letters had gained my trust. I listened to them nearly every day, took their tests, and wrote papers for them. As much as I loved Ohio State and its people for an incredible education and experience, I could not put my fate in the hands of someone I didn't know. I tried to talk myself into it. I even printed the form and drove it to campus. But when the time came, I crumpled it up and tossed it in the garbage. There would be no Stanford Law for J.D.

I decided that I wanted to go to Yale more than any other school. It had a certain aura—with its small class sizes and unique grading system, Yale billed itself as a low-stress way to jump-start a legal career. But most of its students came from elite private colleges, not large state schools like mine, so I imagined that I had no chance of admission. Nonetheless, I submitted an application online, because that was relatively easy. It was late afternoon on an early spring day, 2010, when my phone rang and the caller ID revealed an unfamiliar 203 area code. I answered, and the voice on the other line told me that he was the director of admissions at Yale Law, and that I'd been admitted to the class of 2013. I

I was sufficiently committed to going to Yale Law that I was willing to accept the two hundred thousand dollars or so in debt that I knew I'd accrue. Yet the financial aid package Yale offered exceeded my wildest dreams. In my first year, it was nearly a full ride. That wasn't because of anything I'd done or earned—it was because I was one of the poorest kids in school. Yale offered tens of thousands in need-based aid. It was the first time being so broke paid so well. Yale wasn't just my dream school, it was also the cheapest option on the table.

The New York Times recently reported that the most expensive schools are paradoxically cheaper for low-income students. Take, for example, a student whose parents earn thirty thousand per year—not a lot of money but not poverty level, either. That student would pay ten thousand for one of the less selective branch campuses of the University of Wisconsin but would pay six thousand at the school's flagship Madison campus. At Harvard, the student would pay only about thirteen hundred despite tuition of over forty thousand. Of course, kids like me don't know this. My buddy Nate, a lifelong friend and one of the smartest people I know, wanted to go to the University of Chicago as an undergraduate, but he didn't apply because he knew he couldn't afford it. It likely would have cost him considerably less than Ohio State, just as Yale cost considerably less for me than any other school.

I spent the next few months getting ready to leave. My aunt and uncle's friend got me that job at a local floor tile distribution warehouse, and I worked there during the summer—driving a forklift, getting tile shipments ready for transport, and sweeping a giant warehouse. By the end of the summer, I'd saved enough not to worry about the move to New Haven.

The day I moved felt different from every other time I'd moved away from Middletown. I knew when I left for the Marines that I'd return often and that life might bring me back to my hometown for an extended period (indeed it did). After four years in the Marines, the move to Columbus for college hadn't seemed all that significant. I'd become an expert at leaving Middletown for other places, and each time I felt at least a little forlorn. But I knew this time that I was never really coming back. That didn't bother me. Middletown no longer felt like home.

On my first day at Yale Law School, there were posters in the hallways announcing an event with Tony Blair, the former British prime minister. I couldn't believe it: Tony Blair was

turned a corner to walk into the law school's main entrance. I said, "Excuse me," looked up, and realized the man was New York governor George Pataki. These sorts of things happened at least once a week. Yale Law School was like nerd Hollywood, and I never stopped feeling like an awestruck tourist.

The first semester was structured in a way to make life easy on students. While my friends in other law schools were overwhelmed with work and worrying about strict grading curves that effectively placed you in direct competition with your classmates, our dean asked us during orientation to follow our passions, wherever they might lead, and not worry so much about grades. Our first four classes were graded on a credit/no credit basis, which made that easy. One of those classes, a constitutional law seminar of sixteen students, became a kind of family for me. We called ourselves the island of misfit toys, as there was no real unifying force to our team—a conservative hillbilly from Appalachia, the supersmart daughter of Indian immigrants, a black Canadian with decades' worth of street smarts, a neuroscientist from Phoenix, an aspiring civil rights attorney born a few minutes from Yale's campus, and an extremely progressive lesbian with a fantastic sense of humor, among others—but we became excellent friends.

That first year at Yale was overwhelming, but in a good way. I'd always been an American history buff, and some of the buildings on campus predated the Revolutionary War. Sometimes I'd walk around campus searching for the placards that identified the ages of buildings. The buildings themselves were breathtakingly beautiful—towering masterpieces of neo-Gothic architecture. Inside, intricate stone carvings and wood trim gave the law school an almost medieval feel. You'd even sometimes hear that we went to HLS (Hogwarts Law School). It's telling that the best way to describe the law school was a reference to a series of fantasy novels.

Classes were hard, and sometimes required long nights in the library, but they weren't that hard. A part of me had thought I'd finally be revealed as an intellectual fraud, that the administration would realize they'd made a terrible mistake and send me back to Middletown with their sincerest apologies. Another part of me thought I'd be able to hack it but only with extraordinary dedication; after all, these were the brightest students in the world, and I did not qualify as such. But that didn't end up being the case. Though there were rare geniuses walking the halls of the law school, most of my fellow students were smart but not intimidatingly so. In classroom discussions and on tests, I largely held

extraordinarily critical commentary. "Not good at all," he scribbled on one page. On another, he circled a large paragraph and wrote in the margin, "This is a vomit of sentences masquerading as a paragraph. Fix." I heard through the grapevine that this professor thought Yale should accept only students from places like Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton: "It's not our job to do remedial education, and too many of these other kids need it." That committed me to changing his mind. By the end of the semester, he called my writing "excellent" and admitted that he might have been wrong about state schools. As the first year drew to a close, I felt triumphant—my professors and I got along well, I had earned solid grades, and I had a dream job for the summer—working for the chief counsel for a sitting U.S. senator.

Yet, for all of the joy and intrigue, Yale planted a seed of doubt in my mind about whether I belonged. This place was so beyond the pale for what I expected of myself. I knew zero Ivy League graduates back home; I was the first person in my nuclear family to go to college and the first person in my extended family to attend a professional school. When I arrived in August 2010, Yale had educated two of the three most recent Supreme Court justices and two of the six most recent presidents, not to mention the sitting secretary of state (Hillary Clinton). There was something bizarre about Yale's social rituals: the cocktail receptions and banquets that served as both professional networking and personal matchmaking events. I lived among newly christened members of what folks back home pejoratively call the "elites," and by every outward appearance, I was one of them: I am a tall, white, straight male. I have never felt out of place in my entire life. But I did at Yale.

Part of it has to do with social class. A student survey found that over 95 percent of Yale Law's students qualified as upper-middle-class or higher, and most of them qualified as outright wealthy. Obviously, I was neither upper-middle-class nor wealthy. Very few people at Yale Law School are like me. They may look like me, but for all of the Ivy League's obsession with diversity, virtually everyone—black, white, Jewish, Muslim, whatever—comes from intact families who never worry about money. Early during my first year, after a late night of drinking with my classmates, we all decided to stop at a New Haven chicken joint. Our large group left an awful mess: dirty plates, chicken bones, ranch dressing and soda splattered on the tables, and so on. I couldn't imagine leaving it all for some poor guy to clean up, so I stayed behind. Of a dozen classmates, only one person helped me: my buddy Jamil, who also came from a poorer background. Afterward, I told Jamil that we

Even though my experiences were unique, I never felt like a foreigner in Middletown. Most people's parents had never gone to college. My closest friends had all seen some kind of domestic strife in their life—divorces, remarriages, legal separations, or fathers who spent some time in jail. A few parents worked as lawyers, engineers, or teachers. They were "rich people" to Mamaw, but they were never so rich that I thought of them as fundamentally different. They still lived within walking distance of my house, sent their kids to the same high school, and generally did the same things the rest of us did. It never occurred to me that I didn't belong, even in the homes of some of my relatively wealthy friends.

At Yale Law School, I felt like my spaceship had crashed in Oz. People would say with a straight face that a surgeon mother and engineer father were middle-class. In Middletown, $160,000 is an unfathomable salary; at Yale Law School, students expect to earn that amount in the first year after law school. Many of them are already worried that it won't be enough.

It wasn't just about the money or my relative lack of it. It was about people's perceptions. Yale made me feel, for the first time in my life, that others viewed my life with intrigue. Professors and classmates seemed genuinely interested in what seemed to me a superficially boring story: I went to a mediocre public high school, my parents didn't go to college, and I grew up in Ohio. The same was true of nearly everyone I knew. At Yale, these things were true of no one. Even my service in the Marine Corps was pretty common in Ohio, but at Yale, many of my friends had never spent time with a veteran of America's newest wars. In other words, I was an anomaly.

That's not exactly a bad thing. For much of that first year in law school, I reveled in the fact that I was the only big marine with a Southern twang at my elite law school. But as law school acquaintances became close friends, I became less comfortable with the lies I told about my own past. "My mom is a nurse," I told them. But of course that wasn't true anymore. I didn't really know what my legal father—the one whose name was on my birth certificate—did for a living; he was a total stranger. No one, except my best friends from Middletown whom I asked to read my law school admissions essay, knew about the formative experiences that shaped my life. At Yale, I decided to change that.

I'm not sure what motivated this change. Part of it is that I stopped being ashamed: My parents' mistakes were not my fault, so I had no reason to hide them. But I was concerned most of all that no one understood my grandparents' outsize role in my life.

