

# Hillbilly Elegy

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*A Memoir of a Family  
and Culture in Crisis*

J.D. VANCE



HARPER

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For Mamaw and Papaw, my very own hillbilly terminators

## Introduction

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

So I didn't write this book because I've accomplished something extraordinary. I wrote this book because I've achieved something quite ordinary, which doesn't happen to most kids who grow up like me. You see, I grew up poor, in the Rust Belt, in an Ohio steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope

for as long as I can remember. I have, to put it mildly, a complex relationship with my parents, one of whom has struggled with addiction for nearly my entire life. My grandparents, neither of whom graduated from high school, raised me, and few members of even my extended family attended college. The statistics tell you that kids like me face a grim future—that if they're lucky, they'll manage to avoid welfare; and if they're unlucky, they'll die of a heroin overdose, as happened to dozens in my small hometown just last year.

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

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

There is an ethnic component lurking in the background of my

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

The Scots-Irish are one of the most distinctive subgroups in America. As one observer noted, "In traveling across America, the Scots-Irish have consistently blown my mind as far and away the most persistent and unchanging regional subculture in the country. Their family structures, religion and politics, and social lives all remain unchanged compared to the wholesale abandonment of tradition that's occurred nearly everywhere else."<sup>1</sup> This distinctive embrace of cultural tradition comes along with many good traits—an intense sense of loyalty, a fierce dedication to family and country—but also many bad ones. We do not like outsiders or people who are different from us, whether the difference lies in how they look, how they act, or, most important, how they talk. To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart.

If ethnicity is one side of the coin, then geography is the other. When the first wave of Scots-Irish immigrants landed in the New World in the eighteenth century, they were deeply attracted to

the Appalachian Mountains. This region is admittedly huge—stretching from Alabama to Georgia in the South to Ohio to parts of New York in the North—but the culture of Greater Appalachia is remarkably cohesive. My family, from the hills of eastern Kentucky, describe themselves as hillbillies, but Hank Williams, Jr.—born in Louisiana and an Alabama resident—also identified himself as one in his rural white anthem “A Country Boy Can Survive.” It was Greater Appalachia’s political reorientation from Democrat to Republican that redefined American politics after Nixon. And it is in Greater Appalachia where the fortunes of working-class whites seem dimmest. From low social mobility to poverty to divorce and drug addiction, my home is a hub of misery.

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

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

traits that our culture inculcates make it difficult to succeed in a changing world.

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

I once held this opinion myself, and I very desperately wanted to believe it during my youth. It makes sense. Not having a job is stressful, and not having enough money to live on is even more so. As the manufacturing center of the industrial Midwest has hollowed out, the white working class has lost both its economic security and the stable home and family life that comes with it.

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

The tile business employed about a dozen people, and most employees had worked there for many years. One guy worked

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

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

Eventually, Bob, too, was fired. When it happened, he lashed out at his manager: "How could you do this to me? Don't you know I've got a pregnant girlfriend?" And he was not alone: At

least two other people, including Bob's cousin, lost their jobs or quit during my short time at the tile warehouse.

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

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

It's worth noting that although I focus on the group of people I know—working-class whites with ties to Appalachia—I'm not arguing that we deserve more sympathy than other folks. This is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group. That said, I do hope that

readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without filtering their views through a racial prism. To many analysts, terms like "welfare queen" conjure unfair images of the lazy black mom living on the dole. Readers of this book will realize quickly that there is little relationship between that specter and my argument: I have known many welfare queens; some were my neighbors, and all were white.

This book is not an academic study. In the past few years, William Julius Wilson, Charles Murray, Robert Putnam, and Raj Chetty have authored compelling, well-researched tracts demonstrating that upward mobility fell off in the 1970s and never really recovered, that some regions have fared much worse than others (shocker: Appalachia and the Rust Belt score poorly), and that many of the phenomena I saw in my own life exist across society. I may quibble with some of their conclusions, but they have demonstrated convincingly that America has a problem. Though I will use data, and though I do sometimes rely on academic studies to make a point, my primary aim is not to convince you of a documented problem. My primary aim is to tell a true story about what that problem feels like when you were born with it hanging around your neck.

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

the world. That's the short version. The long version exists in the pages that follow.

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

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

Fortunately, both Jimmy and Lori found their way. Jimmy worked his way through night school and landed a sales job with Johnson & Johnson. He was the first person in my family to have a "career." By the time she turned thirty, Lori was working in radiology and had such a nice new husband that Mamaw told the entire family, "If they ever get divorced, I'm following him."

