

Chapter 3

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

Uncle Jimmy once told me about the time before his sisters were born: "We were just a happy, normal middle-class family. I remember watching *Leave It to Beaver* on TV and thinking that looked like us." When he first told me this, I nodded attentively

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

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

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

and my grandmother lived in a home that was, by Jackson standards, a mansion—two thousand square feet, four bedrooms, and modern plumbing.

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

Hillbilly culture at the time (and maybe now) blended a robust sense of honor, devotion to family, and bizarre sexism into a sometimes explosive mix. Before Mamaw was married, her brothers had been willing to murder boys who disrespected their sister. Now that she was married to a man whom many of them considered more a brother than an outsider, they tolerated behavior that would have gotten Papaw killed in the holler. "Mom's brothers would come up and want to go carousing with Dad," Uncle Jimmy explained. "They'd go drinking and chasing women. Uncle Pet was always the leader. I didn't want to hear about it, but I always did. It was that culture from back then that expected the men were going to go out and do what they wanted to do."

Mamaw felt disloyalty acutely. She loathed anything that smacked of a lack of complete devotion to family. In her own home, she'd say things like "I'm sorry I'm so damned mean" and "You know I love you, but I'm just a crazy bitch." But if she knew of anyone criticizing so much as her socks to an outsider, she'd fly off the handle. "I don't know those people. You never talk about family to some stranger. Never." My sister, Lindsay, and I could fight like cats and dogs in her home, and for the most part she'd let us figure things out alone. But if I told a friend that my

sister was hateful and Mamaw overheard, she'd remember it and tell me the next time we were alone that I had committed the cardinal sin of disloyalty. "How *dare* you speak about your sister to some little shit? In five years you won't even remember his goddamned name. But your sister is the only true friend you'll ever have." Yet in her own life, with three children at home, the men who should have been most loyal to her—her brothers and husband—conspired against her.

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

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

threw it out the back door. The next year he greeted a crowd at his daughter's birthday party and promptly coughed up a huge wad of phlegm at everyone's feet. Then he smiled and walked off to grab himself another beer.

I couldn't believe that mild-mannered Papaw, whom I adored as a child, was such a violent drunk. His behavior was due at least partly to Mamaw's disposition. She was a violent nondrunk. And she channeled her frustrations into the most productive activity imaginable: covert war. When Papaw passed out on the couch, she'd cut his pants with scissors so they'd burst at the seam when he next sat down. Or she'd steal his wallet and hide it in the oven just to piss him off. When he came home from work and demanded fresh dinner, she'd carefully prepare a plate of fresh garbage. If he was in a fighting mood, she'd fight back. In short, she devoted herself to making his drunken life a living hell.

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

Mamaw told Papaw after a particularly violent night of drinking that if he ever came home drunk again, she'd kill him. A week later, he came home drunk again and fell asleep on the couch. Mamaw, never one to tell a lie, calmly retrieved a gasoline canister from the garage, poured it all over her husband, lit a match, and dropped it on his chest. When Papaw burst into

flames, their eleven-year-old daughter jumped into action to put out the fire and save his life. Miraculously, Papaw survived the episode with only mild burns.

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

It's not obvious to anyone why Mamaw and Papaw's marriage fell apart. Perhaps Papaw's alcoholism got the best of him. Uncle Jimmy suspects that he eventually "ran around" on Mamaw. Or maybe Mamaw just cracked—with three living kids, one dead one, and a host of miscarriages in between, who could have blamed her?

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

traveling farther than Cincinnati as children. They believed that they had made it and that their children would go even further.

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

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

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

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

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 Midletown, 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.'"¹¹ Kentucky—down to its county rivalries—moved with the Appalachian migrants to town.

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

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

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."¹² In other words, bad neighborhoods no longer plague only urban ghettos; the bad neighborhoods have spread to the suburbs.

