

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 stepsisters by one measure, but only two if you limited the tally to the offspring of Mom's husband of the moment. Then there was my biological dad's wife, and she had at least one kid, so maybe I should count him, too. Sometimes I'd wax philosophical about the meaning of the word "sibling": Are the children of your mom's previous husbands still related to you? If so, what about the future children of your mom's previous husbands? By some metrics, I probably had about a dozen stepsiblings.

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

troduction, it was always one of pride: “my *full* sister, Lindsay”; “my *whole* sister, Lindsay”; “my *big* sister, Lindsay.” Lindsay was (and remains) the person I was proudest to know. The moment I learned that “half sister” had nothing to do with my affections and everything to do with the genetic nature of our relationship—that Lindsay, by virtue of having a different father, was just as much my half sister as people I’d never seen—remains one of the most devastating moments of my life. Mamaw told me this nonchalantly as I exited the shower one night before bedtime, and I screamed and wailed as if I’d just learned that my dog had died. I calmed down only after Mamaw relented and agreed that henceforth no one would ever refer to Lindsay as my “half sister” again.

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

I always saw her as more adult than child. She never expressed her displeasure at her teenage boyfriends by storming off and slamming doors. When Mom worked late nights or otherwise

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

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

When we arrived at the hotel, a lady instructed us to follow signs to a giant ballroom and wait in line. The ballroom was perfectly tacky in that 1970s sort of way: ugly carpet, big chandeliers, and lighting just bright enough to prevent you from stumbling over your own feet. I wondered how any talent agent could ever appreciate my sister’s beauty. It was too damned dark.

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

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

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

What I do know is that our exuberance didn't survive the car ride. Mom began to worry aloud about the cost of the trip, causing Lindsay and me to bicker about which one of us should go (no doubt I was being a brat). Mom became progressively angrier and then snapped. What happened next was no surprise: There was a lot of screaming, some punching and driving, and then a stopped car on the side of the road, full of two sobbing kids. Mamaw intervened before things got out of hand, but it's a miracle we didn't crash and die: Mom driving and slapping the kids in the backseat; Mamaw on the passenger side, slapping

and screaming at Mom. That was why the car stopped—though Mom was a multitasker, this was too much. We drove home in silence after Mamaw explained that if Mom lost her temper again, Mamaw would shoot her in the face. That night we stayed at Mamaw's house.

I'll never forget Lindsay's face as she marched upstairs to bed. It wore the pain of a defeat known by only a person who experiences the highest high and the lowest low in a matter of minutes. She had been on the cusp of achieving a childhood dream; now she was just another teenage girl with a broken heart. Mamaw turned to retire to her couch, where she would watch *Law & Order*, read the Bible, and fall asleep. I stood in the narrow walkway that separated the living room from the dining room and asked Mamaw a question that had been on my mind since she ordered Mom to drive us home safely. I knew what she'd say, but I guess I just wanted reassurance. “Mamaw, does God love us?” She hung her head, gave me a hug, and began to cry.

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

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

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

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

helicopter. Your death is your own fault." God helps those who help themselves. This was the wisdom of the Book of Mamaw.

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

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

Either because she felt bad for me or because she knew I loved dogs, Gail took me to the local pet store, where a brand-new litter of German shepherd puppies was on display. I desperately wanted one and had just enough birthday money to make the purchase. Gail reminded me that dogs were a lot of work and that my family (read: my mother) had a terrible history of getting dogs and then giving them away. When wisdom fell on deaf ears—"You're probably right, Gail, but they're soooo cute!"—

authority kicked in: "Honey, I'm sorry, but I'm not letting you buy this dog." By the time we returned to Mamaw Blanton's house, I was more upset about the dog than about losing father number two.

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

One of the worst parts, honestly, was that Bob's departure would further complicate the tangled web of last names in our family. Lindsay was a Lewis (her dad's last name), Mom took the last name of whichever husband she was married to, Mamaw and Papaw were Vances, and all of Mamaw's brothers were Blantons. I shared a name with no one I really cared about (which bothered me already), and with Bob gone, explaining why my name was J.D. Hamel would require a few additional awkward moments. "Yeah, my legal father's last name is Hamel. You haven't met him because I don't see him. No, I don't know why I don't see him."

