From J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*

During my last year of high school, I tried out for the varsity golf team. For about a year, I'd taken golf lessons from an old golf pro. The summer before senior year, I got a job at a local golf course so I could practice for free. Mamaw never showed any interest in sports, but she encouraged me to learn golf because "that's where rich people do business." Though wise in her own way, Mamaw knew little about the business habits of rich people, and I told her as much. "Shut up, you fucker," she told me. "Everybody knows rich people love to golf." But when I practiced my swing in the house (I didn't use a ball, so the only damage I did was to the floor) she demanded that I stop ruining her carpet. "But, Mamaw," I protested sarcastically, "if you don't let me practice, I'll never get to do any business on the golf course. I might as well drop out of high school now and get a job bagging groceries." "You smart-ass. If I wasn't crippled, I'd get up right now and smack your head and ass together."

So she helped me pay for my lessons and asked her baby brother (my uncle Gary), the youngest of the Blanton boys, to find me some old clubs. He delivered a nice set of MacGregors, better

than anything we could have afforded on our own, and I practiced as often as I could. By the time golf tryouts rolled around, I had mastered enough of a golf swing not to embarrass myself.

I didn't make the team, though I did show enough improvement to justify practicing with my friends who had made the team, and that was all I really wanted. I learned that Mamaw was right: Golf was a rich person's game. At the course where I worked, few of our customers came from Middletown's working-class neighborhoods. On my first day of golf practice, I showed up in dress shoes, thinking that was what golf shoes were. When an enterprising young bully noticed before the first tee that I was wearing a pair of Kmart brown loafers, he proceeded to mock me mercilessly for the next four hours. I resisted the urge to bury my putter in his goddamned ear, remembering Mamaw's sage advice to "act like you've been there…."

I knew in the back of my mind that decisions were coming about my future. All of my friends planned to go to college; that I had such motivated friends was due to Mamaw's influence. By the time I was in seventh grade, many of my neighborhood friends were already smoking weed. Mamaw found out and forbade me to see any of them. I recognize that most kids ignore instructions like these, but most kids don't receive them from the likes of Bonnie Vance. She promised that if she saw me in the presence of any person on the banned list, she would run him over with her car. "No one would ever find out," she whispered menacingly.

With my friends headed for college, I figured I'd do the same. I scored well enough on the SAT to overcome my earlier bad grades, and I knew that the only two schools I had any interest in attending—Ohio State and Miami University—would both accept me. A few months before I graduated, I had (admittedly, with little thought) settled on Ohio State. A large package arrived in the mail, filled with financial aid information from the university. There was talk of Pell Grants, subsidized loans, unsubsidized loans, scholarships, and something called "work-study." It was all so exciting, if only Mamaw and I could figure out what it meant. We puzzled over the forms for hours before concluding that I could purchase a decent home in Middletown with the debt I'd incur to go to college. We hadn't actually started the forms yet—that would require another herculean effort on another day.

Excitement turned to apprehension, but I reminded myself that college was an investment in my future. "It's the only damned thing worth spending money on right now," Mamaw said. She was right, but as I worried less about the financial aid forms, I began to worry for another reason: I wasn't ready. Not all investments are good investments. All of that debt, and for what? To get drunk all the time and earn terrible grades? Doing well in college required grit, and I had far too little of it.

My high school record left much to be desired: dozens of absences and tardy arrivals, and no school activities to speak of. I was undoubtedly on an upward trajectory, but even toward the end of high school, C's in easy classes revealed a kid unprepared for the rigors of advanced education. In Mamaw's house, I was healing, yet as we combed through those financial aid papers, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had a long way to go.

Everything about the unstructured college experience terrified me—from feeding myself healthy food to paying my own bills. I'd never done any of those things. But I knew that I wanted more out of my life. I knew that I wanted to excel in college, get a good job, and give my family the things I'd never had. I just wasn't ready to start that journey. That's when my cousin Rachael—a Marine Corps veteran—advised that I consider the Corps: "They'll whip your ass into shape." Rachael was Uncle Jimmy's oldest daughter, and thus the dean of our generation of grandchildren. All of us, even Lindsay, looked up to Rachael, so her advice carried enormous weight.

