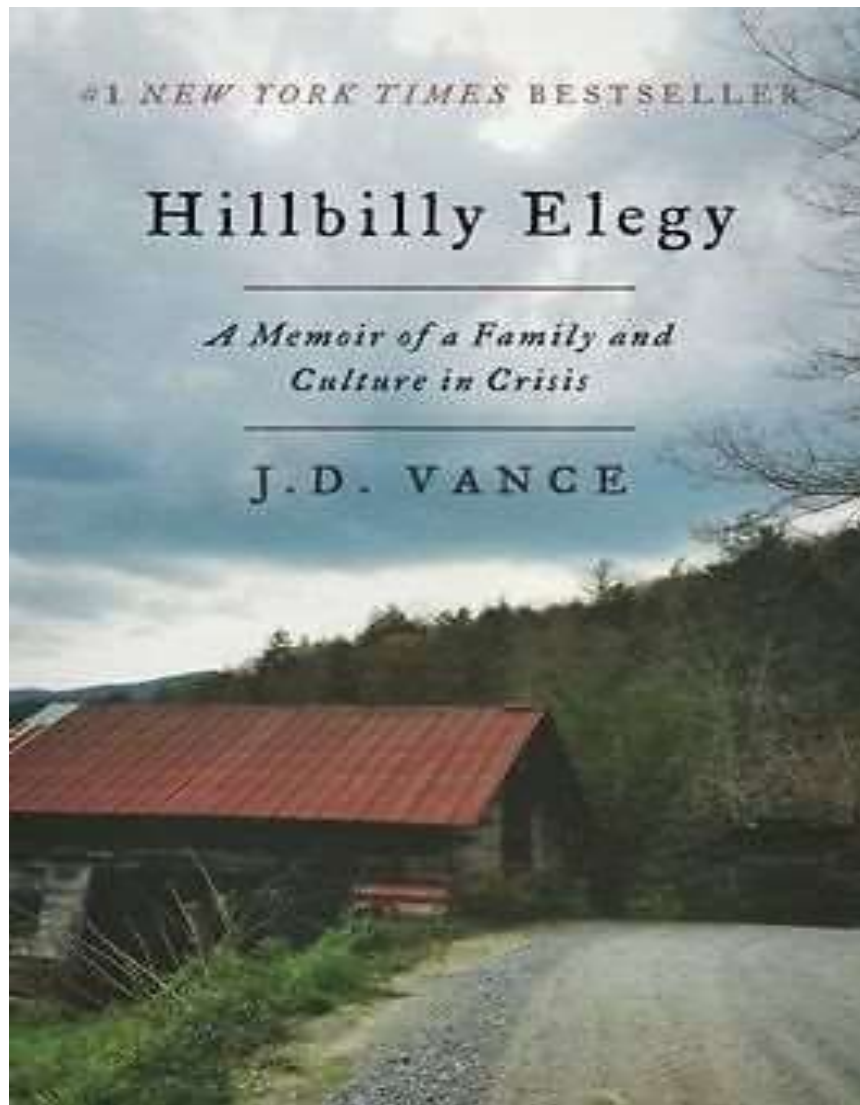


Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis

by J.D. Vance (2016)

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.

We don’t know much about Papaw’s early years, and I doubt that will ever change. We do know that he was something of hillbilly royalty. Papaw’s distant cousin—also Jim Vance—married into the Hatfield family and joined a group of former Confederate soldiers and sympathizers called the Wildcats. When Cousin Jim murdered former Union soldier Asa Harmon McCoy, he kicked off one of the most famous family feuds in American history.

Papaw was born James Lee Vance in 1929, his middle name a tribute to his father, Lee Vance. Lee died just a few months after Papaw’s birth, so Papaw’s overwhelmed mother, Goldie, sent him

to live with her father, Pap Taulbee, a strict man with a small timber business. Though Goldie sent money occasionally, she rarely visited her young son. Papaw would live with Taulbee in Jackson, Kentucky, for the first seventeen years of his life.

