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Hillbilly Elegy

*A Memoir of a Family and
Culture in Crisis*

J. D. VANCE

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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*A Memoir of a Family
and Culture in Crisis*

J.D. VANCE

HARPER

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Dedication

For Mamaw and Papaw, my very own hillbilly terminators

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Introduction

My name is J.D. Vance, and I think I should start with a confession: I find the existence of the book you hold in your hands somewhat absurd. It says right there on the cover that it's a memoir, but I'm thirty-one years old, and I'll be the first to admit that I've accomplished nothing great in my life, certainly nothing that would justify a complete stranger paying money to read about it. The coolest thing I've done, at least on paper, is graduate from Yale Law School, something thirteen-year-old J.D. Vance would have considered ludicrous. But about two hundred people do the same thing every year, and trust me, you don't want to read about most of their lives. I am not a senator, a governor, or a former cabinet secretary. I haven't started a billion-dollar company or a world-changing nonprofit. I have a nice job, a happy marriage, a comfortable home, and two lively dogs.

So I didn't write this book because I've accomplished something extraordinary. I wrote this book because I've achieved something quite ordinary, which doesn't happen to most kids who grow up like me. You see, I grew up poor, in the Rust Belt, in an Ohio steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope for as long as I can remember. I have, to put it mildly, a complex relationship with my parents, one of whom has struggled with addiction for nearly my entire life. My grandparents, neither of whom graduated from high school, raised me, and few members of even my extended family attended college. The statistics tell you that kids like me face a grim future—that if they're lucky, they'll manage to avoid welfare; and if they're unlucky, they'll die of a heroin overdose, as happened to dozens in my small hometown just last year.

I was one of those kids with a grim future. I almost failed out of high school. I nearly gave in to the deep anger and resentment harbored by everyone around me. Today people look at me, at my job and my Ivy League credentials, and assume that I'm some sort of genius, that only a

truly extraordinary person could have made it to where I am today. With all due respect to those people, I think that theory is a load of bullshit. Whatever talents I have, I almost squandered until a handful of loving people rescued me.

That is the real story of my life, and that is why I wrote this book. I want people to know what it feels like to nearly give up on yourself and why you might do it. I want people to understand what happens in the lives of the poor and the psychological impact that spiritual and material poverty has on their children. I want people to understand the American Dream as my family and I encountered it. I want people to understand how upward mobility really feels. And I want people to understand something I learned only recently: that for those of us lucky enough to live the American Dream, the demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us.

There is an ethnic component lurking in the background of my story. In our race-conscious society, our vocabulary often extends no further than the color of someone's skin—"black people," "Asians," "white privilege." Sometimes these broad categories are useful, but to understand my story, you have to delve into the details. I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition—their ancestors were day laborers in the Southern slave economy, sharecroppers after that, coal miners after that, and machinists and millworkers during more recent times. Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends, and family.

The Scots-Irish are one of the most distinctive subgroups in America. As one observer noted, "In traveling across America, the Scots-Irish have consistently blown my mind as far and away the most persistent and unchanging regional subculture in the country. Their family structures, religion and politics, and social lives all remain unchanged compared to the wholesale abandonment of tradition that's occurred nearly everywhere else."¹ This distinctive embrace of cultural tradition comes along with many good traits—an intense sense of loyalty, a fierce dedication to family and country—but also many bad ones. We do not like outsiders or people who are different from us, whether the difference lies in how they look, how they act, or, most important, how they talk. To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart.

If ethnicity is one side of the coin, then geography is the other. When the first wave of Scots-Irish immigrants landed in the New World in the eighteenth century, they were deeply attracted to the Appalachian Mountains. This region is admittedly huge—stretching from Alabama to Georgia in the South to Ohio to parts of New York in the North—but the culture of Greater Appalachia is remarkably cohesive. My family, from the hills of eastern Kentucky, describe themselves as hillbillies, but Hank Williams, Jr.—born in Louisiana and an Alabama resident—also identified himself as one in his rural white anthem “A Country Boy Can Survive.” It was Greater Appalachia’s political reorientation from Democrat to Republican that redefined American politics after Nixon. And it is in Greater Appalachia where the fortunes of working-class whites seem dimmest. From low social mobility to poverty to divorce and drug addiction, my home is a hub of misery.