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

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

## Chapter 4

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

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

town's biggest employer, and though troubling signs were on the horizon, Middletown had avoided significant economic problems. "We saw ourselves as a really fine community, on par with Shaker Heights or Upper Arlington," explained a decades-long veteran of the public schools, comparing the Middletown of yore to some of the most successful of Ohio's suburbs. "Of course, none of us knew what would happen."

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

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

As a kid, I sorted Middletown into three basic geographic regions. First, the area surrounding the high school, which opened

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

Then there was the area where we lived—mostly single-family homes, with abandoned warehouses and factories within walking distance. Looking back, I don't know if the "really poor" areas and my block were any different, or whether these divisions were the constructs of a mind that didn't want to believe it was *really* poor.

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

grandkids woke to find thick locks cracked in two by dead-bolt cutters. From that point forward, I walked.

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

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

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

heyday, had a soda bar and served root beer floats. Across the street is a building that looks like a theater, with one of those giant triangular signs that reads "ST\_\_L" because the letters in the middle were shattered and never replaced. If you need a payday lender or a cash-for-gold store, downtown Middletown is the place to be.

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

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

This change is a symptom of a new economic reality: rising residential segregation. The number of working-class whites in high-poverty neighborhoods is growing. In 1970, 25 percent of white children lived in a neighborhood with poverty rates above 10 percent. In 2000, that number was 40 percent. It's almost certainly even higher today. As a 2011 Brookings Institution study

found, “compared to 2000, residents of extreme-poverty neighborhoods in 2005–09 were more likely to be white, native-born, high school or college graduates, homeowners, and not receiving public assistance.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, bad neighborhoods no longer plague only urban ghettos; the bad neighborhoods have spread to the suburbs.

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

City leaders have tried in vain to revive Middletown’s downtown. You’ll find their most infamous effort if you follow Central Avenue to its end point on the banks of the Miami River, once a lovely place. For reasons I can’t begin to fathom, the city’s brain trust decided to turn our beautiful riverfront into Lake Middletown, an infrastructural project that apparently involved shoveling tons of dirt into the river and hoping something interesting would come of it. It accomplished nothing, though the river now features a man-made dirt island about the size of a city block.

Efforts to reinvent downtown Middletown always struck me as futile. People didn’t leave because our downtown lacked trendy cultural amenities. The trendy cultural amenities left because there weren’t enough consumers in Middletown to support them.

And why weren’t there enough well-paying consumers? Because there weren’t enough jobs to employ those consumers. Downtown Middletown’s struggles were a symptom of everything else happening to Middletown’s people, especially the collapsing importance of Armco Kawasaki Steel.

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

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

The other reason most still call it Armco is that Kawasaki was a Japanese company, and in a town full of World War II vets and

their families, you'd have thought that General Tojo himself had decided to set up shop in southwest Ohio when the merger was announced. The opposition was mostly a bunch of noise. Even Papaw—who once promised he'd disown his children if they bought a Japanese car—stopped complaining a few days after they announced the merger. "The truth is," he told me, "that the Japanese are our friends now. If we end up fighting any of those countries, it'll be the goddamned Chinese."

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

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

Still, few of my friends had ambitions to work there. As small children, we had the same dreams that other kids did; we wanted to be astronauts or football players or action heroes. I wanted to be a professional puppy-player-wither, which at the time seemed eminently reasonable. By the sixth grade, we wanted to be veterinarians or doctors or preachers or businessmen. But not steelworkers. Even at Roosevelt Elementary—where, thanks to Middletown geography, most people's parents lacked a college

education—no one wanted to have a blue-collar career and its promise of a respectable middle-class life. We never considered that we'd be lucky to land a job at Armco; we took Armco for granted.

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

For my grandparents, Armco was an economic savior—the engine that brought them from the hills of Kentucky into America's middle class. My grandfather loved the company and knew every make and model of car built from Armco steel. Even after most American car companies transitioned away from steel-bodied cars, Papaw would stop at used-car dealerships whenever he saw an old Ford or Chevy. "Armco made this steel," he'd tell me. It was one of the few times that he ever betrayed a sense of genuine pride.

Despite that pride, he had no interest in my working there: "Your generation will make its living with their minds, not their hands," he once told me. The only acceptable career at Armco was

as an engineer, not as a laborer in the weld shop. A lot of other Middletown parents and grandparents must have felt similarly: To them, the American Dream required forward momentum. Manual labor was honorable work, but it was their generation's work—we had to do something different. To move up was to move on. That required going to college.