Pap Taulbee had a tiny two-room house just a few hundred yards from the Blantons—Blaine and Hattie and their eight children. Hattie felt sorry for the young motherless boy and became a surrogate mother to my grandfather. Jim soon became an extra member of the family: He spent most of his free time running around with the Blanton boys, and he ate most of his meals in Hattie's kitchen. It was only natural that he'd eventually marry her oldest daughter.

Jim married into a rowdy crew. The Blantons were a famous group in Breathitt, and they had a feuding history nearly as illustrious as Papaw's. Mamaw's great-grandfather had been elected county judge at the beginning of the twentieth century, but only after her grandfather, Tilden (the son of the judge), killed a member of a rival family on Election Day.² In a *New York Times* story about the violent feud, two things leap out. The first is that Tilden never went to jail for the crime.³ The second is that, as the *Times* reported, "complications [were] expected." I would imagine so.

When I first read this gruesome story in one of the country's most circulated newspapers, I felt one emotion above all the rest: pride. It's unlikely that any other ancestor of mine has ever appeared in *The New York Times*. Even if they had, I doubt that any deed would make me as proud as a successful feud. And one that could have swung an election, no less! As Mamaw used to say, you

can take the boy out of Kentucky, but you can't take Kentucky out of the boy.

I can't imagine what Papaw was thinking. Mamaw came from a family that would shoot at you rather than argue with you. Her father was a scary old hillbilly with the mouth and war medals of a sailor. Her grandfather's murderous exploits were impressive enough to make the pages of *The New York Times*. And as scary as her lineage was, Mamaw Bonnie herself was so terrifying that, many decades later, a Marine Corps recruiter would tell me that I'd find boot camp easier than living at home. "Those drill instructors are mean," he said. "But not like that grandma of yours." That meanness wasn't enough to dissuade my grandfather. So Mamaw and Papaw were married as teenagers in Jackson, in 1947.

At that time, as the post-World War II euphoria wore off and people began to adjust to a world at peace, there were two types of people in Jackson: those who uprooted their lives and planted them in the industrial powerhouses of the new America, and those who didn't. At the tender ages of fourteen and seventeen, my grandparents had to decide which group to join.

As Papaw once told me, the sole option for many of his friends was to work "in the mines"—mining coal not far from Jackson. Those who stayed in Jackson spent their lives on the edge of poverty, if not submerged in it. So, soon after marrying, Papaw uprooted his young family and moved to Middletown, a small Ohio town with a rapidly growing industrialized economy.

This is the story my grandparents told me, and like most family legends it's largely true but plays fast and loose with the

details. On a recent trip to visit family in Jackson, my great-uncle Arch—Mamaw’s brother-in-law and the last of that generation of Jacksonians—introduced me to Bonnie South, a woman who’d spent all of her eighty-four years a hundred yards from Mamaw’s childhood home. Until Mamaw left for Ohio, Bonnie South was her best friend. And by Bonnie South’s reckoning, Mamaw and Papaw’s departure involved a bit more scandal than any of us realized.

In 1946, Bonnie South and Papaw were lovers. I’m not sure what this meant in Jackson at the time—whether they were preparing for an engagement or just passing the time together. Bonnie had little to say of Papaw besides the fact that he was “very handsome.” The only other thing Bonnie South recalled was that, at some point in 1946, Papaw cheated on Bonnie with her best friend—Mamaw. Mamaw was thirteen and Papaw sixteen, but the affair produced a pregnancy. And that pregnancy added a number of pressures that made *right now* the time to leave Jackson: my intimidating, grizzled war-veteran great-grandfather; the Blanton Brothers, who had already earned a reputation for defending Mamaw’s honor; and an interconnected group of gun-toting hillbillies who immediately knew all about Bonnie Blanton’s pregnancy. Most important, Bonnie and Jim Vance would soon have another mouth to feed before they’d gotten used to feeding themselves. Mamaw and Papaw left abruptly for Dayton, Ohio, where they lived briefly before settling permanently in Middletown.