Yet there's something else. As I realized how different I was from my classmates at Yale, I grew to appreciate how similar I was to the people back home. Most important, I became acutely aware of the inner conflict born of my recent success. On one of my first visits home after classes began, I stopped at a gas station not far from Aunt Wee's house. The woman at the nearest pump began a conversation, and I noticed that she wore a Yale T-shirt. "Did you go to Yale?" I asked. "No," she replied, "but my nephew does. Do you?" I wasn't sure what to say. It was stupid—her nephew went to school there, for Christ's sake—but I was still uncomfortable admitting that I'd become an Ivy Leaguer. The moment she told me her nephew went to Yale, I had to choose: Was I a Yale Law student, or was I a Middletown kid with hillbilly grandparents? If the former, I could exchange pleasantries and talk about New Haven's beauty; if the latter, she occupied the other side of an invisible divide and could not to be trusted. At her cocktail parties and fancy dinners, she and her nephew probably even laughed about the unsophisticates of Ohio and how they clung to their guns and religion. I would not join forces with her. My answer was a pathetic attempt at cultural defiance: "No, I don't go to Yale. But my girlfriend does." And then I got in my car and drove away.

This wasn't one of my prouder moments, but it highlights the inner conflict inspired by rapid upward mobility: I had lied to a stranger to avoid feeling like a traitor. There are lessons to draw here, among them what I've noted already: that one consequence of isolation is seeing standard metrics of success as not just unattainable but as the property of people not like us. Mamaw always fought that attitude in me, and for the most part, she was successful.

Another lesson is that it's not just our own communities that reinforce the outsider attitude, it's the places and people that upward mobility connects us with—like my professor who suggested that Yale Law School shouldn't accept applicants from non-prestigious state schools. There's no way to quantify how these attitudes affect the working class. We do know that working-class Americans aren't just less likely to climb the economic ladder, they're also more likely to fall off even after they've reached the top. I imagine that the discomfort they feel at leaving behind much of their identity plays at least a small role in this problem. One way our upper class can promote upward mobility, then, is not only by pushing wise public policies but by opening their hearts and minds to the newcomers who don't quite belong.

the past few years, I've vacationed in Panama and England. I've bought my groceries at Whole Foods. I've watched orchestral concerts. I've tried to break my addiction to "refined processed sugars" (a term that includes at least one too many words). I've worried about racial prejudice in my own family and friends.

None of these things is bad on its own. In fact, most of them are good—visiting England was a childhood dream; eating less sugar improves health. At the same time, they've shown me that social mobility isn't just about money and economics, it's about a lifestyle change. The wealthy and the powerful aren't just wealthy and powerful; they follow a different set of norms and mores. When you go from working-class to professional-class, almost everything about your old life becomes unfashionable at best or unhealthy at worst. At no time was this more obvious than the first (and last) time I took a Yale friend to Cracker Barrel. In my youth, it was the height of fine dining—my grandma's and my favorite restaurant. With Yale friends, it was a greasy public health crisis.

These aren't exactly major problems, and if given the option all over again, I'd trade a bit of social discomfort for the life I lead in a heartbeat. But as I realized that in this new world I was the cultural alien, I began to think seriously about questions that had nagged at me since I was a teenager: Why has no one else from my high school made it to the Ivy League? Why are people like me so poorly represented in America's elite institutions? Why is domestic strife so common in families like mine? Why did I think that places like Yale and Harvard were so unreachable? Why did successful people feel so different ?

Chapter 13

As I began to think a bit more deeply about my own identity, I fell hard for a classmate of mine named Usha. As luck would have it, we were assigned as partners for our first major writing assignment, so we spent a lot of time during that first year getting to know each other. She seemed some sort of genetic anomaly, a combination of every positive quality a human being should have: bright, hardworking, tall, and beautiful. I joked with a buddy that if she had possessed a terrible personality, she would have made an excellent heroine in an Ayn Rand novel, but she had a great sense of humor and an extraordinarily direct way of speaking. Where others might have asked meekly, "Yeah, maybe you could rephrase this?" or "Have you thought about this other idea?" Usha would say simply: "I think this sentence needs work" or "This is a pretty terrible argument." At a bar, she looked up at a mutual friend of ours and said, without a hint of irony, "You have a very small

"heartsick" and another told me he had never seen me like this. Toward the end of our first year, I learned that Usha was single, and I immediately asked her out. After a few weeks of flirtations and a single date, I told her that I was in love with her. It violated every rule of modern dating I'd learned as a young man, but I didn't care.

Usha was like my Yale spirit guide. She'd attended the university for college, too, and knew all of the best coffee shops and places to eat. Her knowledge went much deeper, however: She instinctively understood the questions I didn't even know to ask, and she always encouraged me to seek opportunities that I didn't know existed. "Go to office hours," she'd tell me. "Professors here like to engage with students. It's part of the experience here." In a place that always seemed a little foreign, Usha's presence made me feel at home.

I went to Yale to earn a law degree. But that first year at Yale taught me most of all that I didn't know how the world worked. Every August, recruiters from prestigious law firms descend on New Haven, hungry for the next generation of high-quality legal talent. The students call it FIP—short for Fall Interview Program—and it's a marathon week of dinners, cocktail hours, hospitality suite visits, and interviews. On my first day of FIP, just before second-year classes began, I had six interviews, including one with the firm I most coveted—Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, LLP (Gibson Dunn for short)—which had an elite practice in Washington, D.C.

The interview with Gibson Dunn went well and I was invited to their infamous dinner at one of New Haven's fanciest restaurants. The rumor mill informed me that the dinner was a kind of intermediate interview: We needed to be funny, charming, and engaging, or we'd never be invited to the D.C. or New York offices for final interviews. When I arrived at the restaurant, I thought it a pity that the most expensive meal I'd ever eaten would take place in such a high-stakes environment.

Before dinner, we were all corralled into a private banquet room for wine and conversation. Women a decade older than I was carried around wine bottles wrapped in beautiful linens, asking every few minutes whether I wanted a new glass of wine or a refill on the old one. At first I was too nervous to drink. But I finally mustered the courage to answer yes when someone asked whether I'd like some wine and, if so, what kind. "I'll take white," I said, which I thought would settle the matter. "Would you like sauvignon blanc or chardonnay?"

didn’t know what sauvignon blanc was (though I didn’t) but because it was easier to pronounce. I had just dodged my first bullet. The night, however, was young.

At these types of events, you have to strike a balance between shy and overbearing. You don’t want to annoy the partners, but you don’t want them to leave without shaking your hand. I tried to be myself; I’ve always considered myself gregarious but not oppressive. But I was so impressed by the environment that “being myself” meant staring slack-jawed at the fineries of the restaurant and wondering how much they cost.

The wineglasses look like they’ve been Windexed. That dude did not buy his suit at the three-suits-for-one sale at Jos. A. Bank; it looks like it’s made from silk. The linens on the table look softer than my bedsheets; I need to touch them without being weird about it. Long story short, I needed a new plan. By the time we sat down for dinner, I’d resolved to focus on the task at hand—getting a job—and leave the class tourism for later.

My bearing lasted another two minutes. After we sat down, the waitress asked whether I’d like tap or sparkling water. I rolled my eyes at that one: As impressed as I was with the restaurant, calling the water “sparkling” was just too pretentious—like “sparkling” crystal or a “sparkling” diamond. But I ordered the sparkling water anyway. Probably better for me. Fewer contaminants.

I took one sip and literally spit it out. It was the grossest thing I’d ever tasted. I remember once getting a Diet Coke at a Subway without realizing that the fountain machine didn’t have enough Diet Coke syrup. That’s exactly what this fancy place’s “sparkling” water tasted like. “Something’s wrong with that water,” I protested. The waitress apologized and told me she’d get me another Pellegrino. That was when I realized that “sparkling” water meant “carbonated” water. I was mortified, but luckily only one other person noticed what had happened, and she was a classmate. I was in the clear. No more mistakes.

Immediately thereafter, I looked down at the place setting and observed an absurd number of instruments. Nine utensils? Why, I wondered, did I need three spoons? Why were there multiple butter knives? Then I recalled a scene from a movie and realized there was some social convention surrounding the placement and size of the cutlery. I excused myself to the restroom and called my spirit guide: “What do I do with all these damned forks? I don’t want to make a fool of myself.” Armed with Usha’s reply— “Go from outside to inside, and don’t use the same utensil for separate dishes; oh, and use the fat spoon for soup” —I returned to dinner, ready to dazzle my future employers.

school, firm culture, and even a little politics. The recruiters we ate with were very nice, and everyone at my table landed a job offer—even the guy who spit out his sparkling water.

It was at this meal, on the first of five grueling days of interviews, that I began to understand that I was seeing the inner workings of a system that lay hidden to most of my kind. Our career office had emphasized the importance of sounding natural and being someone the interviewers wouldn't mind sitting with on an airplane. It made perfect sense—after all, who wants to work with an asshole?—but it seemed an odd emphasis for what felt like the most important moment of a young career. Our interviews weren't so much about grades or résumés, we were told; thanks to a Yale Law pedigree, one foot was already in the door. The interviews were about passing a social test—a test of belonging, of holding your own in a corporate boardroom, of making connections with potential future clients.

The most difficult test was the one I wasn't even required to take: getting an audience in the first place. All week I marveled at the ease of access to the most esteemed lawyers in the country. All of my friends had at least a dozen interviews, and most led to job offers. I had sixteen when the week began, though by the end I was so spoiled (and exhausted) by the process that I turned down a couple of interviews. Two years earlier, I had applied to dozens of places in the hope of landing a well-paying job after college but was rebuffed every time. Now, after only a year at Yale Law, my classmates and I were being handed six-figure salaries by men who had argued before the United States Supreme Court.