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

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

There was, and still is, a sense that those who make it are of two varieties. The first are lucky: They come from wealthy families with connections, and their lives were set from the moment they were born. The second are the meritocratic: They were born

with brains and couldn't fail if they tried. Because very few in Middletown fall into the former category, people assume that everyone who makes it is just really smart. To the average Middletonian, hard work doesn't matter as much as raw talent.

It's not like parents and teachers never mention hard work. Nor do they walk around loudly proclaiming that they expect their children to turn out poorly. These attitudes lurk below the surface, less in what people say than in how they act. One of our neighbors was a lifetime welfare recipient, but in between asking my grandmother to borrow her car or offering to trade food stamps for cash at a premium, she'd blather on about the importance of industriousness. "So many people abuse the system, it's impossible for the hardworking people to get the help they need," she'd say. This was the construct she'd built in her head: Most of the beneficiaries of the system were extravagant moochers, but she—despite never having worked in her life—was an obvious exception.

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

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

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

Alongside these conflicting norms about the value of blue-collar work existed a massive ignorance about how to achieve white-collar work. We didn't know that all across the country—and even in our hometown—other kids had already started a competition to get ahead in life. During first grade, we played a game every morning: The teacher would announce the number of the day, and we'd go person by person and announce a math equation that produced the number. So if the number of the day was

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

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

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

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

I may not have known multiplication that day, but when I came home and told Papaw about my heartbreak, he turned it into triumph. I learned multiplication and division before dinner. And for two years after that, my grandfather and I would practice increasingly complex math once a week, with an ice cream reward for solid performance. I would beat myself up when I

didn't understand a concept, and storm off, defeated. But after I'd pout for a few minutes, Papaw was always ready to go again. Mom was never much of a math person, but she took me to the public library before I could read, got me a library card, showed me how to use it, and always made sure I had access to kids' books at home.

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

## Chapter 5

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I assume I'm not alone in having few memories from before I was six or seven. I know that I was four when I climbed on top of the dining room table in our small apartment, announced that I was the Incredible Hulk, and dove headfirst into the wall to prove that I was stronger than any building. (I was wrong.)

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

My father, Don Bowman, was Mom's second husband. Mom and Dad married in 1983 and split up around the time I started

## Chapter 11

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I arrived for orientation at Ohio State in early September 2007, and I couldn't have been more excited. I remember every little detail about that day: lunch at Chipotle, the first time Lindsay had ever eaten there; the walk from the orientation building to the south campus 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 when I was

eighteen felt like a piece of cake now. I had puzzled through those financial aid forms with Mamaw a few years earlier, arguing about whether to list her or Mom as my "parent/guardian." We had worried that unless I somehow obtained and submitted the 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 a nicer shirt and a pair of black shoes, and came away with a job offer to be a "consultant." I cared about their mission, and they were great people. I began work immediately.

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 would likely never go away. I never confronted these demands head-on. I never explained to Mom that no matter how nice and caring she was at any given time—and while I had mono, she couldn't have been a better mother—I just felt uncomfortable around her. To 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 options. (I probably could have asked my aunt or uncle, but I desperately wanted to do things on my own.) One Friday morning I dropped off my rent check, knowing that if I waited another day, the fifty-dollar late fee would kick in. I didn't have enough money to 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 counselor and plotted my exit—I'd need to take classes during the summer and more than double the full-time course load during some terms. It was, even by my heightened standards, an intense year. During a particularly terrible February, I sat down with my 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 most admired man in America (and likely still is), but even when the country was enraptured by his rise, most Middletonians viewed him suspiciously. George W. Bush had few fans in 2008. Many loved Bill Clinton, but many more saw him as the symbol of 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 hadn't. When I think today about my life and how genuinely incredible it is—a gorgeous, kind, brilliant life partner; the financial security that I dreamed about as a child; great 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 think she's wrong but because we know she's right.

Many try to blame the anger and cynicism of working-class whites on misinformation. Admittedly, there is an industry of conspiracy-mongers and fringe lunatics writing about all 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."<sup>21</sup> 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 things and participate meaningfully in society. Social psychologists have shown that group belief is a powerful motivator in performance. When groups perceive that it's in their interest to work hard and achieve things, members of that group outperform other 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 their lives are less economically successful than those of their parents'.

In 2010, that just wasn't my mind-set. I was happy about where I was and overwhelmingly hopeful about the future. For the first time in my life, I felt like an outsider in Middletown. And what turned me into an alien was my optimism.

## Notes

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1. Razib Khan, "The Scots-Irish as Indigenous People," *Discover* (July 22, 2012), <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/gnxp/2012/07/the-scots-irish-as-indigenous-people/#.VY8zEBNViko>.
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