The 9/11 attacks had occurred only a year earlier, during my junior year of high school; like any self-respecting hillbilly, I considered heading to the Middle East to kill terrorists. But the prospect of military service—the screaming drill instructors, the constant exercise, the separation from my family—frightened me. Until Rachael told me to talk to a recruiter—implicitly arguing that she thought I could handle it—joining the Marines seemed as plausible as flying to Mars. Now, just weeks before I owed a tuition deposit to Ohio State, I could think of nothing but the Marine Corps.

So one Saturday in late March, I walked into a military recruiter's office and asked him about the Marine Corps. He didn't try to sell me on anything. He told me I'd make very little money and I might even go to war. "But they'll teach you about leadership, and they'll turn you into a disciplined young man." This piqued my interest, but the notion of J.D. the U.S. Marine still inspired disbelief. I was a pudgy, longhaired kid. When our gym teacher told us to run a mile, I'd walk at least half. I had never woken up before six A.M. And here was this organization promising that I'd rise regularly at five A.M. and run multiple miles per day.

I went home and considered my options. I reminded myself that my country needed me, and that I'd always regret not participating in America's newest war. I thought about the GI Bill and how it would help me trade indebtedness for financial freedom. I knew that, most of all, I had no other choice. There was college, or nothing, or the Marines, and I didn't like either of the first two options. Four years in the Marines, I told myself, would help me become the person I wanted to be. But I didn't want to leave home. Lindsay had just had her second kid, an adorable little girl, and was expecting a third, and my nephew was still a toddler. Lori's kids were still babies, too. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to do it. And I knew that if I waited too long, I'd talk myself out of enlisting. So two weeks later, as the Iraq crisis turned into the Iraq war, I signed my name on a dotted line and promised the Marine Corps the first four years of my adult life.

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For all my grandma's efforts, for all of her "You can do anything; don't be like those fuckers who think the deck is stacked against them" diatribes, the message had only partially set in before I enlisted. Surrounding me was another message: that I and the people like me weren't good enough; that the reason Middletown produced zero Ivy League graduates was some genetic or character defect. I couldn't possibly see how destructive that mentality was until I escaped it.

The Marine Corps replaced it with something else, something that loathes excuses. “Giving it my all” was a catchphrase, something heard in health or gym class. When I first ran three miles, mildly impressed with my mediocre twenty-five-minute time, a terrifying senior drill instructor greeted me at the finish line: “If you’re not puking, you’re lazy! Stop being fucking lazy!” He then ordered me to sprint between him and a tree repeatedly. Just as I felt I might pass out, he relented. I was heaving, barely able to catch my breath. “That’s how you should feel at the end of every run!” he yelled. In the Marines, giving it your all was a way of life.

I’m not saying ability doesn’t matter. It certainly helps. But there’s something powerful about realizing that you’ve undersold yourself—that somehow your mind confused lack of effort for inability. This is why, whenever people ask me what I’d most like to change about the white working class, I say, “The feeling that our choices don’t matter.” The Marine Corps excised that feeling like a surgeon does a tumor.

A few days after my twenty-third birthday, I hopped into the first major purchase I’d ever made—an old Honda Civic—grabbed my discharge papers, and drove one last time from Cherry Point, North Carolina, to Middletown, Ohio. During my four years in the Marines, I had seen, in Haiti, a level of poverty I never knew existed. I witnessed the fiery aftermath of an airplane crash into a residential neighborhood. I had watched Mamaw die and then gone to war a few months later. I had befriended a former crack dealer who turned out to be the hardest-working marine I knew.

When I joined the Marine Corps, I did so in part because I wasn’t ready for adulthood. I didn’t know how to balance a checkbook, much less how to complete the financial aid forms for college. Now I knew exactly what I wanted out of my life and how to get there. And in three weeks, I’d start classes at Ohio State.

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I arrived for orientation at Ohio State in early September 2007, and I couldn’t have been more excited. I remember every little detail about that day: lunch at Chipotle, the first time Lindsay had ever eaten there; the walk from the orientation building to the south campus house that would soon be my Columbus home; the beautiful weather. I met with a guidance counselor who talked me through my first college schedule, which put me in class only four days per week, never before nine thirty in the morning. After the Marine Corps and its five thirty A.M. wake-ups, I couldn’t believe my good fortune.