It is unsurprising, then, that we’re a pessimistic bunch. What is more surprising is that, as surveys have found, working-class whites are the most pessimistic group in America. More pessimistic than Latino immigrants, many of whom suffer unthinkable poverty. More pessimistic than black Americans, whose material prospects continue to lag behind those of whites. While reality permits some degree of cynicism, the fact that hillbillies like me are more down about the future than many other groups—some of whom are clearly more destitute than we are—suggests that something else is going on.

Indeed it is. We’re more socially isolated than ever, and we pass that isolation down to our children. Our religion has changed—built around churches heavy on emotional rhetoric but light on the kind of social support necessary to enable poor kids to do well. Many of us have dropped out of the labor force or have chosen not to relocate for better opportunities. Our men suffer from a peculiar crisis of masculinity in which some of the very traits that our culture inculcates make it difficult to succeed in a changing world.

When I mention the plight of my community, I am often met with an explanation that goes something like this: “Of course the prospects for working-class whites have worsened, J.D., but you’re putting the chicken before the egg. They’re divorcing more, marrying less, and experiencing less happiness because their economic opportunities have declined. If they

only had better access to jobs, other parts of their lives would improve as well.”

I once held this opinion myself, and I very desperately wanted to believe it during my youth. It makes sense. Not having a job is stressful, and not having enough money to live on is even more so. As the manufacturing center of the industrial Midwest has hollowed out, the white working class has lost both its economic security and the stable home and family life that comes with it.

But experience can be a difficult teacher, and it taught me that this story of economic insecurity is, at best, incomplete. A few years ago, during the summer before I enrolled at Yale Law School, I was looking for full-time work in order to finance my move to New Haven, Connecticut. A family friend suggested that I work for him in a medium-sized floor tile distribution business near my hometown. Floor tile is extraordinarily heavy: Each piece weighs anywhere from three to six pounds, and it’s usually packaged in cartons of eight to twelve pieces. My primary duty was to lift the floor tile onto a shipping pallet and prepare that pallet for departure. It wasn’t easy, but it paid thirteen dollars an hour and I needed the money, so I took the job and collected as many overtime shifts and extra hours as I could.

The tile business employed about a dozen people, and most employees had worked there for many years. One guy worked two full-time jobs, but not because he had to: His second job at the tile business allowed him to pursue his dream of piloting an airplane. Thirteen dollars an hour was good money for a single guy in our hometown—a decent apartment costs about five hundred dollars a month—and the tile business offered steady raises. Every employee who worked there for a few years earned at least sixteen dollars an hour in a down economy, which provided an annual income of thirty-two thousand—well above the poverty line even for a family. Despite this relatively stable situation, the managers found it impossible to fill my warehouse position with a long-term employee. By the time I left, three guys worked in the warehouse; at twenty-six, I was by far the oldest.

One guy, I’ll call him Bob, joined the tile warehouse just a few months before I did. Bob was nineteen with a pregnant girlfriend. The manager kindly offered the girlfriend a clerical position answering phones. Both of them were terrible workers. The girlfriend missed about every third day of work and never gave advance notice. Though warned to change her habits

repeatedly, the girlfriend lasted no more than a few months. Bob missed work about once a week, and he was chronically late. On top of that, he often took three or four daily bathroom breaks, each over half an hour. It became so bad that, by the end of my tenure, another employee and I made a game of it: We'd set a timer when he went to the bathroom and shout the major milestones through the warehouse—"Thirty-five minutes!" "Forty-five minutes!" "One hour!"