It was pretty clear that there was some mysterious force at work, and I had just tapped into it for the first time. I had always thought that when you need a job, you look online for job postings. And then you submit a dozen résumés. And then you hope that someone calls you back. If you're lucky, maybe a friend puts your résumé at the top of the pile. If you're qualified for a very high-demand profession, like accounting, maybe the job search comes a bit easier. But the rules are basically the same.

The problem is, virtually everyone who plays by those rules fails. That week of interviews showed me that successful people are playing an entirely different game. They don't flood the job market with résumés, hoping that some employer will grace them with an interview. They network. They email a friend of a friend to make sure their name gets the look it deserves. They have their uncles call old college buddies. They have their school's career service office set up interviews months in advance on their behalf. They have

capital. It's a professor's term, but the concept is pretty simple: The networks of people and institutions around us have real economic value. They connect us to the right people, ensure that we have opportunities, and impart valuable information. Without them, we're going it alone.

I learned this the hard way during one of my final interviews of the marathon FIP week. At that point, the interviews were like a broken record. People asked about my interests, my favorite classes, my expected legal specialty. Then they asked if I had any questions. After a dozen tries, my answers were polished, and my questions made me sound like a seasoned consumer of law firm information. The truth was that I had no idea what I wanted to do and no idea what field of law I expected to practice in. I wasn't even sure what my questions about "firm culture" and "work-life balance" meant. The whole process was little more than a dog and pony show. But I didn't seem like an asshole, so I was coasting.

Then I hit a wall. The last interviewer asked me a question I was unprepared to answer: Why did I want to work for a law firm? It was a softball, but I'd gotten so used to talking about my budding interest in antitrust litigation (an interest that was at least a little fabricated) that I was laughably unprepared. I should have said something about learning from the best or working on high-stakes litigation. I should have said anything other than what came from my mouth: "I don't really know, but the pay isn't bad! Ha ha!" The interviewer looked at me like I had three eyes, and the conversation never recovered.

I was certain I was toast. I had flubbed the interview in the worst way. But behind the scenes, one of my recommenders was already working the phones. She told the hiring partner that I was a smart, good kid and would make an excellent lawyer. "She raved about you," I later heard. So when the recruiters called to schedule the next round of interviews, I made the cut. I eventually got the job, despite failing miserably at what I perceived was the most important part of the recruiting process. The old adage says that it's better to be lucky than good. Apparently having the right network is better than both.

At Yale, networking power is like the air we breathe—so pervasive that it's easy to miss. Toward the end of our first year, most of us were studying for The Yale Law Journal writing competition. The Journal publishes lengthy pieces of legal analysis, mostly for an academic audience. The articles read like radiator manuals—dry, formulaic, and partially written in another language. (A sampling: "Despite grading's great promise, we show that the regulatory design, implementation, and practice suffer from serious flaws: jurisdictions

Some kids came to the law school with a plan for admission to The Yale Law Journal . The writing competition kicked off in April. By March, some people were weeks into preparation. On the advice of recent graduates (who were also close friends), a good friend had begun studying before Christmas. The alumni of elite consulting firms gathered together to grill each other on editorial techniques. One second-year student helped his old Harvard roommate (a first-year student) design a study strategy for the final month before the test. At every turn, people were tapping into friendship circles and alumni groups to learn about the most important test of our first year.

I had no idea what was going on. There was no Ohio State alumni group—when I arrived, I was one of two Ohio State graduates at the entire law school. I suspected the Journal was important, because Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor had been a member. But I didn't know why. I didn't even know what the Journal did. The entire process was a black box, and no one I knew had the key.

There were official channels of information. But they telegraphed conflicting messages. Yale prides itself on being a low-stress, noncompetitive law school. Unfortunately, that ethos sometimes manifests itself in confused messaging. No one seemed to know what value the credential actually held. We were told that the Journal was a huge career boost but that it wasn't that important, that we shouldn't stress about it but that it was a prerequisite for certain types of jobs. This was undoubtedly true: For many career paths and interests, Journal membership was merely wasted time. But I didn't know which career paths that applied to. And I was unsure how to find out.

It was around this time that Amy Chua, one of my professors, stepped in and told me exactly how things worked: "Journal membership is useful if you want to work for a judge or if you want to be an academic. Otherwise, it's a waste. But if you're unsure what you want to do, go ahead and try out." It was million-dollar advice. Because I was unsure what I wanted, I followed it. Though I didn't make it during my first year, I made the cut during my second year and became an editor of the prestigious publication. Whether I made it isn't the point. What mattered was that, with a professor's help, I had closed the information gap. It was like I'd learned to see.

This wasn't the last time Amy helped me navigate unfamiliar terrain. Law school is a three-year obstacle course of life and career decisions. One the one hand, it's nice to have so many opportunities. On the other hand, I had no idea what to do with those

vague notion that I'd like to do public service after I repaid my law school debt. But I didn't have a job in mind.

Life didn't wait. Almost immediately after I committed to a law firm, people started talking about clerkship applications for after graduation. Judicial clerkships are one-year stints with federal judges. It's a fantastic learning experience for young lawyers: Clerks read court filings, research legal issues for a judge, and even help the judge draft opinions. Every former clerk raves about the experience, and private-sector employers often shell out tens of thousands in signing bonuses for recent clerks.

That's what I knew about clerkships, and it was completely true. It was also very superficial: The clerkship process is infinitely more complex. First you have to decide what kind of court you want to work for: a court that does a lot of trials or a court that hears appeals from lower courts. Then you have to decide which regions of the country to apply to. If you want to clerk for the Supreme Court, certain "feeder" judges give you a greater chance of doing so. Predictably, those judges hire more competitively, so holding out for a feeder judge carries certain risks—if you win the game, you're halfway to the chambers of the nation's highest court; if you lose, you're stuck without a clerkship. Sprinkled on top of these factors is the reality that you work closely with these judges. And no one wants to waste a year getting berated by an asshole in black robes.

There's no database that spits out this information, no central source that tells you which judges are nice, which judges send people to the Supreme Court, and which type of work—trial or appellate—you want to do. In fact, it's considered almost unseemly to talk about these things. How do you ask a professor if the judge he's recommending you to is a nice lady? It's trickier than it might seem.

So to get this information, you have to tap into your social network—student groups, friends who have clerked, and the few professors who are willing to give brutally honest advice. By this point in my law school experience, I had learned that the only way to take advantage of networking was to ask. So I did. Amy Chua told me that I shouldn't worry about clerking for a prestigious feeder judge because the credential wouldn't prove very useful, given my ambitions. But I pushed until she relented and agreed to recommend me to a high-powered federal judge with deep connections to multiple Supreme Court justices.

I submitted all the materials—a résumé, a polished writing sample, and a desperate letter

A few days after I submitted my materials, Amy called me into her office to let me know that I had made the short list. My heart fluttered. I knew that all I needed was an interview and I'd get the job. And I knew that if she pushed my application hard enough, I'd get the interview.

That was when I learned the value of real social capital. I don't mean to suggest that my professor picked up the phone and told the judge he had to give me an interview. Before she did that, my professor told me that she wanted to talk to me very seriously. She turned downright somber: "I don't think you're doing this for the right reasons. I think you're doing this for the credential, which is fine, but the credential doesn't actually serve your career goals. If you don't want to be a high-powered Supreme Court litigator, you shouldn't care that much about this job."

She then told me how hard a clerkship with this judge would be. He was demanding to the extreme. His clerks didn't take a single day off for an entire year. Then she got personal. She knew I had a new girlfriend and that I was crazy about her. "This clerkship is the type of thing that destroys relationships. If you want my advice, I think you should prioritize Usha and figure out a career move that actually suits you."

It was the best advice anyone has ever given me, and I took it. I told her to withdraw my application. It's impossible to say whether I would have gotten the job. I was probably being overconfident: My grades and résumé were fine but not fantastic. However, Amy's advice stopped me from making a life-altering decision. It prevented me from moving a thousand miles away from the person I eventually married. Most important, it allowed me to accept my place at this unfamiliar institution—it was okay to chart my own path and okay to put a girl above some shortsighted ambition. My professor gave me permission to be me.

It's hard to put a dollar value on that advice. It's the kind of thing that continues to pay dividends. But make no mistake: The advice had tangible economic value. Social capital isn't manifest only in someone connecting you to a friend or passing a résumé on to an old boss. It is also, or perhaps primarily, a measure of how much we learn through our friends, colleagues, and mentors. I didn't know how to prioritize my options, and I didn't know that there were other, better paths for me. I learned those things through my network—specifically, a very generous professor.

My education in social capital continues. For a time, I contributed to the website of David

interviewed me and, when I joined his firm, became an important mentor. I later ran into this man at a Yale conference, where he introduced me to his old buddy from the Bush White House (and my political hero), Indiana governor Mitch Daniels. Without David's advice, I never would have found myself at that firm, nor would I have spoken (albeit briefly) to the public figure I most admired.

I did decide that I wanted to clerk. But instead of walking into the process blindly, I came to know what I wanted out of the experience—to work for someone I respected, to learn as much as I could, and to be close to Usha. So Usha and I decided to go through the clerkship process together. We landed in northern Kentucky, not far from where I grew up. It was the best possible situation. We liked our judicial bosses so much that we asked them to officiate our wedding.