This has occurred for complicated reasons. Federal housing policy has actively encouraged homeownership, from Jimmy Carter's Community Reinvestment Act to George W. Bush's ownership society. But in the Middletowns of the world, homeownership comes at a steep social cost: As jobs disappear in a given area, declining home values trap people in certain neighborhoods. Even if you'd like to move, you can't, because the bottom has fallen out of the market—you now owe more than any buyer is willing to pay. The costs of moving are so high that many people stay put. Of course, the people trapped are usually 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 Midwesterner, 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.¹³ The Public Religion Institute based its results on surveys—essentially, they called around and asked people what they thought.¹⁴ The only thing that report proves is that many folks talk about working more than they actually work.

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

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

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

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-dod-dee-dot." I remember watching Joe Montana lead a TD-winning drive in the Super Bowl against the hometown Bengals. And I remember the early September day in kindergarten when Mom and Lindsay picked me up from school and told me that I'd never see my dad again. He was giving me up for adoption, they said. It was the saddest I had ever felt.

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

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

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

We'd all eventually learn that there was much to dislike about Bob. But what drove Mamaw's initial dislike were the parts of him that most resembled her. Mamaw apparently understood

what would take me another twenty years to learn: that social class in America isn't just about money. And her desire that her children do better than she had done extended past their education and employment and into the relationships they formed. When it came to spouses for her kids and parents for her grandkids, Mamaw felt, whether she knew it consciously, that she wasn't good enough.

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

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

My life assumed a predictable cadence: I'd go to school and come home and eat dinner. I visited Mamaw and Papaw nearly every day. Papaw would sit on our porch to smoke, and I'd sit out there with him and listen to him grumble about politics or the steelworkers' union. When I learned to read, Mom bought me my first chapter book—*Space Brat*—and heaped praise on me for

finishing it quickly. I loved to read, and I loved to work on math problems with Papaw, and I loved the way that Mom seemed to delight in everything I did.

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

Mom didn't want me to understand only the rules of football; she wanted me to understand the strategy. We practiced on our construction-paper football field, going over the various contingencies: What happened if a particular lineman (a shiny nickel) missed his block? What could the quarterback (a dime) do if no receiver (another dime) was open? We didn't have chess, but we did have football.

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

Mom believed deeply in the promise of education. She was the salutariorian of her high school class but never made it to college

because Lindsay was born weeks after Mom graduated from high school. But she did return to a local community college and earn an associate's degree in nursing. I was probably seven or eight when she started working full-time as a nurse, and I liked to think that I had contributed in some small way: I "helped" her study by crawling all over her, and I let her practice drawing blood on my youthful veins.

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

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

In the southwest Ohio of my youth, we learned to value loyalty, honor, and toughness. I earned my first bloody nose at five and my first black eye at six. Each of these fights began after someone insulted my mother. Mother jokes were never allowed, and grandmother jokes earned the harshest punishment that my little fists could administer. Mamaw and Papaw ensured that I knew the basic rules of fighting: You never start a fight; you always end the fight if someone else starts it; and even though you never start a fight, it's maybe okay to start one if a man insults your family. This last rule was unspoken but clear. Lindsay had a boyfriend named Derrick, maybe her first boyfriend, who broke up with her after a few days. She was heartbroken as only thirteen-year-olds can be, so I decided to confront Derrick when I saw him walking past our house one day. He had five years and about thirty-five pounds on me, but I came at him twice as he pushed me down easily. The third time I came at him, he'd had enough and proceeded to pound the shit out of me. I ran to Mamaw's house for some first aid, crying and a little bloody. She just smiled at me. "You did good, honey. You did real good."

In fighting, as with many things, Mamaw taught me through experience. She never laid a hand on me punitively—she was anti-spanking in a way must have come from her own bad experiences—but when I asked her what it felt like to be punched in the head, she showed me. A swift blow, delivered by the meat of her hand, directly on my cheek. "That didn't feel so bad, did it?" And the answer was no. Getting hit in the face wasn't nearly as terrible as I'd imagined. This was one of her most important rules of fighting: Unless someone really knows how to hit, a punch in the face is no big deal. Better to take a blow to the face than to miss an opportunity to deliver your own. Her second tip

was to stand sideways, with your left shoulder facing your opponent and your hands raised because "you're a much smaller target that way." Her third rule was to punch with your whole body, especially your hips. Very few people, Mamaw told me, appreciate how unimportant your fist is when it comes to hitting someone.

