

*Charles Hayes*

**Leaving Appalachia--A Memoir**

**S**ITTING HALFWAY UP A WOODED HILLSIDE, looking down at my shack and the creek that flows by it, I know that this hollow is more of who I am than the possibilities that come through these hills from the outside. The things that threaten me are mostly rooted in my guts. They will follow wherever I go. But the poverty and isolation are starting to weigh heavy and my best years are gone. If I am to go on I must find a way to leave this place.

It can't deteriorated much more. The little work that I can get is a thing of the past and my drinking is at a level that kills most others. Amazingly my body allows it to continue. Maybe it is the life that I live without the benefit of wheels. The struggle of getting from place to place puts demands upon my body that most people only read about in stories of bygone eras. Maybe this way of life, combined with a strong constitution, stands me up. Thinking that society can have their concrete trails to obesity and heart disease, I try to act like less is more. But most times, especially during bad weather, it is cold comfort. And a bitterness that is not only from the biting cold plays upon my mind. It unsettles the bit of peace that can be had by more space. Yet the anger keeps me going. And it squashes the fear. The thought of sickness has no room to dance.

I am perceived in this small mountain community as not much. Most don't find their grapes as sour as I find mine. Romance is dead and few women will tolerate me. Some refuse to condemn but the majority hold me low. This bothers me but, like in the war, I reject the troublesome thoughts with the mantra of Vietnam, "Fuck it, it don't mean nothing."

This little hollow of Fox Run had once belonged to me, like the Hole In The Wall had belonged to the gang. But those days have passed on. And the law is as aware of Fox Run as it was of the Hole In The Wall. My grip on it is slipping.

Fox Run is the only real home that I have ever known. Had it not been for it, I probably would not have made it. Close by my shack are buried all the dogs that I loved and that loved me. To the winds on the ridge, my mother's ashes are scattered. But the neighbors hate me and the land has changed. It is not as free. My mother will understand, and the dogs that she also loved will stay with her. Deep down in its soul Fox Run will keep it's integrity and ignore the assholes who climb all over it. And in doing that it will take good care of my loved ones.

The logging trail switches back and forth among the leafy green hardwoods as it ascends to beyond where the waters of Fox Run bubble from the earth. The drone of the locusts have died off and I can smell the coming of colder weather. Near the last switchback a white tailed deer bolts down the steep wooded terrain, the white underside of its tail starched skyward. Excited chatter of squirrels broadcast my intrusion into their territory.

I will say goodbye to my mother and the Appalachians that have helped me weather the failures of my life. Reaching the summit of the log-

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ging trail, I take in the magnificent view and feel like I am losing my last haunt.

Speaking with my mother and contemplating life away from all that is before me, I try to leave something of relevance before starting back down the mountain. It is a hard thing to do among this landscape of isolation, its back always turned, rooted in the ages. Not looking back, I start the steep decline. The little that I have to begin another life does not allow me to imagine my return. I will be lucky to just get by wherever I end up. I am 44 years old.

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The Vietnamese woman sitting beside me on the bus is heading to Minneapolis. Her conversation excites me as I learn that she once worked as a nurse for Dr. Tom Dooley in Vietnam. I read Dr. Dooley's book about his humanitarian and anti-communist work during the late 1950s in Vietnam. That was long before I set foot there but I remember the black slab and the early deaths from that period recorded on it at the memorial in DC. Recalling the pictures in his book, I recognize the woman beside me from her much younger days, smiling happily. Now she seems sad and tired and is not doing well in the Minnesota area. For her, Vietnam was a war zone as well. She helped save lives and I helped Uncle Sam take them. It does not escape me that we both got rewarded with a bunch of shit. For myself I can understand, but it seems tremendously unfair to this woman that helped do the same work that Kennedy later based his founding of the Peace Corps upon.

She has a certain anger that she tries to cover but I can see it. I can also see that, like myself, she doesn't cotton much to social conversation but, for some reason, is making an exception with me. Probably because I exhibit some respect for her and say that the country of her birth is beautiful. I am flattered that she seems to allow me to get inside her social screen. We never talk about it but I know what has brought her to where she is in life. She was someone loved and respected for her gifts a long time ago. Young and idealistic, she had evaded the communist uprising by coming to America when Dr. Dooley passed on from cancer. But once here, with the doctor gone, she got a good taste of racism, and how it played in her chances of having a life on par with the Americans. Disillusioned and obviously struggling to get back to Minneapolis after a long bus trip to try to better her lot, she is carrying back to Minneapolis another failed attempt to overcome the status quo. Again she has seen an America that the flowery speeches of people like Kennedy didn't reveal. Maybe her run from her country to the "freedom" of America haunts her.

Reaching Minneapolis, I have to change buses. I walk with her into the terminal and notice that no one is there to meet her. Her face is hard but she summons up enough kindness to say goodbye and good luck.