This is just one version of how the world of successful people actually works. But social capital is all around us. Those who tap into it and use it prosper. Those who don't are running life's race with a major handicap. This is a serious problem for kids like me. Here's a non-exhaustive list of things I didn't know when I got to Yale Law School:

That you needed to wear a suit to a job interview.

That wearing a suit large enough to fit a silverback gorilla was inappropriate.

That a butter knife wasn't just decorative (after all, anything that requires a butter knife can be done better with a spoon or an index finger).

That pleather and leather were different substances.

That your shoes and belt should match.

That certain cities and states had better job prospects.

That going to a nicer college brought benefits outside of bragging rights.

That finance was an industry that people worked in.

Mamaw always resented the hillbilly stereotype—the idea that our people were a bunch of slobbering morons. But the fact is that I was remarkably ignorant of how to get ahead. Not knowing things that many others do often has serious economic consequences. It cost me a job in college (apparently Marine Corps combat boots and khaki pants aren't proper interview attire) and could have cost me a lot more in law school if I hadn't had a few people helping me every step of the way.

Chapter 14

As I started my second year of law school, I felt like I'd made it. Fresh off a summer job at

beaten the odds. I was better than where I came from: better than Mom and her addiction and better than the father figures who' d walked out on me. I regretted only that Mamaw and Papaw weren' t around to see it.

But there were signs that things weren' t going so well, particularly in my relationship with Usha. We' d been dating for only a few months when she stumbled upon an analogy that described me perfectly. I was, she said, a turtle. "Whenever something bad happens—even a hint of disagreement—you withdraw completely. It' s like you have a shell that you hide in."

It was true. I had no idea how to deal with relationship problems, so I chose not to deal with them at all. I could scream at her when she did something I didn' t like, but that seemed mean. Or I could withdraw and get away. Those were the proverbial arrows in my quiver, and I had nothing else. The thought of fighting with her reduced me to a morass of the qualities I thought I hadn' t inherited from my family: stress, sadness, fear, anxiety. It was all there, and it was intense .

So I tried to get away, but Usha wouldn' t let me. I tried to break everything off multiple times, but she told me that was stupid unless I didn' t care about her. So I' d scream and I' d yell. I' d do all of the hateful things that my mother had done. And then I' d feel guilty and desperately afraid. For so much of my life, I' d made Mom out to be a kind of villain. And now I was acting like her. Nothing compares to the fear that you' re becoming the monster in your closet.

During that second year of law school, Usha and I traveled to D.C. for follow-up interviews with a few law firms. I returned to our hotel room, dejected that I had just performed poorly with one of the firms I really wanted to work for. When Usha tried to comfort me, to tell me that I' d probably done better than I expected, but that even if I hadn' t, there were other fish in the sea, I exploded. "Don' t tell me that I did fine," I yelled. "You' re just making an excuse for weakness. I didn' t get here by making excuses for failure."

I stormed out of the room and spent the next couple of hours on the streets of D.C.' s business district. I thought about that time Mom took me and our toy poodle to Middletown' s Comfort Inn after a screaming match with Bob. We stayed there for a couple of days, until Mamaw convinced Mom that she had to return home and face her problems like an adult. And I thought about Mom during her childhood, running out the back door with her mother and sister to avoid another night of terror with her alcoholic

In it, a large Lincoln blow-up doll with an extraordinarily large grin gazes at those walking by. I felt like this inflatable Lincoln was mocking me. Why the hell is he smiling? I thought. Lincoln was melancholy to begin with, and if any place invoked a smile, surely it wouldn't be a stone's throw away from the place where someone shot him in the head.

I turned the corner, and after a few steps I saw Usha sitting on the steps of Ford's Theatre. She had run after me, worried about me being alone. I realized then that I had a problem—that I must confront whatever it was that had, for generations, caused those in my family to hurt those whom they loved. I apologized profusely to Usha. I expected her to tell me to go fuck myself, that it would take days to make up for what I'd done, that I was a terrible person. A sincere apology is a surrender, and when someone surrenders, you go in for the kill. But Usha wasn't interested in that. She calmly told me through her tears that it was never acceptable to run away, that she was worried, and that I had to learn how to talk to her. And then she gave me a hug and told me that she accepted my apology and was glad I was okay. That was the end of it.

Usha hadn't learned how to fight in the hillbilly school of hard knocks. The first time I visited her family for Thanksgiving, I was amazed at the lack of drama. Usha's mother didn't complain about her father behind his back. There were no suggestions that good family friends were liars or backstabbers, no angry exchanges between a man's wife and the same man's sister. Usha's parents seemed to genuinely like her grandmother and spoke of their siblings with love. When I asked her father about a relatively estranged family member, I expected to hear a rant about character flaws. What I heard instead was sympathy and a little sadness but primarily a life lesson: "I still call him regularly and check up on him. You can't just cast aside family members because they seem uninterested in you. You've got to make the effort, because they're family."

I tried to go to a counselor, but it was just too weird. Talking to some stranger about my feelings made me want to vomit. I did go to the library, and I learned that behavior I considered commonplace was the subject of pretty intense academic study. Psychologists call the everyday occurrences of my and Lindsay's life "adverse childhood experiences," or ACEs. ACEs are traumatic childhood events, and their consequences reach far into adulthood. The trauma need not be physical. The following events or feelings are some of the most common ACEs:

- being sworn at, insulted, or humiliated by parents

- living with an alcoholic or a drug user
- living with someone who was depressed or attempted suicide
- watching a loved one be physically abused.

ACEs happen everywhere, in every community. But studies have shown that ACEs are far more common in my corner of the demographic world. A report by the Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund showed that among those with a college degree or more (the non–working class), fewer than half had experienced an ACE. Among the working class, well over half had at least one ACE, while about 40 percent had multiple ACEs. This is really striking—four in every ten working-class people had faced multiple instances of childhood trauma. For the non–working class, that number was 29 percent.

I gave a quiz to Aunt Wee, Uncle Dan, Lindsay, and Usha that psychologists use to measure the number of ACEs a person has faced. Aunt Wee scored a seven—higher even than Lindsay and me, who each scored a six. Dan and Usha—the two people whose families seemed nice to the point of oddity—each scored a zero. The weird people were the ones who hadn't faced any childhood trauma.

Children with multiple ACEs are more likely to struggle with anxiety and depression, to suffer from heart disease and obesity, and to contract certain types of cancers. They're also more likely to underperform in school and suffer from relationship instability as adults. Even excessive shouting can damage a kid's sense of security and contribute to mental health and behavioral issues down the road.

Harvard pediatricians have studied the effect that childhood trauma has on the mind. In addition to later negative health consequences, the doctors found that constant stress can actually change the chemistry of a child's brain. Stress, after all, is triggered by a physiological reaction. It's the consequence of adrenaline and other hormones flooding our system, usually in response to some kind of stimulus. This is the classic fight-or-flight response that we learn about in grade school. It sometimes produces incredible feats of strength and bravery from ordinary people. It's how mothers can lift heavy objects when their children are trapped underneath, and how an unarmed elderly woman can fight off a mountain lion with her bare hands to save her husband.

Unfortunately, the fight-or-flight response is a destructive constant companion. As Dr. Nadine Burke Harris put it, the response is great "if you're in a forest and there's a bear. The problem is when that bear comes home from the bar every night." When that

with increased potential for fear and anxiety." For kids like me, the part of the brain that deals with stress and conflict is always activated—the switch flipped indefinitely. We are constantly ready to fight or flee, because there is constant exposure to the bear, whether that bear is an alcoholic dad or an unhinged mom. We become hardwired for conflict. And that wiring remains, even when there's no more conflict to be had.

It's not just fighting. By almost any measure, American working-class families experience a level of instability unseen elsewhere in the world. Consider, for instance, Mom's revolving door of father figures. No other country experiences anything like this. In France, the percentage of children exposed to three or more maternal partners is 0.5 percent—about one in two hundred. The second highest share is 2.6 percent, in Sweden, or about one in forty. In the United States, the figure is a shocking 8.2 percent—about one in twelve—and the figure is even higher in the working class. The most depressing part is that relationship instability, like home chaos, is a vicious cycle. As sociologists Paula Fornby and Andrew Cherlin found, a "growing body of literature suggests that children who experience multiple transitions in family structure may fare worse developmentally than children raised in stable two-parent families and perhaps even than children raised in stable, single-parent families."

For many kids, the first impulse is escape, but people who lurch toward the exit rarely choose the right door. This is how my aunt found herself married at sixteen to an abusive husband. It's how my mom, the salutatorian of her high school class, had both a baby and a divorce, but not a single college credit under her belt before her teenage years were over. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Chaos begets chaos. Instability begets instability. Welcome to family life for the American hillbilly.

For me, understanding my past and knowing that I wasn't doomed gave me the hope and fortitude to deal with the demons of my youth. And though it's cliché, the best medicine was talking about it with the people who understood. I asked Aunt Wee if she had similar relationship experiences, and she answered almost reflexively: "Of course. I was always ready for battle with Dan," she told me. "Sometimes I'd even brace myself for a big argument—like physically put myself in a fighting position—before he stopped speaking." I was shocked. Aunt Wee and Dan have the most successful marriage I've seen. Even after twenty years, they interact like they started dating last year. Her marriage got even better, she said, only after she realized that she didn't have to be on guard all

you? Why do you fight with me like I'm your enemy?'" The answer is that, in our home, it was often difficult to tell friend from foe. Sixteen years later, though, and Lindsay is still married.