Of all the things that I hated about my childhood, nothing compared to the revolving door of father figures. To her credit, Mom had avoided abusive or neglectful partners, and I never felt mistreated by any of the men she brought into our home. But I hated the disruption. And I hated how often these boyfriends would walk out of my life just as I'd begun to like them. Lindsay,

with the benefit of age and wisdom, viewed all of the men skeptically. She knew that at some point they'd be gone. With Bob's departure, I had learned the same lesson.

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

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

Mom perhaps sensed that Bob was regretting his decision to take on an additional child, because one day she called me into the living room to speak on the phone with Don Bowman, my

biological father. It was a short but memorable conversation. He asked if I remembered wanting to have a farm with horses and cows and chickens, and I answered that I did. He asked if I remembered my siblings—Cory and Chelsea—and I did a little bit, so I said, “Kind of.” He asked if I’d like to see him again.

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

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

More than any other person, Dad understood what Kentucky meant to me, because it meant the same thing to him. His mom

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

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

I remember running through a field with Dad’s collie, Dannie, a beautiful, bedraggled creature so gentle that he once caught a baby rabbit and carried it in his mouth, unharmed, to a human for inspection. I have no idea why I was running, but we both collapsed from exhaustion and lay in the grass, Dannie’s head on my chest and my eyes staring at the blue sky. I don’t know that I had ever felt so content, so completely unworried about life and its stresses.

Dad had built a home with an almost jarring serenity. He and his wife argued, but they rarely raised their voices at each other and never resorted to the brutal insults that were commonplace

in Mom's house. None of their friends drank, not even socially. Even though they believed in corporal punishment, it was never doled out excessively or combined with verbal abuse—spanking was methodical and anger-free. My younger brother and sister clearly enjoyed their lives, even though they lacked pop music or R-rated movies.

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

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

In his religious habits, Dad lived the stereotype of a culturally conservative Protestant with Southern roots, even though the stereotype is mostly inaccurate. Despite their reputation for clinging to their religion, the folks back home resembled Mamaw more than Dad: deeply religious but without any attachment to a real church community. Indeed, the only conservative Protestants I knew who attended church regularly were my dad and his family.¹⁷ In the middle of the Bible Belt, active church attendance is actually quite low.¹⁸

Despite its reputation, Appalachia—especially northern Alabama and Georgia to southern Ohio—has far lower church attendance than the Midwest, parts of the Mountain West, and much of the space between Michigan and Montana. Oddly enough, we think we attend church more than we actually do. In a recent Gallup poll, Southerners and Midwesterners reported the highest rates of church attendance in the country. Yet *actual* church attendance is much lower in the South.

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

The juxtaposition is jarring: Religious institutions remain a positive force in people's lives, but in a part of the country slammed by the decline of manufacturing, joblessness, addiction, and broken homes, church attendance has fallen off. Dad's

church offered something desperately needed by people like me. For alcoholics, it gave them a community of support and a sense that they weren't fighting addiction alone. For expectant mothers, it offered a free home with job training and parenting classes. When someone needed a job, church friends could either provide one or make introductions. When Dad faced financial troubles, his church banded together and purchased a used car for the family. In the broken world I saw around me—and for the people struggling in that world—religion offered tangible assistance to keep the faithful on track.