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

I don't know why, but after a few years Mamaw's views evolved on fighting. I was in third grade, had just lost a race, and felt there was only one way to adequately deal with the taunting victor. Mamaw, lurking nearby, intervened in what was certain to be another schoolyard cage match. She sternly asked whether I had forgotten her lesson that the only just fights are defensive. I didn't know what to say—she had endorsed the unstated rule of honor fighting only a few years earlier. "One time I got in a fight and you told me that I did good," I told her. She said, "Well, then, I was wrong. You shouldn't fight unless you have to." Now, *that* made an impression. Mamaw never admitted mistakes.

The next year, I noticed that a class bully had taken a particular interest in a specific victim, an odd kid I rarely spoke to. Thanks to my prior exploits, I was largely immune to bullying,

and, like most kids, was usually content to avoid the bully's attention. One day, though, he said something about his victim that I overheard, and I felt a strong urge to stick up for the poor kid. There was something pathetic about the target, who seemed especially wounded by the bully's treatment.

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

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

Chris went to the school nurse, and after I confirmed that I hadn't killed him and would avoid the police, my thoughts immediately turned to the school justice system—whether I'd be suspended or expelled and for how long. While the other kids played at recess and Chris recovered with the nurse, the teacher brought me into the classroom. I thought she was going to tell me that she'd called my parents and I'd be kicked out of school. Instead, she gave me a lecture about fighting and made me practice my handwriting instead of playing outside. I detected a hint of approval from the teacher, and I sometimes wonder whether there were school politics at work in her inability to appropriately discipline the class bully. At any rate, Mamaw found out about the fight directly from me and praised me for doing something really good. It was the last time I ever got in a fistfight.

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

When I was about nine years old, things began to unravel at home. Tired of Papaw's constant presence and Mamaw's "interference," Mom and Bob decided to move to Preble County, a sparsely populated part of Ohio farm country approximately thirty-five miles from Middletown. Even as a boy, I knew this was the very worst thing that could happen to me. Mamaw and

Papaw were my best friends. They helped me with my homework and spoiled me with treats when I behaved correctly or finished a difficult school assignment. They were also the gatekeepers. They were the scariest people I knew—old hillbillies who carried loaded guns in their coat pockets and under their car seats, no matter the occasion. They kept the monsters at bay.

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

Mom had a lot of Mamaw's fire, which meant that she never allowed herself to become a victim during domestic disputes. It also meant that she often escalated normal disagreements beyond where they should go. During one of my second-grade football games, a tall, overweight mother muttered about why I had been given the ball on the previous play. Mom, a bleacher row behind the woman, overheard the comment and told her that I'd been given the ball because, unlike her child, I wasn't a fat piece of shit who'd been raised by a fat piece-of-shit mother. By the time I observed the commotion on the sidelines, Bob was ripping Mom away with the woman's hair still clenched in her hands. After the game, I asked Mom what happened, and she replied only, "No one criticizes my boy." I beamed with pride.

In Preble County, with Mamaw and Papaw over forty-five minutes away, the fights turned into screaming matches. Often

the subject was money, though it made little sense for a rural Ohio family with a combined income of over a hundred thousand dollars to struggle with money. But fight they did, because they bought things they didn't need—new cars, new trucks, a swimming pool. By the time their short marriage fell apart, they were tens of thousands of dollars in debt, with nothing to show for it.

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

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

I began to do poorly in school. Many nights I'd lie in bed, unable to sleep because of the noise—the furniture rocking,

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

Not every day was like that, of course. But even when the house was ostensibly peaceful, our lives were so charged that I was constantly on guard. Mom and Bob never smiled at each other or said nice things to Lindsay and me anymore. You never knew when the wrong word would turn a quiet dinner into a terrible fight, or when a minor childhood transgression would send a plate or book flying across the room. It was like we were living among land mines—one wrong step, and *kaaboom*.