I thought a lot about myself, about the emotional triggers I'd learned over eighteen years of living at home. I realized that I mistrusted apologies, as they were often used to convince you to lower your guard. It was an "I'm sorry" that convinced me to take that fateful car ride with Mom more than a decade earlier. And I began to understand why I used words as weapons: That's what everyone around me did; I did it to survive. Disagreements were war, and you played to win the game.

I didn't unlearn these lessons overnight. I continue to struggle with conflict, to fight the statistical odds that sometimes seem to bear down on me. Sometimes it's easier knowing that the statistics suggest I should be in jail or fathering my fourth illegitimate child. And sometimes it's harder—conflict and family breakdown seem like the destiny I can't possibly escape. In my worst moments, I convince myself that there is no exit, and no matter how much I fight old demons, they are as much an inheritance as my blue eyes and brown hair. The sad fact is that I couldn't do it without Usha. Even at my best, I'm a delayed explosion—I can be defused, but only with skill and precision. It's not just that I've learned to control myself but that Usha has learned how to manage me. Put two of me in the same home and you have a positively radioactive situation. It's no surprise that every single person in my family who has built a successful home—Aunt Wee, Lindsay, my cousin Gail—married someone from outside our little culture.

This realization shattered the narrative I told about my life. In my own head, I was better than my past. I was strong. I left town as soon as I could, served my country in the Marines, excelled at Ohio State, and made it to the country's top law school. I had no demons, no character flaws, no problems. But that just wasn't true. The things I wanted most in the entire world—a happy partner and a happy home—required constant mental focus. My self-image was bitterness masquerading as arrogance. A few weeks into my second year of law school, I hadn't spoken to Mom in many months, longer than at any point in my life. I realized that of all the emotions I felt toward my mother—love, pity, forgiveness, anger, hatred, and dozens of others—I had never tried sympathy. I had never tried to understand my mom. At my most empathetic, I figured she suffered from some terrible genetic defect, and I hoped I hadn't inherited it. As I increasingly saw Mom's behavior in myself, I tried

bailouts were common, and they always came with theoretical strings attached. She had to budget, they'd tell her, and they'd put her on some arbitrary plan they'd designed themselves. The plan was the cost of their help. As they sat and discussed things, Papaw buried his head in his hands and did something Uncle Jimmy had never seen him do: He wept. "I've failed her," he cried. He kept on repeating, "I've failed her; I've failed her; I've failed my baby girl."

Papaw's rare breakdown strikes at the heart of an important question for hillbillies like me: How much of our lives, good and bad, should we credit to our personal decisions, and how much is just the inheritance of our culture, our families, and our parents who have failed their children? How much is Mom's life her own fault? Where does blame stop and sympathy begin?

All of us have opinions. Uncle Jimmy reacts viscerally to the idea that any of the blame for Mom's choices can be laid at Papaw's feet. "He didn't fail her. Whatever happened to her, it's her own damned fault." Aunt Wee sees things in much the same way, and who can blame her? Just nineteen months younger than Mom, she saw the worst of Mamaw and Papaw and made her own share of mistakes before coming out on the other side. If she can do it, then so should Mom. Lindsay has a bit more sympathy and thinks that just as our lives left us with demons, Mom's life must have done the same to her. But at some point, Lindsay says, you have to stop making excuses and take responsibility.

My own view is mixed. Whatever might be said about my mom's parents' roles in my life, their constant fighting and alcoholism must have taken its toll on her. Even when they were children, the fighting seemed to affect my aunt and mother differently. While Aunt Wee would plead with her parents to calm down, or provoke her father in order to take the heat off her mother, Mom would hide, or run away, or collapse on the floor with her hands over her ears. She didn't handle it as well as her brother and sister. In some ways, Mom is the Vance child who lost the game of statistics. If anything, my family is probably lucky that only one of them lost that game.

What I do know is that Mom is no villain. She loves Lindsay and me. She tried desperately to be a good mother. Sometimes she succeeded; sometimes she didn't. She tried to find happiness in love and work, but she listened too much to the wrong voice in her head. But Mom deserves much of the blame. No person's childhood gives him or her a perpetual moral get-out-of-jail-free card—not Lindsay, not Aunt Wee, not me, and not Mom.

again to addiction, I hated her and wished sometimes that she would take enough narcotics to rid me and Lindsay of her for good. When she lay sobbing in bed after another failed relationship, I felt a rage that could have driven me to kill.

Toward the end of law school, Lindsay called to tell me that Mom had taken to a new drug—heroin—and had decided to give rehab another try. I didn't know how many times Mom had been to rehab, how many nights she'd spent in the hospital barely conscious because of some drug. So I shouldn't have been surprised or all that bothered, but "heroin" just has a certain ring to it; it's like the Kentucky Derby of drugs. When I learned of Mom's newest substance of choice, I felt a cloud hanging over me for weeks. Maybe I had finally lost all hope for her.

The emotion Mom inspired then was not hatred, or love, or rage, but fear. Fear for her safety. Fear for Lindsay having to deal yet again with Mom's problems while I lived hundreds of miles away. Fear most of all that I hadn't escaped a goddamned thing. Months away from graduating from Yale Law, I should have felt on top of the world. Instead, I found myself wondering the same thing I'd wondered for much of the past year: whether people like us can ever truly change.

When Usha and I graduated, the crew that watched me walk across the stage numbered eighteen, including my cousins Denise and Gail, the daughters, respectively, of Mamaw's brothers David and Pet. Usha's parents and uncle—fantastic people, though considerably less rowdy than our crew—made the trip, too. It was the first time that her family met mine, and we behaved. (Though Denise had some choice words for the modern "art" at the museum we visited!)

Mom's bout with addiction ended as they always did—in an uneasy truce. She didn't make the trip to see me graduate, but she wasn't using drugs at that moment, and that was all right with me. Justice Sonya Sotomayor spoke at our commencement and advised that it was okay to be unsure about what we wanted to do with ourselves. I think she was talking about our careers, but for me it had a much broader meaning. I had learned much about law at Yale. But I'd also learned that this new world would always seem a bit foreign to me, and that being a hillbilly meant sometimes not knowing the difference between love and war. When we graduated, that's what I was most unsure about.

Chapter 15

What I remember most is the fucking spiders. Really big ones, like tarantulas or something.

makeshift sun blocker that seemed primed to collapse on top of me. On each web was at least one giant spider, and I thought that if I looked away from them for too long, one of those ghastly creatures would jump on my face and suck my blood. I'm not even afraid of spiders, but these things were big .

I wasn't supposed to be here. I'd structured my entire life to avoid just these types of places. When I thought of leaving my hometown, of "getting out," it was from this sort of place that I wanted to escape. It was past midnight. The streetlight revealed the silhouette of a man sitting halfway in his truck—the door open, his feet dangling to the side—with the unmistakable form of a hypodermic needle sticking from his arm. I should have been shocked, but this was Middletown, after all. Just a few weeks earlier, the police had discovered a woman passed out at the local car wash, a bag of heroin and a spoon in the passenger seat, the needle still protruding from her arm.

The woman running the hotel that night was the most pitiful sight of all. She might have been forty, but everything about her—from the long, gray, greasy hair, the mouth empty of teeth, and the frown that she wore like a millstone—screamed old age. This woman had lived a hard life. Her voice sounded like a small child's, even a toddler's. It was meek, barely audible, and very sad.

I gave the woman my credit card, and she was clearly unprepared. "Normally, people pay cash," she explained. I told her, "Yeah, but like I said on the phone, I'm going to pay with a credit card. I can run to an ATM if you'd prefer." "Oh, I'm sorry, I guess I forgot. But it's okay, we've got one of those machines around here somewhere." So she retrieved one of those ancient card-swiping machines—the kind that imprints the card's information on a yellow slip of paper. When I handed her the card, her eyes seemed to plead with me, as if she were a prisoner in her own life. "Enjoy your stay," she said, which struck me as an odd instruction. I had told her on the phone not an hour earlier that the room wasn't for me, it was for my homeless mother. "Okay," I said. "Thanks."

I was a recent graduate of Yale Law School, a former editor of the prestigious Yale Law Journal , and a member of the bar in good standing. Just two months earlier, Usha and I were married on a beautiful day in Eastern Kentucky. My entire family showed up for the occasion, and we both changed our name to Vance—giving me, finally, the same name as the family to which I belonged. I had a nice job, a recently purchased home, a loving relationship, and a happy life in a city I loved—Cincinnati. Usha and I had returned there

Or at least that's how it looked to an outsider. But upward mobility is never clean-cut, and the world I left always finds a way to reel me back in. I don't know the precise chain of events that led me to that hotel, but I knew the stuff that mattered. Mom had begun using again. She'd stolen some family heirlooms from her fifth husband to buy drugs (prescription opiates, I think), and he'd kicked her out of the house in response. They were divorcing, and she had nowhere to go.

I'd sworn to myself that I'd never help Mom again, but the person who made that oath to himself had changed. I was exploring, however uneasily, the Christian faith that I'd discarded years earlier. I had learned, for the first time, the extent of Mom's childhood emotional wounds. And I had realized that those wounds never truly heal, even for me. So when I discovered that Mom was in dire straits, I didn't mutter insults under my breath and hang up the phone. I offered to help her.