In later years, Mamaw sometimes spoke of a daughter who died in infancy, and she led us all to believe that the daughter was born sometime after Uncle Jimmy, Mamaw and Papaw’s eldest child. Mamaw suffered eight miscarriages in the decade between

Uncle Jimmy's birth and my mother's. But recently my sister discovered a birth certificate for "Infant" Vance, the aunt I never knew, who died so young that her birth certificate also lists her date of death. The baby who brought my grandparents to Ohio didn't survive her first week. On that birth certificate, the baby's brokenhearted mother lied about her age: Only fourteen at the time and with a seventeen-year-old husband, she couldn't tell the truth, lest they ship her back to Jackson or send Papaw to jail.

Mamaw's first foray into adulthood ended in tragedy. Today I often wonder: Without the baby, would she ever have left Jackson? Would she have run off with Jim Vance to foreign territory? Mamaw's entire life—and the trajectory of our family—may have changed for a baby who lived only six days.

Whatever mix of economic opportunity and family necessity catapulted my grandparents to Ohio, they were there, and there was no going back. So Papaw found a job at Armco, a large steel company that aggressively recruited in eastern Kentucky coal country. Armco representatives would descend on towns like Jackson and promise (truthfully) a better life for those willing to move north and work in the mills. A special policy encouraged wholesale migration: Applicants with a family member working at Armco would move to the top of the employment list. Armco didn't just hire the young men of Appalachian Kentucky; they actively encouraged those men to bring their extended families.

A number of industrial firms employed a similar strategy, and it appears to have worked. During that era, there were many Jacksons and many Middletowns. Researchers have documented two major waves of migration from Appalachia to the industrial

powerhouse economies in the Midwest. The first happened after World War I, when returning veterans found it nearly impossible to find work in the not-yet-industrialized mountains of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee. It ended as the Great Depression hit Northern economies hard.⁴ My grandparents were part of the second wave, composed of returning veterans and the rapidly rising number of young adults in 1940s and '50s Appalachia.⁵ As the economies of Kentucky and West Virginia lagged behind those of their neighbors, the mountains had only two products that the industrial economies of the North needed: coal and hill people. And Appalachia exported a lot of both.

Precise numbers are tough to pin down because studies typically measure “net out-migration”—as in the total number of people who left minus the number of people who came in. Many families constantly traveled back and forth, which skews the data. But it is certain that many millions of people traveled along the “hillbilly highway”—a metaphorical term that captured the opinion of Northerners who saw their cities and towns flooded with people like my grandparents. The scale of the migration was staggering. In the 1950s, thirteen of every one hundred Kentucky residents migrated out of the state. Some areas saw even greater emigration: Harlan County, for example, which was brought to fame in an Academy Award–winning documentary about coal strikes, lost 30 percent of its population to migration. In 1960, of Ohio’s ten million residents, one million were born in Kentucky, West Virginia, or Tennessee. This doesn’t count the large number of migrants from elsewhere in the southern Appalachian Mountains; nor does it include the children or grandchildren of migrants who were hill

people to the core. There were undoubtedly many of these children and grandchildren, as hillbillies tended to have much higher birthrates than the native population.⁶

In short, my grandparents' experience was extremely common. Significant parts of an entire region picked up shop and moved north. Need more proof? Hop on a northbound highway in Kentucky or Tennessee the day after Thanksgiving or Christmas, and virtually every license plate you see comes from Ohio, Indiana, or Michigan—cars full of hillbilly transplants returning home for the holidays.

Mamaw's family participated in the migratory flow with gusto. Of her seven siblings, Pet, Paul, and Gary moved to Indiana and worked in construction. Each owned a successful business and earned considerable wealth in the process. Rose, Betty, Teaberry, and David stayed behind. All of them struggled financially, though everyone but David managed a life of relative comfort by the standards of their community. The four who left died on a significantly higher rung of the socioeconomic ladder than the four who stayed. As Papaw knew when he was a young man, the best way up for the hillbilly was out.