Up to that point in my life, I was a perfectly fit and healthy child. I exercised constantly, and though I didn't exactly watch what I ate, I didn't have to. But I began to put on weight, and I was positively chubby by the time I started the fifth grade. I often felt sick and would complain of severe stomachaches to the school nurse. Though I didn't realize it at the time, the trauma at home was clearly affecting my health. "Elementary students may show signs of distress through somatic complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, and pains," reads one resource for school administrators who deal with children who suffer trauma at home. "These students may have a change in behavior, such as increased

irritability, aggression, and anger. Their behaviors may be inconsistent. These students may show a change in school performance and have impaired attention and concentration and more school absences." I just thought I was constipated or that I really hated my new hometown.

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

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

The never-ending conflict took its toll. Even thinking about it today makes me nervous. My heart begins to race, and my stomach leaps into my throat. When I was very young, all I wanted to do was get away from it—to hide from the fighting, go to Mamaw's, or disappear. I couldn't hide from it, because it was all around me.

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

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

Lindsay and I largely bought Mamaw's view of things, and

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

Despite the return to a familiar home, Mom's behavior grew increasingly erratic. She was more roommate than parent, and of the three of us—Mom, Lindsay, and me—Mom was the roommate most prone to hard living. I'd go to bed only to wake up around midnight, when Lindsay got home from doing whatever teenagers do. I'd wake up again at two or three in the morning, when Mom got home. She had new friends, most of them younger and without kids. And she cycled through boyfriends, switching partners every few months. It was so bad that my best friend at the time commented on her "flavors of the month." I'd grown accustomed to a certain amount of instability, but it was of a familiar type: There would be fighting or running away from fights; when things got rocky, Mom would explode on us or even slap or pinch us. I didn't like it—who would?—but this new behavior was just strange. Though Mom had been many things, she hadn't been a partier. When we moved back to Middletown, that changed.

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

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

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

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

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

Mom did find me. She must have seen where I ran from the highway. She banged on the door and demanded that I come out. I begged the owner not to open the door, so she locked the doors and promised Mom that her two dogs—each no bigger than a medium-sized house cat—would attack her if she tried to enter. Eventually Mom broke down the woman's door and dragged me out as I screamed and clurched for anything—the screen door, the guardrails on the steps, the grass on the ground. The woman stood there and watched, and I hated her for doing nothing. But she had in fact done something: In the minutes between my call to Mamaw and Mom's arrival, the woman had apparently dialed 911. So as Mom dragged me to her car, two police cruisers pulled up, and the cops who got out put Mom in handcuffs. She did not go quietly; they wrestled her into the back of a cruiser. Then she was gone.

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

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

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

Mom was released from jail on bond and prosecuted for a domestic violence misdemeanor. The case depended entirely on me. Yet during the hearing, when asked if Mom had ever threatened me, I said no. The reason was simple: My grandparents were paying a lot of money for the town's highest-powered lawyer. They were furious with my mother, but they didn't want their daughter in jail, either. The lawyer never explicitly encouraged dishonesty, but he did make it clear that what I said would either increase or decrease the odds that Mom spent additional time in prison. "You don't want your mom to go to jail, do you?" he asked. So I lied, with the express understanding that even though Mom would have her liberty, I could live with my grandparents whenever I wished. Mom would officially retain custody, but from that day forward I lived in her house only when I chose to—and Mamaw told me that if Mom had a problem with the arrangement, she could talk to the barrel of Mamaw's gun. This was hillbilly justice, and it didn't fail me.

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

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

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

The adventure had just begun. I had traveled out of state before: I had joined my grandparents on road trips to South Carolina and Texas, and I visited Kentucky regularly. On those trips, I rarely spoke to anyone except family, and I never noticed anything all that different. Napa was like a different country. In California, every day included a new adventure with my teenage cousins and their friends. During one trip we went to the Castro District of San Francisco so that, in the words of my older cousin Rachael, I could learn that gay people weren't out to molest me. Another day, we visited a winery. On yet another day, we helped at my cousin Nate's high school football practice. It was all very exciting. Everyone I met thought I sounded like I was from Kentucky. Of course, I kind of was from Kentucky. And I loved that people thought I had a funny accent. That said, it became clear to me that California really was something else. I'd visited Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Columbus, and Lexington. I'd spent a considerable amount of time in South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Arkansas. So why was California so different?

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

Chapter 6

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

There was one person for whom the term "sibling" definitely applied: my sister, Lindsay. If any adjective ever preceded her in-