I tried to call a Middletown hotel and give them my credit card information. The cost for a week was a hundred and fifty dollars, and I figured that would give us time to come up with a plan. But they wouldn't accept my card over the phone, so at eleven P.M. on a Tuesday night, I drove from Cincinnati to Middletown (about an hour's drive each way) to keep Mom from homelessness.

The plan I developed seemed relatively simple. I'd give Mom enough money to help her get on her feet. She'd find her own place, save money to get her nursing license back, and go from there. In the meantime, I'd monitor her finances to ensure that she stayed clean and on track financially. It reminded me of the "plans" Mamaw and Papaw used to put together, but I convinced myself that this time things would be different.

I'd like to say that helping Mom came easily. That I had made some peace with my past and was able to fix a problem that had plagued me since elementary school. That, armed with sympathy and an understanding of Mom's childhood, I was able to patiently help Mom deal with her addiction. But dealing with that sleazy motel was hard. And actively managing her finances, as I planned to do, required more patience and time than I had.

By the grace of God, I no longer hide from Mom. But I can't fix everything, either. There is room now for both anger at Mom for the life she chooses and sympathy for the childhood she didn't. There is room to help when I can, when finances and emotional reserves allow me to care in the way Mom needs. But there is also recognition of my own limitations and my willingness to separate myself from Mom when engagement means too little money to

People sometimes ask whether I think there's anything we can do to "solve" the problems of my community. I know what they're looking for: a magical public policy solution or an innovative government program. But these problems of family, faith, and culture aren't like a Rubik's Cube, and I don't think that solutions (as most understand the term) really exist. A good friend, who worked for a time in the White House and cares deeply about the plight of the working class, once told me, "The best way to look at this might be to recognize that you probably can't fix these things. They'll always be around. But maybe you can put your thumb on the scale a little for the people at the margins."

There were many thumbs put on my scale. When I look back at my life, what jumps out is how many variables had to fall in place in order to give me a chance. There was my grandparents' constant presence, even when my mother and stepfather moved far away in an effort to shut them out. Despite the revolving door of would-be father figures, I was often surrounded by caring and kind men. Even with her faults, Mom instilled in me a lifelong love of education and learning. My sister always protected me, even after I'd physically outgrown her. Dan and Aunt Wee opened their home when I was too afraid to ask. Long before that, they were my first real exemplars of a happy and loving marriage. There were teachers, distant relatives, and friends.

Remove any of these people from the equation, and I'm probably screwed. Other people who have overcome the odds cite the same sorts of interventions. Jane Rex runs the transfer students' office at Appalachian State University. Like me, she grew up in a working-class family and was its first member to attend college. She's also been married for nearly forty years and has raised three successful kids of her own. Ask what made a difference in her life, and she'll tell you about the stable family that empowered her and gave her a sense of control over her future. And she'll tell you about the power of seeing enough of the world to dream big: "I think you have to have good role models around you. One of my very good friends, her father was the president of the bank, so I got to see different things. I knew there was another life out there, and that exposure gives you something to dream for."

My cousin Gail is one of my all-time favorite people: She's one of the first of my mom's generation, the Blanton grandchildren. Gail's life is the American Dream personified: a beautiful house, three great kids, a happy marriage, and a saintly demeanor. Outside of Mamaw Blanton, a virtual deity in the eyes of us grandkids and great-grandkids, I've

I assumed that Gail had inherited her storybook life from her parents. No one's that nice, I thought, especially not someone who's suffered any real adversity. But Gail was a Blanton, and, at heart a hillbilly, and I should have known that no hillbilly makes it to adulthood without a few major screwups along the way. Gail's home life provided its own emotional baggage. She was seven when her dad walked out and seventeen when she graduated from high school, planning for college at Miami University. But there was a catch: "Mom told me I couldn't go to college unless I broke up with my boyfriend. So I moved out the day after graduation, and by August, I was pregnant."

Almost immediately, her life began to disintegrate. Racial prejudice bubbled to the surface when she announced that a black baby was joining the family. Announcements led to arguments, and then one day Gail found herself without a family. "I didn't hear from any of our relatives," Gail told me. "My mom said she never wanted to hear my name again."

Given her age and the lack of family support, it's hardly surprising that her marriage soon ended. But Gail's life had grown considerably more complex: She hadn't just lost her family, she'd gained a young daughter who depended entirely on her. "It completely changed my life—being a mom was my identity. I might have been a hippie, but now I had rules—no drugs, no alcohol, nothing that was going to lead to social services taking my baby away."

So here's Gail: teenage single mom, no family, little support. A lot of people would wilt in those circumstances, but the hillbilly took over. "Dad wasn't really around," Gail remembered, "and hadn't been in years, and I obviously wasn't speaking to Mom. But I remember the one lesson I took from them, and that was that we could do anything we wanted. I wanted that baby, and I wanted to make it work. So I did it." She got a job with a local telephone company, worked her way up the ladder, and even returned to college. By the time she remarried, she had hit one hell of a stride. The storybook marriage to her second husband, Allan, is just icing on the cake.

Some version of Gail's story often rears its head where I grew up. You watch as teenagers find themselves in dire straits, sometimes of their own making and sometimes not. The statistics are stacked high against them, and many succumb: to crime or an early death at worst, domestic strife and welfare dependency at best. But others make it. There's Jane Rex. There's Lindsay, who blossomed in the midst of Mamaw's death; Aunt Wee, who

they saw—from a family friend, an uncle, or a work mentor—what was available and what was possible.

Not long after I began thinking about what might help the American working class get ahead, a team of economists, including Raj Chetty, published a groundbreaking study on opportunity in America. Unsurprisingly, they found that a poor kid's chances of rising through the ranks of America's meritocracy were lower than most of us wanted. By their metrics, a lot of European countries seemed better than America at the American Dream. More important, they discovered that opportunity was not spread evenly over the whole country. In places like Utah, Oklahoma, and Massachusetts, the American Dream was doing just fine—as good or better than any other place in the world. It was in the South, the Rust Belt, and Appalachia where poor kids really struggled. Their findings surprised a lot of people, but not me. And not anyone who'd spent any time in these areas.

In a paper analyzing the data, Chetty and his coauthors noted two important factors that explained the uneven geographic distribution of opportunity: the prevalence of single parents and income segregation. Growing up around a lot of single moms and dads and living in a place where most of your neighbors are poor really narrows the realm of possibilities. It means that unless you have a Mamaw and Papaw to make sure you stay the course, you might never make it out. It means that you don't have people to show you by example what happens when you work hard and get an education. It means, essentially, that everything that made it possible for me, Lindsay, Gail, Jane Rex, and Aunt Wee to find some measure of happiness is missing. So I wasn't surprised that Mormon Utah—with its strong church, integrated communities, and intact families—wiped the floor with Rust Belt Ohio.

There are, I think, policy lessons to draw from my life—ways we might put our thumb on that all-important scale. We can adjust how our social services systems treat families like mine. Remember that when I was twelve I watched Mom get hauled away in a police cruiser. I'd seen her get arrested before, but I knew that this time was different. We were in the system now, with social worker visits and mandated family counseling. And a court date hanging over my head like a guillotine blade.

Ostensibly, the caseworkers were there to protect me, but it became very obvious, very early in the process, that they were obstacles to overcome. When I explained that I spent most of my time with my grandparents and that I'd like to continue with that

myself with a foster family as I was with Mamaw. The notion of being separated from everyone and everything I loved was terrifying. So I shut my mouth, told the social workers everything was fine, and hoped that I wouldn't lose my family when the court hearing came.

That hope panned out—Mom didn't go to jail, and I got to stay with Mamaw. The arrangement was informal: I could stay with Mom if I wanted, but if not, Mamaw's door was always open. The enforcement mechanism was equally informal: Mamaw would kill anyone who tried to keep me from her. This worked for us because Mamaw was a lunatic and our entire family feared her.

Not everyone can rely on the saving graces of a crazy hillbilly. Child services are, for many kids, the last pieces of the safety net; if they fall through, precious little remains to catch them.

Part of the problem is how state laws define the family. For families like mine—and for many black and Hispanic families—grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles play an outsize role. Child services often cut them out of the picture, as they did in my case. Some states require occupational licensing for foster parents—just like nurses and doctors—even when the would-be foster parent is a grandmother or another close family member. In other words, our country's social services weren't made for hillbilly families, and they often make a bad problem worse.

I wish I could say this was a small problem, but it's not. In a given year, 640,000 children, most of them poor, will spend at least some time in foster care. Add that to the unknown number of kids who face abuse or neglect but somehow avoid the foster care system, and you have an epidemic—one that current policies exacerbate.

There are other things we can do. We can build policies based on a better understanding of what stands in the way of kids like me. The most important lesson of my life is not that society failed to provide me with opportunities. My elementary and middle schools were entirely adequate, staffed with teachers who did everything they could to reach me. Our high school ranked near the bottom of Ohio's schools, but that had little to do with the staff and much to do with the students. I had Pell Grants and government-subsidized low-interest student loans that made college affordable, and need-based scholarships for law school. I never went hungry, thanks at least in part to the old-age benefits that Mamaw generously shared with me. These programs are far from perfect, but to the degree that I

Recently, I sat down with a group of teachers from my alma mater, Middletown High. All of them expressed the worry, in one form or another, that society devoted too many resources too late in the game. "It's like our politicians think college is the only way," one teacher told me. "For many, it's great. But a lot of our kids have no realistic shot of getting a college degree." Another said: "The violence and the fighting, it's all they've seen from a very young age. One of my students lost her baby like she'd lost her car keys—had no idea where it went. Two weeks later, her child turned up in New York City with the father, a drug dealer, and some of his family." Short of a miracle, we all know what kind of life awaits that poor baby. Yet there's precious little to support her now, when an intervention might help.