Ohio State’s main campus in Columbus is about a hundred miles away from Middletown, meaning it was close enough for weekend visits to my family. For the first time in a few years, I could drop in on Middletown whenever I felt like it. And while Havelock (the North Carolina city closest to my Marine Corps base) was not too different from Middletown, Columbus felt like an urban paradise. It was (and remains) one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, powered in large part by the bustling university that was now my home. OSU grads were starting businesses, historic buildings were being converted into new restaurants and bars, and even the worst neighborhoods seemed to be undergoing significant revitalization. Not long after I moved

to Columbus, one of my best friends began working as the promotions director for a local radio station, so I always knew what was happening around town and always had an in to the city's best events, from local festivals to VIP seating for the annual fireworks show.

In many ways, college was very familiar. I made a lot of new friends, but virtually all of them were from southwest Ohio. My six roommates included five graduates of Middletown High School and one graduate of Edgewood High School in nearby Trenton. They were a little younger (the Marine Corps had aged me past the age of the typical freshman), but I knew most of them from back home. My closest friends had already graduated or were about to, but many stayed in Columbus after graduation. Though I didn't know it, I was witnessing a phenomenon that social scientists call "brain drain"—people who are able to leave struggling cities often do, and when they find a new home with educational and work opportunities, they stay there. Years later, I looked at my wedding party of six groomsmen and realized that every single one of them had, like me, grown up in a small Ohio town before leaving for Ohio State. To a man, all of them had found careers outside of their hometowns, and none of them had any interest in ever going back.

By the time I started at Ohio State, the Marine Corps had instilled in me an incredible sense of invincibility. I'd go to classes, do my homework, study at the library, and make it home in time to drink well past midnight with my buddies, then wake up early to go running. My schedule was intense, but everything that had made me fear the independent college life when I was eighteen felt like a piece of cake now. I had puzzled through those financial aid forms with Mamaw a few years earlier, arguing about whether to list her or Mom as my "parent/guardian." We had worried that unless I somehow obtained and submitted the financial information of Bob Hamel (my legal father), I'd be guilty of fraud. The whole experience had made both of us painfully aware of how unfamiliar we were with the outside world. I had nearly failed out of high school, earning Ds and Fs in English I. Now I paid my own bills and earned As in every class I took at my state's flagship university. I felt completely in control of my destiny in a way that I never had before.

I knew that Ohio State was put-up-or-shut-up time. I had left the Marine Corps not just with a sense that I could do what I wanted but also with the capacity to plan. I wanted to go to law school, and I knew that to go to the best law school, I'd need good grades and to ace the infamous Law School Admissions Test, or LSAT. There was much I didn't know, of course. I couldn't really explain why I wanted to go to law school besides the fact that in Middletown the "rich kids" were born to either doctors or lawyers, and I didn't want to work with blood. I didn't know how much else was out there, but the little knowledge I had at least gave me direction, and that was all I needed.

I loathed debt and the sense of limitation it imposed. Though the GI Bill paid for a significant chunk of my education, and Ohio State charged relatively little to an in-state resident, I still needed to cover about twenty thousand dollars of expenses on my own. I took a job at the Ohio Statehouse, working for a remarkably kind senator from the Cincinnati area named Bob Schuler. He was a good man, and I liked his politics, so when constituents called and complained, I tried

to explain his positions. I watched lobbyists come and go and overheard the senator and his staff debate whether a particular bill was good for his constituents, good for his state, or good for both. Observing the political process from the inside made me appreciate it in a way that watching cable news never had. Mamaw had thought all politicians were crooks, but I learned that, no matter their politics, that was largely untrue at the Ohio Statehouse.

After a few months at the Ohio Senate, as my bills piled up and I found fewer and fewer ways to make up the difference between my spending and my income (one can donate plasma only twice per week, I learned), I decided to get another job. One nonprofit advertised a part-time job that paid ten dollars an hour, but when I showed up for the interview in khakis, an ugly lime-green shirt, and Marine Corps combat boots (my only non-sneakers at the time) and saw the interviewer's reaction, I knew that I was out of luck. I barely noticed the rejection email a week later. A local nonprofit did work for abused and neglected children, and they also paid ten dollars an hour, so I went to Target, bought a nicer shirt and a pair of black shoes, and came away with a job offer to be a "consultant." I cared about their mission, and they were great people. I began work immediately.

