This was my mind-set when I was seventeen, and though I'm far less angry today than I was then, it was my first indication that the policies of Mamaw's "party of the working man"—the Democrats—weren't all they were cracked up to be.

Political scientists have spent millions of words trying to explain how Appalachia and the South went from staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation. Some blame race relations and the Democratic Party's embrace of the civil rights movement. Others cite religious faith and the hold that social conservatism has on evangelicals in that region. A big part of the explanation lies in the fact that many in the white working class saw precisely what I did, working at Dillman's. As far back as the 1970s, the white working class began to turn to Richard Nixon because of a perception that, as one man put it, government was "payin' people who are on welfare today doin' nothin'! They're laughin' at our society! And we're all hardworkin' people and we're gettin' laughed at for workin' every day!"[20]

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

Despite our efforts to draw bright lines between the working and nonworking poor, Mamaw and I recognized that we shared a lot in common with those whom we thought gave our people a bad name. Those Section 8 recipients looked a lot like us. The matriarch of the first family to move in next door was born in

Kentucky but moved north at a young age as her parents sought a better life. She'd gotten involved with a couple of men, each of whom had left her with a child but no support. She was nice, and so were her kids. But the drugs and the late-night fighting revealed troubles that too many hillbilly transplants knew too well. Confronted with such a realization of her own family's struggle, Mamaw grew frustrated and angry.

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

These were bizarre views for my bleeding-heart grandma. And if she blasted the government for doing too much one day, she'd blast it for doing too little the next. The government, after all, was just helping poor people find a place to live, and my grandma loved the idea of anyone helping the poor. She had no philosophical objection to Section 8 vouchers. So the Democrat in her would resurface. She'd rant about the lack of jobs and wonder aloud whether that was why our neighbor couldn't find a good man. In her more compassionate moments, Mamaw asked if it made any sense that our society could afford aircraft carriers but not drug treatment facilities—like Mom's—for everyone. Sometimes she'd criticize the faceless rich, whom she saw as far too unwilling to carry their fair share of the social burden. Mamaw saw every ballot failure of the local school improvement tax (and there were many) as an indictment of our society's failure to provide a quality education to kids like me.

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

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

The problems of our community hit close to home. Mom's struggles weren't some isolated incident. They were replicated, replayed, and relived by many of the people who, like us, had moved hundreds of miles in search of a better life. There was no end in sight. Mamaw had thought she escaped the poverty

of the hills, but the poverty—emotional, if not financial—had followed her. Something had made her later years eerily similar to her earliest ones. What was happening? What were our neighbor's teenage daughter's prospects? Certainly the odds were against her, with a home life like that. This raised the question: What would happen to me?

I was unable to answer these questions in a way that didn't implicate something deep within the place I called home. What I knew is that other people didn't live like we did. When I visited Uncle Jimmy, I did not wake to the screams of neighbors. In Aunt Wee and Dan's neighborhood, homes were beautiful and lawns well manicured, and police came around to smile and wave but never to load someone's mom or dad in the back of their cruiser.

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

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

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

Though insightful, neither of these books fully answered the questions that plagued me: Why didn't our neighbor leave that abusive man? Why did she spend her money on drugs? Why couldn't she see that her behavior was destroying her daughter? Why were all of these things happening not just to our neighbor but to my mom? It would be years before I learned that no

single book, or expert, or field could fully explain the problems of hillbillies in modern America. Our elegy is a sociological one, yes, but it is also about psychology and community and culture and faith.

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

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

There were the neighbors down the street, a younger woman with a toddler and her middle-aged boyfriend. The boyfriend worked, and the woman spent her days watching *The Young and the Restless*. Her young son was adorable, and he loved Mamaw. At all times of the day—one time, past midnight—he would wander to her doorstep and ask for a snack. His mother had all the time in the world, but she couldn't keep a close enough watch on her child to prevent him from straying into the homes of strangers. Sometimes his diaper would need changing. Mamaw once called social services on the woman, hoping they'd somehow

rescue the young boy. They did nothing. So Mamaw used my nephew's diapers and kept a watchful eye on the neighborhood, always looking for signs of her "little buddy."

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

This was my world: a world of truly irrational behavior. We spend our way into the poorhouse. We buy giant TVs and iPads. Our children wear nice clothes thanks to high-interest credit cards and payday loans. We purchase homes we don't need, refinance them for more spending money, and declare bankruptcy, often leaving them full of garbage in our wake. Thrift is inimical to our being. We spend to pretend that we're upper-class. And when the dust clears—when bankruptcy hits or a family member bails us out of our stupidity—there's nothing left over. Nothing for the kids' college tuition, no investment to grow our wealth, no rainy-day fund if someone loses her job. We know we shouldn't spend like this. Sometimes we beat ourselves up over it, but we do it anyway.

Our homes are a chaotic mess. We scream and yell at each other like we're spectators at a football game. At least one member of the family uses drugs—sometimes the father, sometimes the mother, sometimes both. At especially stressful times, we'll hit and punch each other, all in front of the rest of the

family, including young children; much of the time, the neighbors hear what's happening. A bad day is when the neighbors call the police to stop the drama. Our kids go to foster care but never stay for long. We apologize to our kids. The kids believe we're really sorry, and we are. But then we act just as mean a few days later.

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

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

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

few years, all of them had vanished—given to the police department or to a family friend. After saying goodbye to the fourth dog, our hearts harden. We learn not to grow too attached.

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

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

There were (and remain) many who lived by my grandparents' code. Sometimes you saw it in the subtlest of ways: the old neighbor who diligently tended her garden even as her neighbors let their homes rot from the inside out; the young woman who grew up with my mom, who returned to the neighborhood every day to help her mother navigate old age. I say this not to romanticize my grandparents' way of life—which, as I've observed, was rife with problems—but to note that many in our community may have struggled but did so successfully. There are many intact families, many dinners shared in peaceful homes, many children

studying hard and believing they'll claim their own American Dream. Many of my friends have built successful lives and happy families in Middletown or nearby. They are not the problem, and if you believe the statistics, the children of these intact homes have plenty of reason for optimism.

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

One Sunday, Mamaw agreed to watch Aunt Wee's kids for several hours. Aunt Wee dropped them off at ten. I had to work the dreaded eleven A.M. to eight P.M. shift at the grocery store. I hung out with the kids for about forty-five minutes, then left at ten-forty-five for work. I was unusually upset—devastated, even—to leave them. I wanted nothing more than to spend the day with Mamaw and the babies. I told Mamaw that, and instead of telling me to "quit your damn whining" like I expected, she told me she wished that I could stay home, too. It was a rare moment of empathy. "But if you want the sort of work where you can spend the weekends with your family, you've got to go to college and make something of yourself." That was the essence of Mamaw's genius. She didn't just preach and cuss and demand. She showed me what was possible—a peaceful Sunday afternoon with the people I loved—and made sure I knew how to get there.

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

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

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

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

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