It was probably uncommon for my grandparents to be alone in their new city. But if Mamaw and Papaw were isolated from their family, they were hardly segregated from Middletown's broader population. Most of the city's inhabitants had moved there for work in the new industrial plants, and most of these new workers were from Appalachia. The family-based hiring practices of the major industrial firms⁷ had their desired effect, and the results were predictable. All over the industrial Midwest, new communities of

Appalachian transplants and their families sprang up, virtually out of nowhere. As one study noted, “Migration did not so much destroy neighborhoods and families as transport them.”⁸ In 1950s Middletown, my grandparents found themselves in a situation both new and familiar. New because they were, for the first time, cut off from the extended Appalachian support network to which they were accustomed; familiar because they were still surrounded by hillbillies.

I’d like to tell you how my grandparents thrived in their new environment, how they raised a successful family, and how they retired comfortably middle-class. But that is a partial truth. The full truth is that my grandparents struggled in their new life, and they continued to do so for decades.

For starters, a remarkable stigma attached to people who left the hills of Kentucky for a better life. Hillbillies have a phrase—“too big for your britches”—to describe those who think they’re better than the stock they came from. For a long time after my grandparents came to Ohio, they heard exactly that phrase from people back home. The sense that they had abandoned their families was acute, and it was expected that, whatever their responsibilities, they would return home regularly. This pattern was common among Appalachian migrants: More than nine in ten would make visits “home” during the course of their lives, and more than one in ten visited about once a month.⁹ My grandparents returned to Jackson often, sometimes on consecutive weekends, despite the fact that the trip in the 1950s required about twenty hours of driving. Economic mobility came with a lot of pressures, and it came with a lot of new responsibilities.

That stigma came from both directions: Many of their new neighbors viewed them suspiciously. To the established middle class of white Ohioans, these hillbillies simply didn't belong. They had too many children, and they welcomed their extended families into their homes for too long. On several occasions, Mamaw's brothers and sisters lived with her and Papaw for months as they tried to find good work outside of the hills. In other words, many parts of their culture and customs met with roaring disapproval from native Middletonians. As one book, *Appalachian Odyssey*, notes about the influx of hill people to Detroit: "It was not simply that the Appalachian migrants, as rural strangers 'out of place' in the city, were upsetting to Midwestern, urban whites. Rather, these migrants disrupted a broad set of assumptions held by northern whites about how white people appeared, spoke, and behaved . . . the disturbing aspect of *hillbillies* was their racialness. Ostensibly, they were of the same racial order (whites) as those who dominated economic, political, and social power in local and national arenas. But *hillbillies* shared many regional characteristics with the southern blacks arriving in Detroit."¹⁰

One of Papaw's good friends—a hillbilly from Kentucky whom he met in Ohio—became the mail carrier in their neighborhood. Not long after he moved, the mail carrier got embroiled in a battle with the Middletown government over the flock of chickens that he kept in his yard. He treated them just as Mamaw had treated her chickens back in the holler: Every morning he collected all the eggs, and when his chicken population grew too large, he'd take a few of the old ones, wring their necks, and carve them up for meat right in his backyard. You can just imagine a well-bred housewife watching

out the window in horror as her Kentucky-born neighbor slaughtered squawking chickens just a few feet away. My sister and I still call the old mail carrier “the chicken man,” and years later even a mention of how the city government ganged up on the chicken man could inspire Mamaw’s trademark vitriol: “Fucking zoning laws. They can kiss my ruby-red asshole.”

The move to Middletown created other problems, as well. In the mountain homes of Jackson, privacy was more theory than practice. Family, friends, and neighbors would barge into your home without much warning. Mothers would tell their daughters how to raise their children. Fathers would tell sons how to do their jobs. Brothers would tell brothers-in-law how to treat their wives. Family life was something people learned on the fly with a lot of help from their neighbors. In Middletown, a man’s home was his castle.