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

He worried that the custody war was destroying me. When I saw him during visitations before the adoption, I would hide under the bed for the first few hours, fearful that he would kidnap me and never let me see Mamaw again. Seeing his son in such a frightened state led him to reconsider his approach. Mamaw hated him, a fact I knew firsthand; but Dad said her hatred stemmed from the early days of his marriage to Mom, when he was far from a perfect husband. Sometimes when he came to pick me up, Mamaw would stand on the porch and stare at him, unblinking, clutching a hidden weapon. When he spoke to the court's child psychiatrist, he learned that I had begun acting out

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

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

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

Despite the lack of a legal relationship, I began spending a lot of time with Dad. I visited him on most holidays and spent every other weekend at his house. Though I loved seeing aunts, uncles, and cousins who hadn't been part of my life in years,

the basic segregation of my two lives remained. Dad avoided Mom's side of the family, and vice versa. Lindsay and Mamaw appreciated Dad's new role in my life, but they continued to distrust him. To Mamaw, Dad was the "sperm donor" who had abandoned me at a critical juncture. Although I, too, resented Dad for the past, Mamaw's stubbornness didn't make things any easier.

Still, my relationship with Dad continued to develop, and so did my relationship with his church. The downside of his theology was that it promoted a certain segregation from the outside world. I couldn't listen to Eric Clapton at Dad's house—not because the lyrics were inappropriate but because Eric Clapton was influenced by demonic forces. I'd heard people joke that if you played Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" backward, you'd hear some evil incantation, but a member of Dad's church spoke about the Zeppelin myth as if it were actually true.

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

bad influences. Even Mamaw fell from favor because her religious views didn't conflict with her affinity for Bill Clinton.

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

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

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

do you want to suck dicks?" I was flabbergasted. Why would someone want to do that? She repeated herself, and I said, "Of course not!" "Then," she said, "you're not gay. And even if you did want to suck dicks, that would be okay. God would still love you." That settled the matter. Apparently I didn't have to worry about being gay anymore. Now that I'm older, I recognize the profundity of her sentiment: Gay people, though unfamiliar, threatened nothing about Mamaw's being. There were more important things for a Christian to worry about.

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

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

were the natural finish for a culture sliding so quickly toward the abyss.

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

Chapter 7

In the fall after I turned thirteen, Mom began dating Matt, a younger guy who worked as a firefighter. I adored Matt from the start—he was my favorite of all of Mom's men, and we still keep in touch. One night I was at home watching TV, waiting for Mom to get home from work with a bucket of KFC for dinner. I had two responsibilities that evening: first, track down Lindsay in case she was hungry; and second, run food over to Mamaw as soon as Mom arrived. Shortly before I expected Mom, Mamaw called. "Where is your mother?"

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

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

I figured Mamaw was overreacting. But then I considered the utter predictability of Papaw's schedule. He woke at six in the morning every day, without an alarm clock, then drove to McDonald's at seven to grab a coffee with his old Armco buddies.

After a couple of hours of conversation, he would amble over to Mamaw's house and spend the morning watching TV or playing cards. If he left at all before dinnertime, he might briefly visit his friend Paul's hardware store. Without exception, he stayed at Mamaw's house to greet me when I came home from school. And if I didn't go to Mamaw's—if I went to Mom's, as I did when times were good—he'd usually come over and say goodbye before he went home for the evening. That he had missed all of these events meant that something was very wrong.

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

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

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

We all hugged her before squeezing into the car and heading back to Mamaw's. The adults gave me the unenviable task of tracking down Lindsay and giving her the news. This was before cell phones, and Lindsay, being a seventeen-year-old, was difficult to reach. She wasn't answering the house phone, and none of her friends answered my calls. Mamaw's house sat literally five houses away from Mom's—313 McKinley to 303—so I listened to the adults make plans and watched out the window for signs of my sister's return. The adults spoke about funeral arrangements, where Papaw would want to be buried—"In Jackson, goddammit," Mamaw insisted—and who would call Uncle Jimmy and tell him to come home.

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

Lindsay was a teenager when Papaw died, at the height of that weird mixture of thinking you know everything and caring too much about how others perceive you. Papaw was many things, but he was never cool. He wore the same old T-shirt every day with a front pocket just big enough to fit a pack of cigarettes. He always smelled of mildew, because he washed his clothes but let them dry "naturally," meaning packed together in a washing machine. A

lifetime of smoking had blessed him with an unlimited supply of phlegm, and he had no problem sharing that phlegm with everyone, no matter the time or occasion. He listened to Johnny Cash on perpetual repeat and drove an old El Camino—a car truck—everywhere he went. In other words, Papaw wasn't ideal company for a beautiful seventeen-year-old girl with an active social life. Thus, she took advantage of him in the same way that every young girl takes advantage of a father: She loved and admired him, she asked him for things that he sometimes gave her, and she didn't pay him a lot of attention when she was around her friends.