Eventually, Bob, too, was fired. When it happened, he lashed out at his manager: "How could you do this to me? Don't you know I've got a pregnant girlfriend?" And he was not alone: At least two other people, including Bob's cousin, lost their jobs or quit during my short time at the tile warehouse.

You can't ignore stories like this when you talk about equal opportunity. Nobel-winning economists worry about the decline of the industrial Midwest and the hollowing out of the economic core of working whites. What they mean is that manufacturing jobs have gone overseas and middle-class jobs are harder to come by for people without college degrees. Fair enough—I worry about those things, too. But this book is about something else: what goes on in the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It's about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.

The problems that I saw at the tile warehouse run far deeper than macroeconomic trends and policy. Too many young men immune to hard work. Good jobs impossible to fill for any length of time. And a young man with every reason to work—a wife-to-be to support and a baby on the way—carelessly tossing aside a good job with excellent health insurance. More troublingly, when it was all over, he thought something had been done *to him*. There is a lack of agency here—a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself. This is distinct from the larger economic landscape of modern America.

It's worth noting that although I focus on the group of people I know—working-class whites with ties to Appalachia—I'm not arguing that we deserve more sympathy than other folks. This is not a story about why white people have more to complain about than black people or any other group. That said, I do hope that readers of this book will be able to take from it an appreciation of how class and family affect the poor without

filtering their views through a racial prism. To many analysts, terms like “welfare queen” conjure unfair images of the lazy black mom living on the dole. Readers of this book will realize quickly that there is little relationship between that specter and my argument: I have known many welfare queens; some were my neighbors, and all were white.

This book is not an academic study. In the past few years, William Julius Wilson, Charles Murray, Robert Putnam, and Raj Chetty have authored compelling, well-researched tracts demonstrating that upward mobility fell off in the 1970s and never really recovered, that some regions have fared much worse than others (shocker: Appalachia and the Rust Belt score poorly), and that many of the phenomena I saw in my own life exist across society. I may quibble with some of their conclusions, but they have demonstrated convincingly that America has a problem. Though I will use data, and though I do sometimes rely on academic studies to make a point, my primary aim is not to convince you of a documented problem. My primary aim is to tell a true story about what that problem feels like when you were born with it hanging around your neck.

I cannot tell that story without appealing to the cast of characters who made up my life. So this book is not just a personal memoir but a family one—a history of opportunity and upward mobility viewed through the eyes of a group of hillbillies from Appalachia. Two generations ago, my grandparents were dirt-poor and in love. They got married and moved north in the hope of escaping the dreadful poverty around them. Their grandchild (me) graduated from one of the finest educational institutions in the world. That’s the short version. The long version exists in the pages that follow.

Though I sometimes change the names of people to protect their privacy, this story is, to the best of my recollection, a fully accurate portrait of the world I’ve witnessed. There are no composite characters and no narrative shortcuts. Where possible, I corroborated the details with documentation—report cards, handwritten letters, notes on photographs—but I am sure this story is as fallible as any human memory. Indeed, when I asked my sister to read an earlier draft, that draft ignited a thirty-minute conversation about whether I had misplaced an event chronologically. I left my version in, not because I suspect my sister’s memory is faulty (in fact, I imagine hers is better than mine), but because I think there is something to learn in how I’ve organized the events in my own mind.

Nor am I an unbiased observer. Nearly every person you will read about is deeply flawed. Some have tried to murder other people, and a few were successful. Some have abused their children, physically or emotionally. Many abused (and still abuse) drugs. But I love these people, even those to whom I avoid speaking for my own sanity. And if I leave you with the impression that there are bad people in my life, then I am sorry, both to you and to the people so portrayed. For there are no villains in this story. There's just a ragtag band of hillbillies struggling to find their way—both for their sake and, by the grace of God, for mine.

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 two 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 mountainside 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 earring 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 "girlieness," 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 knifepoint—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, apparently 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 children 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 untended," 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.