However, that castle was empty for Mamaw and Papaw. They brought an ancient family structure from the hills and tried to make it work in a world of privacy and nuclear families. They were newlyweds, but they didn’t have anyone to teach them about marriage. They were parents, but there were no grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins to help them with the workload. The only nearby close relative was Papaw’s mother, Goldie. She was mostly a stranger to her own son, and Mamaw couldn’t have held her in lower esteem for abandoning him.

After a few years, Mamaw and Papaw began to adapt. Mamaw became close friends with the “neighbor lady” (that was her word for the neighbors she liked) who lived in a nearby apartment; Papaw worked on cars in his spare time, and his

coworkers slowly turned from colleagues to friends. In 1951 they welcomed a baby boy—my uncle Jimmy—and showered him with their new material comforts. Jimmy, Mamaw would tell me later, could sit up at two weeks, walk at four months, speak in complete sentences just after his first birthday, and read classic novels by age three (“A slight exaggeration,” my uncle later admitted). They visited Mamaw’s brothers in Indianapolis and picnicked with their new friends. It was, Uncle Jimmy told me, “a typical middle-class life.” Kind of boring, by some standards, but happy in a way you appreciate only when you understand the consequences of not being boring.

Which is not to say that things always proceeded smoothly. Once, they traveled to the mall to buy Christmas presents with the holiday throng and let Jimmy roam so he could locate a toy he coveted. “They were advertising it on television,” he told me recently. “It was a plastic console that looked like the dash of a jet fighter plane. You could shine a light or shoot darts. The whole idea was to pretend that you were a fighter pilot.”

Jimmy wandered into a pharmacy that happened to sell the toy, so he picked it up and began to play with it. “The store clerk wasn’t happy. He told me to put the toy down and get out.” Chastised, young Jimmy stood outside in the cold until Mamaw and Papaw strolled by and asked if he’d like to go inside the pharmacy.

“I can’t,” Jimmy told his father.

“Why?”

“I just can’t.”

“Tell me why right now.”

He pointed at the store clerk. “That man got mad at me and told me to leave. I’m not allowed to go back inside.”

Mamaw and Papaw stormed in, demanding an explanation for the clerk’s rudeness. The clerk explained that Jimmy had been playing with an expensive toy. “This toy?” Papaw asked, picking up the toy. When the clerk nodded, Papaw smashed it on the ground. Utter chaos ensued. As Uncle Jimmy explained, “They went nuts. Dad threw another of the toys across the store and moved toward the clerk in a very menacing way; Mom started grabbing random shit off the shelves and throwing it all over the place. She’s screaming, ‘Kick his fucking ass! Kick his fucking ass!’ And then Dad leans in to this clerk and says very clearly, ‘If you say another word to my son, I will break your fucking neck.’ This poor guy was completely terrified, and I just wanted to get the hell out of there.” The man apologized, and the Vances continued with their Christmas shopping as if nothing had happened.

So, yes, even in their best times, Mamaw and Papaw struggled to adapt. Middletown was a different world. Papaw was supposed to go to work and complain politely to management about rude pharmacy employees. Mamaw was expected to cook dinner, do laundry, and take care of the children. But sewing circles, picnics, and door-to-door vacuum salesmen were not suited to a woman who had almost killed a man at the tender age of twelve. Mamaw had little help when the children were young and required constant supervision, and she had nothing else to do with her time. Decades later she would remember how isolated she felt in the slow suburban crawl of midcentury Middletown. Of that era, she

said with characteristic bluntness: “Women were just shit on all the time.”

Mamaw had her dreams but never the opportunity to pursue them. Her greatest love was children, in both a specific sense (her children and grandchildren were the only things in the world she seemed to enjoy in old age) and a general one (she watched shows about abused, neglected, and missing kids and used what little spare money she had to purchase shoes and school supplies for the neighborhood’s poorest children). She seemed to feel the pain of neglected kids in a deeply personal way and spoke often of how she hated people who mistreated children. I never understood where this sentiment came from—whether she herself was abused as a child, perhaps, or whether she just regretted that her childhood had ended so abruptly. There is a story there, though I’ll likely never hear it.