To this day, being able to "take advantage" of someone is the measure in my mind of having a parent. For me and Lindsay, the fear of imposing stalked our minds, infecting even the food we ate. We recognized instinctively that many of the people we depended on weren't supposed to play that role in our lives, so much so that it was one of the first things Lindsay thought of when she learned of Papaw's death. We were conditioned to feel that we couldn't really depend on people—that, even as children, asking someone for a meal or for help with a broken-down automobile was a luxury that we shouldn't indulge in too much lest we fully tap the reservoir of goodwill serving as a safety valve in our lives. Mamaw and Papaw did everything they could to fight that instinct. On our rare trips to a nice restaurant, they would interrogate me about what I truly wanted until I'd confess that yes, I did want the steak. And then they'd order it for me over my protests. No matter how imposing, no figure could erase that feeling entirely. Papaw had come the closest, but he clearly hadn't succeeded all the way, and now he was gone.

Papaw died on a Tuesday, and I know this because when Mom's boyfriend, Matt, drove me to a local diner the next morn-

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

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

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

I thought about a moment nearly a decade earlier that I'd heard about but didn't remember. I was four or five, sitting in a church pew for a great-uncle's funeral in that same Deaton funeral home in Jackson. We had just arrived after a long drive from Middletown, and when the minister asked us to bow our

heads and pray, I bowed my head and passed out. Mamaw's older brother Uncle Pet lay me on my side with a Bible as a pillow and thought nothing more of it. I was asleep for what happened next, but I've heard some version of it a hundred times. Even today, when I see someone who attended that funeral, they tell me about my hillbilly Mamaw and Papaw.

When I failed to appear in the crowd of mourners leaving the church, Mamaw and Papaw grew suspicious. There were perverts even in Jackson, they told me, who wanted to stick sticks up your burt and "blow on your pecker" as much as the perverts in Ohio or Indiana or California. Papaw hatched a plan: There were only two exits to Deaton's, and no one had driven away yet. Papaw ran to the car and grabbed a .44 Magnum for himself and a .38 Special for Mamaw. They manned the exits to the funeral home and checked every car. When they encountered an old friend, they explained the situation and enlisted help. When they met someone else, they searched the cars like goddamned DEA agents.

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

I thought about Papaw buying me a BB gun with a mounted scope. He placed the gun on his workbench with a vise to hold it in place and fired repeatedly at a target. After each shot, we adjusted the scope, aligning the crosshairs with where the BB impacted the target. And then he taught me how to shoot—how to focus on the sights and not the target, how to exhale before pulling the trigger. Years later, our marine boot camp marksmanship instructors would tell us that the kids who already

"knew" how to shoot performed the worst, because they'd learned improper fundamentals. That was true with one exception: me. From Papaw, I had learned excellent fundamentals, and I qualified with an M16 rifle as an expert, the highest category, with one of the highest scores in my entire platoon.

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

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

Papaw was a terrifying hillbilly made for a different time and place. During that cross-country drive with Aunt Wee, they

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

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

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

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

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

Mamaw, too, seemed out of sorts. Kentucky was usually the one place where she was completely in her element. In Middletown, she could never truly be herself. At Perkins, our favorite breakfast spot, Mamaw's mouth would sometimes earn a request from the manager that she keep her voice down or watch her language. "That fucker," she'd mutter under her breath, chastened and uncomfortable. But at Bill's Family Diner, the only restaurant in Jackson worth sitting down at for a meal, she'd scream at the kitchen staff to "hurry the hell up" and they'd laugh and say, "Okay, Bonnie." Then she'd look at me and tell me, "You know I'm just fucking with them, right? They know I'm not a mean old bitch."