So I think that any successful policy program would recognize what my old high school's teachers see every day: that the real problem for so many of these kids is what happens (or doesn't happen) at home. For example, we'd recognize that Section 8 vouchers ought to be administered in a way that doesn't segregate the poor into little enclaves. As Brian Campbell, another Middletown teacher, told me, "When you have a large base of Section 8 parents and kids supported by fewer middle-class taxpayers, it's an upside-down triangle. There're fewer emotional and financial resources when the only people in a neighborhood are low-income. You just can't lump them together, because then you have a bigger pool of hopelessness." On the other hand, he said, "put the lower-income kids with those who have a different lifestyle model, and the lower-income kids start to rise up." Yet when Middletown recently tried to limit the number of Section 8 vouchers offered within certain neighborhoods, the federal government balked. Better, I suppose, to keep those kids cut off from the middle class.

Government policy may be powerless to resolve other problems in our community. As a child, I associated accomplishments in school with femininity. Manliness meant strength, courage, a willingness to fight, and, later, success with girls. Boys who got good grades were "sissies" or "faggots." I don't know where I got this feeling. Certainly not from Mamaw, who demanded good grades, nor from Papaw. But it was there, and studies now show that working-class boys like me do much worse in school because they view schoolwork as a feminine endeavor. Can you change this with a new law or program? Probably not. Some scales aren't that amenable to the proverbial thumb.

I've learned that the very traits that enabled my survival during childhood inhibit my

find it and "borrow" it—some under the mattress, some in the underwear drawer, some at Mamaw's house. When, later in life, Usha and I consolidated finances, she was shocked to learn that I had multiple bank accounts and small past-due balances on credit cards. Usha still sometimes reminds me that not every perceived slight—from a passing motorist or a neighbor critical of my dogs—is cause for a blood feud. And I always concede, despite my raw emotions, that she's probably right.

A couple of years ago, I was driving in Cincinnati with Usha, when somebody cut me off. I honked, the guy flipped me off, and when we stopped at a red light (with this guy in front of me), I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the car door. I planned to demand an apology (and fight the guy if necessary), but my common sense prevailed and I shut the door before I got out of the car. Usha was delighted that I'd changed my mind before she yelled at me to stop acting like a lunatic (which has happened in the past), and she told me that she was proud of me for resisting my natural instinct. The other driver's sin was to insult my honor, and it was on that honor that nearly every element of my happiness depended as a child—it kept the school bully from messing with me, connected me to my mother when some man or his children insulted her (even if I agreed with the substance of the insult), and gave me something, however small, over which I exercised complete control. For the first eighteen or so years of my life, standing down would have earned me a verbal lashing as a "pussy" or a "wimp" or a "girl." The objectively correct course of action was something that the majority of my life had taught me was repulsive to an upstanding young man. For a few hours after I did the right thing, I silently criticized myself. But that's progress, right? Better that than sitting in a jail cell for teaching that asshole a lesson about defensive driving.

Conclusion

Shortly before Christmas last year, I stood in the kids' section of a Washington, D.C., Walmart, shopping list in hand, gazing at toys and talking myself out of each of them. That year, I had volunteered to "adopt" a needy child, which meant that I was given a list by the local branch of the Salvation Army and told to return with a bag of unwrapped Christmas gifts.

It sounds pretty simple, but I managed to find fault with nearly every suggestion. Pajamas? Poor people don't wear pajamas. We fall asleep in our underwear or blue jeans. To this day, I find the very notion of pajamas an unnecessary elite indulgence, like caviar or electric

on learning aids for fear of appearing condescending. Eventually I settled on some clothes, a fake cell phone, and fire trucks.

I grew up in a world where everyone worried about how they' d pay for Christmas. Now I live in one where opportunities abound for the wealthy and privileged to shower their generosity on the community' s poor. Many prestigious law firms sponsor an "angel program," which assigns a child to a lawyer and provides a wish list of gifts. Usha' s former courthouse encouraged judicial employees to adopt a kid for the holidays—each a child of someone who previously went through the court system. Program coordinators hoped that if someone else purchased presents, the child' s parents might feel less tempted to commit crimes in order to provide. And there' s always Toys for Tots. During the past few Christmas seasons, I' ve found myself in large department stores, buying toys for kids I' ve never met.

As I shop, I' m reminded that wherever I fell on the American socioeconomic ladder as a child, others occupy much lower rungs: children who cannot depend on the generosity of grandparents for Christmas gifts; parents whose financial situations are so dire that they rely on criminal conduct—rather than payday loans—to put today' s hot toys under the tree. This is a very useful exercise. As scarcity has given way to plenty in my own life, these moments of retail reflection force me to consider just how lucky I am.

Still, shopping for low-income kids reminds me of my childhood and of the ways that Christmas gifts can serve as domestic land mines. Every year the parents in my neighborhood would begin an annual ritual very different from the one I' ve become accustomed to in my new material comfort: worrying about how to give their kids a "nice Christmas," with niceness always defined by the bounty underneath the Christmas tree. If your friends came over the week before Christmas and saw a barren floor beneath the tree, you would offer a justification. "Mom just hasn' t gone shopping yet" or "Dad' s waiting for a big paycheck at the end of the year, and then he' ll get a ton of stuff." These excuses were meant to mask what everyone knew: All of us were poor, and no amount of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles memorabilia would change that.

No matter our financial position, our family somehow managed to spend just more than we had on holiday shopping. We didn' t qualify for credit cards, but there were many ways to spend money you didn' t have. You could write a future date on a check (a practice called "post-dating") so the recipient couldn' t cash it until you had money in the bank.

a nice Christmas. They' d always protest Mom' s understanding of what made Christmas nice, but they' d still give in. It might be the day before Christmas, but our tree would be piled high with the trendiest gifts even as our family savings dwindled from very little to nothing, then from nothing to something less than that.

When I was a baby, Mom and Lindsay frantically searched for a Teddy Ruxpin doll, a toy so popular that every store in town sold out. It was expensive and, as I was only two, unnecessary. But Lindsay still remembers the day wasted searching for the toy. Mom somehow received a tip about a stranger who was willing to part with one of his Ruxpins at a significant markup. Mom and Lindsay traveled to his house to fetch the trinket that stood between a child who could barely walk and the Christmas of his dreams. The only thing I remember of old Teddy is finding him in a box years later, his sweater tattered and his face covered in crusted snot.

It was the holiday season that taught me about tax refunds, which I gathered were free bits of money sent to the poor in the new year to save them from the financial indiscretions of the old one. Income tax refunds were the ultimate backstops. "We can definitely afford this; we' ll just pay for it with the refund check" became a Christmas mantra. But the government was fickle. There were few moments more anxious than the one when Mom came home from the tax preparer in early January. Sometimes the refund exceeded expectations. But when Mom learned that Uncle Sam couldn' t cover the Christmas splurge because her "credits" weren' t as high as she had hoped, that could ruin your whole month. Ohio Januaries are depressing enough as it is.

I assumed that rich people celebrated Christmas just like us, perhaps with fewer financial worries and even cooler presents. Yet I noticed after my cousin Bonnie was born that Christmastime at Aunt Wee' s house had a decidedly different flavor. Somehow my aunt and uncle' s children ended up with more pedestrian gifts than I had come to expect as a child. There was no obsession with meeting a two- or three-hundred-dollar threshold for each child, no worry that a kid would suffer in the absence of the newest electronic gadget. Usha often received books for Christmas. My cousin Bonnie, at the age of eleven, asked her parents to donate her Christmas gifts to Middletown' s needy. Shockingly, her parents obliged: They didn' t define their family' s Christmas holiday by the dollar value of gifts their daughter accumulated.

However you want to define these two groups and their approach to giving—rich and

an almost primal scorn—recently, an acquaintance used the word "confabulate" in a sentence, and I just wanted to scream. But I have to give it to them: Their children are happier and healthier, their divorce rates lower, their church attendance higher, their lives longer. These people are beating us at our own damned game.

I was able to escape the worst of my culture's inheritance. And uneasy though I am about my new life, I cannot whine about it: The life I lead now was the stuff of fantasy during my childhood. So many people helped create that fantasy. At every level of my life and in every environment, I have found family and mentors and lifelong friends who supported and enabled me.

But I often wonder: Where would I be without them? I think back on my freshman year of high school, a grade I nearly failed, and the morning when Mom walked into Mamaw's house demanding a cup of clean urine. Or years before that, when I was a lonely kid with two fathers, neither of whom I saw very often, and Papaw decided that he would be the best dad he could be for as long as he lived. Or the months I spent with Lindsay, a teenage girl acting as a mother while our own mother lived in a treatment center. Or the moment I can't even remember when Papaw installed a secret phone line in the bottom of my toy box so that Lindsay could call Mamaw and Papaw if things got a little too crazy. Thinking about it now, about how close I was to the abyss, gives me chills. I am one lucky son of a bitch.

