

*Charles Hayes*  
**Child of Slate**

His father gone to falling slate, Danny and his dog haunt the hills. Shedding coal dust that dresses grime below and turns the waters bad, children that play tough yet wet the cot and boast of fathers keen of eye and sinew, Danny will find a way to love the lone and learn a man.

The hillside meadow opens up like a sprinkle of autumn stardust. Yellow walls of light, bursting with snaps of blue, paint deer with cashmere coats as they leap for cover, their white tails flagging high. A secrete womb among the digs, no place for others nor their boasts. A refuge from the sour looks of I can do it better. And the bloody vans that wail from the pits, a family's table fare within their guts.

This special place on high, so strange amid the hollow chill, a treasure it must conceal. Another pants for winter wash, or a chest of silver yore to share a cot. This high meadow marks the spot.

A sense of gift and spirit born in the cathedral of woods and sky, a will to hope for more. Plumes of soot and cinders, standard fare for a child of slate, will not fool Danny. Up here, he knows the treasure has to be.

His knowledge comes from all about, over slag and roads of strip. With a whisper, lest he ruin the spell or kill the scene, he hugs his dog and bends a furry ear.

"Sniff it out Patches. You can do it boy. Find our treasure."

## The King

Drifting on the water, turning like a tardy second hand on a mirrored sky of cirrus, we park our canoe paddles and watch the steep timber slowly spin. Silver Maples flash waves of white brilliance as a blow rustles their coats. A furtive beaver pops a tail, sending shore birds aflutter, and a whisper of far current plays a wash as pollen swims, sweetening the aroma of muddy banks.

Beth dangles a hand in the water, her smooth brow a plain of calm as she reads the maple signs. Flipping a line toward an ivy covered log, no slack to contemplate, a sharp tug I feel and set the hook, watching in excited awe as a Bass breaks the water, exploding sprays of color from its manic dance. Bringing in the king of the hole, its mouth gasping large, I remove the hook and drop it back. Snapping me with a terrified eye, it winks a glossy flank and disappears, a tiny ripple of glass and pungent hands its only print. Beth frowns and says, "You must like pot-  
ted meat and peanut butter."

Thinking that though she be right, I'll never tell the heart that she has captured. "I'm sorry babe," I say. "I just couldn't keep the king of the hole." Turning back to fore, Beth hands her paddle and rights our tack, the call of froth not far. "That's OK," she says. "I'll get us one when we pitch for eve. That one was a beaut, though probably tough." I choke a burst of mirth and look to see, Beth, her eyebrows high and lips a tinge of smile, looking back at me. My leg no longer curled, I smile and say, "You got me."

Moving faster now, a sparkling ribbon, topped with furrowed lace, sucks us in. Slapping faces and blurring eyes, our ride has its own way. Beth digs her paddle down, I drag mine behind, the chute to find and steady on. Sometimes with only air to pull, we squeal and laugh, and let the river lay our track. But through luck and the strength of pearly years, we burst from the rapids to slip into the lee of a wider pass, our thumping hearts telling how small we are. Beth, her hair undone and plastered to her face, turns to me and stills. Her look, a second star with so much to say, touches me to lead the way. "I bet you haven't done that before." Shimmering with delight, she screams and catches breath while my heart swells. "Oh my God, Peter," she finally says. "I had no idea it could be so much fun! This is worth it to miss the sheets and kitchen fare." In a surrender closely held, happy to the core, I see a flame in her eye, one that I have lit. Trying to calm, lest I burst my chest, I stroke on. "You bet, love. It belongs to us."

A finger over the ridge, our bright star cools and begins to set. Looking now for lee that will last the night, I point our craft to the sandy strip beneath the Sycamores, their dappled trunks and broad lime green our décor of choice. Pulling the canoe up high we unload and pitch our tent. "I am really hungry," Beth says, as she pops the peanut butter and gathers bread. "Fix me one too," I say. "I'll make a fire for later on."

Crickets chirp and June Bugs light the air as the sizzle of green sticks with dogs on end make our juices ache. Black before they can swell, our dogs split the dough and catch a strip of yellow spice. On a palm with chips at hand our dinnerware is curt. But after three or four our cheeks deflate with canteen sips to wash them down.

After several chunks of drift, the fire all yellow gone, is but a cherry glow. June Bugs no longer fly their blink, lanterns dark by now. Sun cured faces with pools of ember glow, gaze to the celestial lights beyond. The moon, a happy face that clicks across the sky, winks as we say goodnight, its cheeks a rouge of blush as we zip the tent.

A flat smack breaks the quiet of night when all is well and truths have all been told. Sleepily Beth feathers my ear with a query of common yore. "What was that?" Smiling deep within I am tempted to boogiemane a yarn but instead reply, "A beaver tail I suppose." Her breath still soft upon my ear, she says, "I don't think so." Enjoying this sleepy repartee, I finger dance along her skin and say, "What was it then."

With a little giggle that wafts like music around our nest, she says, "The king."