In Jackson, among old friends and real hillbillies, she needed no filter. At her brother's funeral a few years earlier, Mamaw and her niece Denise convinced themselves that one of the pallbearers was a pervert, so they broke into his funeral home office and searched through his belongings. They found an extensive magazine collection, including a few issues of *Beaver Hunt* (a periodical that I can assure you has nothing to do with aquatic mammals). Mamaw found it hilarious. "Fucking *Beaver Hunt*!" she'd roar.

"Who comes up with this shit?" She and Denise hatched a plot to take the magazines home and mail them to the pallbearer's wife. After a short deliberation, she changed her mind. "With my luck," she told me, "we'll get in a crash on the way back to Ohio and the police will find these damned things in my trunk. I'll be damned if I'm going to go out with everyone thinking I was a lesbian—and a perverted one at that!" So they threw the magazines away to "teach that pervert a lesson" and never spoke of it again. This side of Mamaw rarely showed itself outside of Jackson.

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

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

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

Mom's, under the ruse that Mamaw needed me with her as she grieved. Perhaps they hoped to give me a little space to mourn Papaw. I don't know.

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

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

A few days after the funeral, I walked onto Mamaw's front porch, looked down the street, and saw an incredible commotion.

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

Papaw's death cast light upon something that had previously lurked in the shadows. Only a kid could have missed the writing on the wall, I suppose. A year earlier, Mom had lost her job at Middletown Hospital after Rollerblading through the emergency room. At the time I saw Mom's bizarre behavior as the consequence of her divorce from Bob. Similarly, Mamaw's occasional references to Mom "getting loaded" seemed like random comments of a woman known for her willingness to say anything, not a diagnosis of a deteriorating reality. Not long after Mom lost her job, during my trip to California, I heard from her just once. I had no idea that, behind the scenes, the adults—meaning Mamaw on the one hand and Uncle Jimmy and his wife, Aunt Donna, on the other—were debating whether I should move permanently to California.

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

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

So instead of retreating to Mamaw's house, or calling her every time problems arose with Mom, I relied on Lindsay and on myself. Lindsay was a recent high school graduate, and I had just started seventh grade, but we made it work. Sometimes

Matt or Tammy brought us food, but we largely fended for ourselves: Hamburger Helper, TV dinners, Pop-Tarts, and breakfast cereal. I'm not sure who paid the bills (probably Mamaw). We didn't have a lot of structure—Lindsay once came home from work to find me hanging out with a couple of her friends, all of us drunk—but in some ways we didn't need it. When Lindsay learned that I got the beer from a friend of hers, she didn't lose her cool or laugh at the indulgence; she kicked everyone out and then lectured me on substance abuse.

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

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

On designated weekdays and weekends, we visited our mother at the CAT house. Between the hills of Kentucky, Mamaw and

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

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

Mom's rehab proceeded apace, and her condition apparently improved with time. Sundays were designated as unstructured family time: We couldn't take Mom off-site, but we were able to eat and watch TV and talk as normal. Sundays were usually

happy, though Mom did angrily chide us during one visit because our relationship with Mamaw had grown too close. "I'm your mother, not her," she told us. I realized that Mom had begun to regret the seeds she'd sown with Lindsay and me.

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

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

At one meeting a man walked in a few minutes late, smelling like a garbage can. His matted hair and dirty clothes evidenced a life on the streets, a truth he confirmed as soon as he opened his mouth. "My kids won't speak to me; no one will," he told us. "I

scrounge together what money I can and spend it on smack. Tonight I couldn't find any money or any smack, so I came in here because it looked warm." The organizer asked if he'd be willing to try giving up the drugs for more than one night, and the man answered with admirable candor: "I could say yes, but honestly, probably not. I'll probably be back at it tomorrow night."

I never saw that man again. Before he left, someone did ask him where he was from. "Well, I've lived here in Hamilton for most of my life. But I was born down in eastern Kentucky, Owsley County." At the time, I didn't know enough about Kentucky geography to tell the man that he had been born no more than twenty miles from my grandparents' childhood home.