Not long ago, I had lunch with Brian, a young man who reminded me of fifteen-year-old J.D. Like Mom, his mother caught a taste for narcotics, and like me, he has a complicated relationship with his father. He's a sweet kid with a big heart and a quiet manner. He has spent nearly his entire life in Appalachian Kentucky; we went to lunch at a local fast-food restaurant, because in that corner of the world there isn't much else to eat. As we talked, I noticed little quirks that few others would. He didn't want to share his milk shake, which was a little out of character for a kid who ended every sentence with "please" or "thank you." He finished his food quickly and then nervously looked from person to person. I could tell that he wanted to ask a question, so I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and asked if he needed anything. "Y—Yeah," he started, refusing to make eye contact. And then, almost in a whisper: "I wonder if I could get a few more french fries?" He was hungry. In 2014, in the richest country on earth, he wanted a little extra to eat but felt uncomfortable asking. Lord help us.

because we don't care; we lose contact with them to survive. We never stop loving, and we never lose hope that our loved ones will change. Rather, we are forced, either by wisdom or by the law, to take the path of self-preservation.

What happens to Brian? He has no Mamaw or Papaw, at least not like mine, and though he's lucky enough to have supportive family who will keep him out of foster care, his hope of a "normal life" evaporated long ago, if it ever existed. When we met, his mother had already permanently lost custody. In his short life, he has already experienced multiple instances of childhood trauma, and in a few years he will begin making decisions about employment and education that even children of wealth and privilege have trouble navigating.

Any chance he has lies with the people around him—his family, me, my kin, the people like us, and the broad community of hillbillies. And if that chance is to materialize, we hillbillies must wake the hell up. Brian's mom's death was another shitty card in an already abysmal hand, but there are many cards left to deal: whether his community empowers him with a sense that he can control his own destiny or encourages him to take refuge in resentment at forces beyond his control; whether he can access a church that teaches him lessons of Christian love, family, and purpose; whether those people who do step up to positively influence Brian find emotional and spiritual support from their neighbors.

I believe we hillbillies are the toughest goddamned people on this earth. We take an electric saw to the hide of those who insult our mother. We make young men consume cotton undergarments to protect a sister's honor. But are we tough enough to do what needs to be done to help a kid like Brian? Are we tough enough to build a church that forces kids like me to engage with the world rather than withdraw from it? Are we tough enough to look ourselves in the mirror and admit that our conduct harms our children?

Public policy can help, but there is no government that can fix these problems for us.

Recall how my cousin Mike sold his mother's house—a property that had been in our family for over a century—because he couldn't trust his own neighbors not to ransack it. Mamaw refused to purchase bicycles for her grandchildren because they kept disappearing—even when locked up—from her front porch. She feared answering her door toward the end of her life because an able-bodied woman who lived next door would not stop bothering her for cash—money, we later learned, for drugs. These problems were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else. We created them, and only we can

don’t need to socialize at cocktail parties. We do need to create a space for the J.D.s and Brians of the world to have a chance. I don’t know what the answer is, precisely, but I know it starts when we stop blaming Obama or Bush or faceless companies and ask ourselves what we can do to make things better.

I wanted to ask Brian whether, like me, he had bad dreams. For nearly two decades, I suffered from a terrible recurring nightmare. The first time it came to me, I was seven, fast asleep in my great Mamaw Blanton’s bed. In the dream, I’m trapped in large conference room in a large tree house—as if the Keebler elves had just finished a massive picnic and their tree house were still adorned with dozens of tables and chairs. I’m there alone with Lindsay and Mamaw, when all of a sudden Mom charges through the room, tossing tables and chairs as she goes. She screams, but her voice is robotic and distorted, as if filtered through radio static. Mamaw and Lindsay run for a hole in the floor—presumably the exit ladder from the tree house. I fall behind, and by the time I reach the exit, Mom is just behind me. I wake up, right as she’s about to grab me, when I realize not just that the monster has caught me but that Mamaw and Lindsay have abandoned me.

In different versions, the antagonist changes form. It has been a Marine Corps drill instructor, a barking dog, a movie villain, and a mean teacher. Mamaw and Lindsay always make an appearance, and they always make it to the exit just ahead of me. Without fail, the dream provokes pure terror. The first time I had it, I woke up and ran to Mamaw, who was up late watching TV. I explained the dream and begged her never to leave me. She promised that she wouldn’t and stroked my hair until I fell asleep again.

My subconscious had spared me for years, when, out of nowhere, I had the dream again a few weeks after I graduated from law school. There was a crucial difference: The subject of the monster’s ire wasn’t me but my dog, Casper, with whom I’d lost my temper earlier in the night. There was no Lindsay and no Mamaw. And I was the monster.

I chased my poor dog around the tree house, hoping to catch him and throttle him. But I felt Casper’s terror, and I felt my shame at having lost my temper. I finally caught up to him, but I didn’t wake up. Instead, Casper turned and looked at me with those sad, heart-piercing eyes that only dogs possess. So I didn’t throttle him; I gave him a hug. And the last emotion I felt before waking was relief at having controlled my temper.

I got out of bed for a glass of cold water, and when I returned, Casper was staring at me, wondering what on earth his human was doing awake at such an odd hour. It was two

would go to work, take the dogs to the park, buy groceries with Usha, and make a nice dinner. It was everything I ever wanted. So I patted Casper's head and went back to sleep.

Acknowledgments

Writing this book was among the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life. I learned much I didn't know about my culture, my neighborhood, and my family, and I relearned much that I had forgotten. I owe a great deal to many people. In no particular order:

Tina Bennett, my wonderful agent, believed in the project even before I did. She encouraged me when I needed it, pushed me when I needed it, and guided me through a publication process that initially scared the hell out of me. She has the heart of a hillbilly and the mind of a poet, and I'm honored to call her a friend.

Besides Tina, the person who deserves the most credit for this book's existence is Amy Chua, my Yale contracts professor, who convinced me that both my life and the conclusions I drew from it were worth putting down on paper. She has the wisdom of a respected academic and the confident delivery of a Tiger Mother, and there were many times that I needed (and benefitted) from both.

The entire team at Harper deserves tremendous credit. Jonathan Jao, my editor, helped me think critically about what I wanted the book to accomplish and had the patience to help me accomplish it. Sofia Groopman gave the book a fresh eye when it was desperately needed. Joanna, Tina, and Katie guided me through the publicity process with warmth and skill. Tim Duggan took a chance on this project and me when he had little reason to do so. For all of them, and their work on my behalf, I'm very thankful.

Many people read various drafts and offered important feedback, from questioning the choice of a word in a particular sentence to doubting the wisdom of deleting an entire chapter. Charles Tyler read a very early draft and forced me to hone in on a few core themes. Kyle Bumgarner and Sam Rudman offered helpful feedback early in the writing process. Kiel Brennan-Marquez, who has had the official and unofficial burden of teaching me writing for many years, read and critiqued multiple drafts. I appreciate all of their efforts.

I'm grateful to the many people who opened up about their lives and work, including Jane Rex, Sally Williamson, Jennifer McGuffey, Mindy Farmer, Brian Campbell, Stevie Van Gordon, Sherry Gaston, Katrina Reed, Elizabeth Wilkins, JJ Snidow, and Jim Williamson.

them more brother than friend. I’ ve been fortunate, too, to have mentors and friends of incredible ability, each of whom ensured that I had access to opportunities I simply didn’ t deserve. They include: Ron Selby, Mike Stratton, Shannon Arledge, Shawn Haney, Brad Nelson, David Frum, Matt Johnson, Judge David Bunning, Reihan Salam, Ajay Royan, Fred Moll, and Peter Thiel. Many of these folks read versions of the manuscript and provided critical feedback.

I owe an incredible amount to my family, especially those who opened their hearts and shared memories, no matter how difficult or painful. My sister Lindsay Ratliff and Aunt Wee (Lori Meibers) deserve special thanks, both for helping me write this book and for supporting me throughout my life. I’ m also grateful to Jim Vance, Dan Meibers, Kevin Ratliff, Mom, Bonnie Rose Meibers, Hannah Meibers, Kameron Ratliff, Meghan Ratliff, Emma Ratliff, Hattie Hounshell Blanton, Don Bowman (my dad), Cheryl Bowman, Cory Bowman, Chelsea Bowman, Lakshmi Chilukuri, Krish Chilukuri, Shreya Chilukuri, Donna Vance, Rachael Vance, Nate Vance, Lilly Hudson Vance, Daisy Hudson Vance, Gail Huber, Allan Huber, Mike Huber, Nick Huber, Denise Blanton, Arch Stacy, Rose Stacy, Rick Stacy, Amber Stacy, Adam Stacy, Taheton Stacy, Betty Sebastian, David Blanton, Gary Blanton, Wanda Blanton, Pet Blanton, Teaberry Blanton, and every crazy hillbilly I’ ve ever had the honor to call my kin.

Last, but certainly not least, is my darling wife, Usha, who read every single word of my manuscript literally dozens of times, offered needed feedback (even when I didn’ t want it!), supported me when I felt like quitting, and celebrated with me during times of progress. So much of the credit for both this book and the happy life I lead belongs to her. Though it is one of the great regrets of my life that Mamaw and Papaw never met her, it is the source of my greatest joy that I did.

Prev

Next