With two jobs and a full-time class load, my schedule intensified, but I didn't mind. I didn't realize there was anything unusual about my commitments until a professor emailed me about meeting after class to discuss a writing assignment. When I sent him my schedule, he was aghast. He sternly told me that I should focus on my education and not let work distractions stand in my way. I smiled, shook his hand, and said thanks, but I did not heed his advice. I liked staying up late to work on assignments, waking up early after only three or four hours of sleep, and patting myself on the back for being able to do it. After so many years of fearing my own future, of worrying that I'd end up like many of my neighbors or family—addicted to drugs or alcohol, in prison, or with kids I couldn't or wouldn't take care of—I felt an incredible momentum. I knew the statistics. I had read the brochures in the social worker's office when I was a kid. I had recognized the look of pity from the hygienist at the low-income dental clinic. I wasn't supposed to make it, but I was doing just fine on my own.

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My second year of college started pretty much as my first year had, with a beautiful day and a lot of excitement. With the new job, I was a bit busier, but I didn't mind the work. What I did mind was the gnawing feeling that, at twenty-four, I was a little too old to be a second-year college student. But with four years in the Marine Corps behind me, more separated me from the other students than age. During an undergraduate seminar in foreign policy, I listened as a nineteen-year-old classmate with a hideous beard spouted off about the Iraq war. He explained that those fighting the war were typically less intelligent than those (like him) who immediately went to college. It showed, he argued, in the wanton way soldiers butchered and disrespected Iraqi civilians. It was an objectively terrible opinion—my friends from the Marine Corps spanned the political spectrum and held nearly every conceivable opinion about the war. Many of my Marine Corps friends were staunch liberals who had no love for our commander in chief—then George W. Bush—and felt that we had sacrificed too much for too little gain. But none of them had ever uttered such unreflective tripe.

As the student prattled on, I thought about the never-ending training on how to respect Iraqi culture—never show anyone the bottom of your foot, never address a woman in traditional Muslim garb without first speaking to a male relative. I thought about the security we provided for Iraqi poll workers, and how we studiously explained the importance of their mission without ever pushing our own political views on them. I thought about listening to a young Iraqi (who couldn't speak a word of English) flawlessly rap every single word of 50 Cent's "In Da Club" and laughing along with him and his friends. I thought about my friends who were covered in third-degree burns, "lucky" to have survived an IED attack in the Al-Qaim region of Iraq. And here was this dipshit in a spotty beard telling our class that we murdered people for sport.

I felt an immediate drive to finish college as quickly as possible. I met with a guidance counselor and plotted my exit—I'd need to take classes during the summer and more than double the full-time course load during some terms. It was, even by my heightened standards, an intense year. During a particularly terrible February, I sat down with my calendar and counted the number of days since I'd slept more than four hours in a day. The tally was thirty-nine. But I continued, and in August 2009, after one year and eleven months at Ohio State, I graduated with a double major, summa cum laude. I tried to skip my graduation ceremony, but my family wouldn't let me. So I sat in an uncomfortable chair for three hours before I walked across the podium and received my college diploma. When Gordon Gee, then president of the Ohio State University, paused for an unusually long photograph with the girl who stood in front of me in line, I extended my hand to his assistant, nonverbally asking for the diploma. She handed it to me, and I stepped behind Dr. Gee and down off the podium. I may have been the only graduating student that day to not shake his hand. *On to the next one,* I thought.

I knew I'd go to law school later the next year (my August graduation precluded a 2009 start to law school), so I moved home to save money. Aunt Wee had taken Mamaw's place as the family matriarch: She put out the fires, hosted family gatherings, and kept us all from breaking apart. She had always provided me with a home base after Mamaw's death, but ten months seemed like an imposition; I didn't like the idea of disrupting her family's routine. But she insisted, "J.D., this is your home now. It's the only place for you to stay."

Those last months living in Middletown were among the happiest of my life. I was finally a college graduate, and I knew that I'd soon accomplish another dream—going to law school. I worked odd jobs to save money and grew closer to my aunt's two daughters. Every day I'd get home from work, dusty and sweaty from manual labor, and sit at the dinner table to hear my teenage cousins talk about their days at school and trials with friends. Sometimes I'd help with homework. On Fridays during Lent, I helped with the fish fries at the local Catholic church. That feeling I had in college—that I had survived decades of chaos and heartbreak and finally come out on the other side—deepened.