

Hillbilly Elegy

*A Memoir of a Family
and Culture in Crisis*

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HARPER

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Chapter 1

Like most small children, I learned my home address so that if I got lost, I could tell a grown-up where to take me. In kindergarten, when the teacher asked me where I lived, I could recite the address without skipping a beat, even though my mother changed addresses frequently, for reasons I never understood as a child. Still, I always distinguished “my address” from “my home.” My address was where I spent most of my time with my mother and sister, wherever that might be. But my home never changed: my great-grandmother’s house, in the holler, in Jackson, Kentucky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Uncle Pet came next. Uncle Pet was a tall man with a biting wit and a raunchy sense of humor. The most economically successful of the Blanton crew, Uncle Pet left home early and started some timber and construction businesses that made him enough money to race horses in his spare time. He seemed the nicest of the Blanton men, with the smooth charm of a successful businessman. But that charm masked a fierce temper. Once, when a truck driver delivered supplies to one of Uncle Pet's businesses, he told my old hillbilly uncle, "Off-load this now, you son of a bitch." Uncle Pet took the comment literally: "When you say that, you're calling my dear old mother a bitch, so I'd kindly ask you speak more carefully." When the driver—nicknamed Big Red because of his size and hair color—repeated the insult, Uncle Pet did what any rational business owner would do: He pulled the man from his truck, beat him unconscious, and ran an electric saw up and down his body. Big Red nearly bled to death but was rushed to the hospital and survived. Uncle Pet never went to

jail, though. Apparently, Big Red was also an Appalachian man, and he refused to speak to the police about the incident or press charges. He knew what it meant to insult a man's mother.

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

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

Even knowing what a pistol-packing lunatic Mamaw was, I find this story hard to believe. I polled members of my family, and about half had never heard the story. The part I believe is that she would have murdered the man if someone hadn't stopped her. She loathed disloyalty, and there was no greater disloyalty than class betrayal. Each time someone stole a bike from our porch (three times, by my count), or broke into her car and took

the loose change, or stole a delivery, she'd tell me, like a general giving his troops marching orders, "There is nothing lower than the poor stealing from the poor. It's hard enough as it is. We sure as hell don't need to make it even harder on each other."

Youngest of all the Blanton boys was Uncle Gary. He was the baby of the family and one of the sweetest men I knew. Uncle Gary left home young and built a successful roofing business in Indiana. A good husband and a better father, he'd always say to me, "We're proud of you, ole Jaydot," causing me to swell with pride. He was my favorite, the only Blanton brother not to threaten me with a kick in the ass or a detached ear.

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

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

One of the most common tales of Breathitt's gore revolved around an older man in town who was accused of raping a young girl. Mamaw told me that, days before his trial, the man was found facedown in a local lake with sixteen bullet wounds in his back. The authorities never investigated the murder, and the only mention of the incident appeared in the local newspaper on the morning his body was discovered. In an admirable display

of journalistic pith, the paper reported: "Man found dead. Foul play expected." "Foul play expected?" my grandmother would *roar*. "You're goddamned right. Bloody Breathitt got to that son of a bitch."

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

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

Despite their virtues, or perhaps because of them, the Blanton men were full of vice. A few of them left a trail of neglected children, cheated wives, or both. And I didn't even know them that well: I saw them only at large family reunions or during the holidays. Still, I loved and worshipped them. I once overheard Mamaw tell her mother that I loved the Blanton men because so many father figures had come and gone, but the Blanton men were always there. There's definitely a kernel of truth to that. But more than anything, the Blanton men were the living embodiment of the hills of Kentucky. I loved them because I loved Jackson.

As I grew older, my obsession with the Blanton men faded into appreciation, just as my view of Jackson as some sort of

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

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

Some of it was as heartbreaking as it was cliché: decrepit shacks rotting away, stray dogs begging for food, and old furniture strewn on the lawns. Some of it was far more troubling. While passing a small two-bedroom house, I noticed a frightened set of eyes looking at me from behind the curtains of a bedroom window. My curiosity piqued, I looked closer and counted no fewer than eight pairs of eyes, all looking at me from three windows with an unsettling combination of fear and longing. On the front porch was a thin man, no older than thirty-five, appar-

ently the head of the household. Several ferocious, malnourished, chained-up dogs protected the furniture strewn about the barren front yard. When I asked Rick's son what the young father did for a living, he told me the man had no job and was proud of it. But, he added, "they're mean, so we just try to avoid them."

That house might be extreme, but it represents much about the lives of hill people in Jackson. Nearly a third of the town lives in poverty, a figure that includes about half of Jackson's children. And that doesn't count the large majority of Jacksonians who hover around the poverty line. An epidemic of prescription drug addiction has taken root. The public schools are so bad that the state of Kentucky recently seized control. Nevertheless, parents send their children to these schools because they have little extra money, and the high school fails to send its students to college with alarming consistency. The people are physically unhealthy, and without government assistance they lack treatment for the most basic problems. Most important, they're *mean* about it—they will hesitate to open their lives up to others for the simple reason that they don't wish to be judged.

In 2009, ABC News ran a news report about Appalachian America, highlighting a phenomenon known locally as "Mountain Dew mouth": painful dental problems in young children, generally caused by too much sugary soda. In its broadcast, ABC featured a litany of stories about Appalachian children confronting poverty and deprivation. The news report was widely watched in the region but met with utter scorn. The consistent reaction: This is none of your damn business. "This has to be the most offensive thing I have ever heard and you should all be ashamed, ABC included," wrote one commenter online. Another added: "You should be ashamed of yourself for reinforcing old,

false stereotypes and not giving a more accurate picture of Appalachia. This is an opinion shared among many in the actual rural towns of the mountains that I have met."

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

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

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

The truth is hard, and the hardest truths for hill people are the ones they must tell about themselves. Jackson is undoubtedly full of the nicest people in the world; it is also full of drug addicts and at least one man who can find the time to make eight chil-

dren but can't find the time to support them. It is unquestionably beautiful, but its beauty is obscured by the environmental waste and loose trash that scatters the countryside. Its people are hardworking, except of course for the many food stamp recipients who show little interest in honest work. Jackson, like the Blanton men, is full of contradictions.

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

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

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

grandparents' grandchildren. People have struggled to get out of Jackson for decades; now they struggle to escape Middletown.

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

Chapter 2

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

My grandparents—Mamaw and Papaw—were, without question or qualification, the best things that ever happened to me. They spent the last two decades of their lives showing me the value of love and stability and teaching me the life lessons that most people learn from their parents. Both did their part to ensure that I had the self-confidence and the right opportunities to get a fair shot at the American Dream. But I doubt that, as children, Jim Vance and Bonnie Blanton ever expected much out of their own lives. How could they? Appalachian hills and single-room, K-12 schoolhouses don't tend to foster big dreams.