Mamaw dreamed of turning that passion into a career as a children’s attorney—serving as a voice for those who lacked one. She never pursued that dream, possibly because she didn’t know what becoming an attorney took. Mamaw never spent a day in high school. She’d given birth to and buried a child before she could legally drive a car. Even if she’d known what was required, her new lifestyle offered little encouragement or opportunity for an aspiring law student with three children and a husband.

Despite the setbacks, both of my grandparents had an almost religious faith in hard work and the American Dream. Neither was under any illusions that wealth or privilege didn’t matter in America. On politics, for example, Mamaw had one opinion—“They’re all a bunch of crooks”—but Papaw became a committed Democrat. He

had no problem with Armco, but he and everyone like him hated the coal companies in Kentucky thanks to a long history of labor strife. So, to Papaw and Mamaw, not all rich people were bad, but all bad people were rich. Papaw was a Democrat because that party protected the working people. This attitude carried over to Mamaw: All politicians might be crooks, but if there were any exceptions, they were undoubtedly members of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal coalition.

Still, Mamaw and Papaw believed that hard work mattered more. They knew that life was a struggle, and though the odds were a bit longer for people like them, that fact didn't excuse failure. "Never be like these fucking losers who think the deck is stacked against them," my grandma often told me. "You can do anything you want to."

Their community shared this faith, and in the 1950s that faith appeared well founded. Within two generations, the transplanted hillbillies had largely caught up to the native population in terms of income and poverty level. Yet their financial success masked their cultural unease, and if my grandparents caught up economically, I wonder if they ever truly assimilated. They always had one foot in the new life and one foot in the old one. They slowly acquired a small number of friends but remained strongly rooted in their Kentucky homeland. They hated domesticated animals and had little use for "critters" that weren't for eating, yet they eventually relented to the children's demands for dogs and cats.

Their children, though, were different. My mom's generation was the first to grow up in the industrial Midwest, far from the deep twangs and one-room schools of the hills. They attended modern

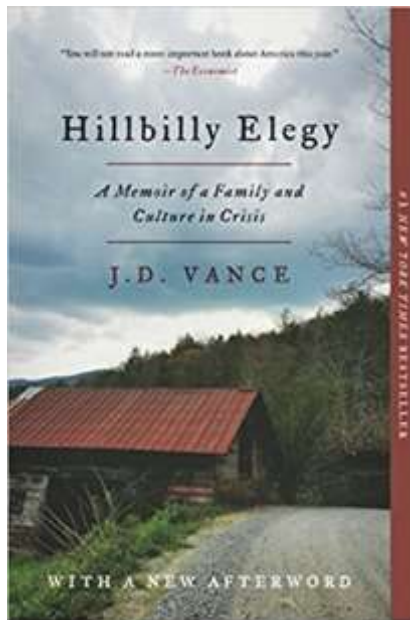
high schools with thousands of other students. To my grandparents, the goal was to get out of Kentucky and give their kids a head start. The kids, in turn, were expected to do something with that head start. It didn't quite work out that way.

Before Lyndon Johnson and the Appalachian Regional Commission brought new roads to southeastern Kentucky, the primary road from Jackson to Ohio was U.S. Route 23. So important was this road in the massive hillbilly migration that Dwight Yoakam penned a song about northerners who castigated Appalachian children for learning the wrong three R's: "Reading, Rightin', Rt. 23." Yoakam's song about his own move from southeastern Kentucky could have come from Mamaw's diary:

They thought readin', writin', Route 23 would take them to the good life that they had never seen;

They didn't know that old highway would lead them to a world of misery

Mamaw and Papaw may have made it out of Kentucky, but they and their children learned the hard way that Route 23 didn't lead where they hoped.



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