Gone in the crowd, a lonely woman on the down side of what was a heroic beginning. Guilt is left in her wake for me. I saw some of the things that I did reflected in her eyes as she occasionally looked at me during our exchanges. She saw those same things done by others like me, thought then that they were necessary, but now she knows better. She is hurt.

All across the country the different buses make rest stops at meal times

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so passengers can buy something to eat and have a smoke. I have peanut butter and crackers, a few sandwiches. I do not buy food. I notice a woman and her little girl that also do not buy anything to eat. Finally, after many hours, they ask me for food. Maybe they are running from something and were in too much of a hurry to plan their provisions. Or maybe they just don't have the means. I don't have much to give but I share what I can. The woman eats only a bite and lets her daughter eat the rest. Their appreciation makes me feel privileged to actually encounter and relate to other human beings. I was in the woods a long time and this is different. This bus trip is doing things to me that I didn't expect. All the buses are long haul so most of the people are leaving something or going to something. Or, like myself, both.

I cross the Rockies and go across the panhandle of Idaho into Washington State and enter Spokane. I will change buses in Spokane for the last time. It is pushing my third day and by the time I cross Washington to Seattle it will be a full three days.

In the Spokane bus terminal a prostitute is working the crowd. I occupy myself with observing her action. Walking over to my waiting area, she takes a proudly defiant stance and looks the area over, judging the quality of her potential clients. She is young, about 25, dressed in high heels with a strap around each ankle and a short pink skirt that reveals nice legs. Atop her head, over pretty blue eyes, and a well proportioned face, is a pile of red hair. Wearing a thin cashmere sweater with a low neckline that hints of a ripe body below, her only flaw is a small barely noticeable paunch. It is the kind of little tale tell sign on a young person that indicates that they don't get enough exercise. She catches the eye of a young dark haired man sitting across from me and flashes a smile that shows nice even white teeth. Quickly, as he smiles back, she occupies the seat beside him, fires up a cigarette, and crosses her legs, giving me a view that washes away the travel fatigue. She and her John smoke and talk a while, smiling frequently. About five minutes on they get up and leave together, her close on his arm. Wondering where they go late at night in the city center, I realize just how much I miss a woman's company.

In a short while they return and, while the John melts in his seat, the girl's roving eye picks up mine. She smiles and I catch myself, almost smiling back. She gets this and just turns the pretty smile off. It is gone like it never was, replaced by the roving business eye. It is purely the act of the deal. She takes no offense. She knows people like to watch her because she is good. This is old hat. She has business to take care of while the night is on. And she does. Leaving and returning with young men, her take is brisk. Much like a scene in a movie being shot over again, her night plays on and she does well. As the day breaks and she retires, I climb on my last bus to wind across Washington to Seattle and its Puget Sound.

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In less than a week I am working in Ballard, a Seattle neighborhood, at a plastics manufacturer running some of the same machines I operated many years before, making and repairing pumps for the mining industry. A Scandinavian working class neighborhood, Ballard also harbors the Northwest fishing fleet. My boss is a hard ass Norwegian who thinks that

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the world is full of shit and ignorance except for him. Many times before me, he drove the hired help away.

Always in my face ranting and raving about something, the little bald headed Norwegian is trying to put me through the wringer as well. I want to smack the shit out of him but I hold on without being demeaned by pretending that his behavior is amusing. It works for a while but when I become interested in an office worker that he, though married, also seems to like, it gets really bad. He is trying to push me into quitting. I know that I will have to go but I am not going to give the son of bitch the satisfaction of driving me away like a cowed dog. I have survived much worse than this ass hole. I will make the son of bitch fire me. When I leave I want to make sure that he can't say that I quit, thereby saving him from any responsibility in my leaving. The whole shop and probably even his friend, the owner, know his nature. Almost all despise it. I want it to begin to weigh a little more in his life. It is my only way to take something out of this situation. I am biding time.

Running a very complicated machine that only the Norwegian completely knows how to run, I have learned it's operation some and am progressing in my skill with it. Going slow so as not to damage the part and ruin hours of work, I am interrupted when the Norwegian comes running over. Jumping in between me and my work, he yells, "Good God damn Hayes, what is taking you so long!?"

My blood boils but I throw my gut switch to calm.

"Don't get all hysterical, boss, these things just take a little time."

The Norwegian freezes for an instant and squares on me. Red faced and wide eyed, he begins to stutter.

"Wha...wha...what did you say?"

Taking a slightly wider stance, I smile and fold my arms.

"Stop acting like a girl, boss. I'll get it done. It takes time."

The Norwegian stands there a moment, his mouth slightly open, trying to control himself. But the smirk on my face is too much for him. He continues his rant as soon as he can regroup.

"You're too slow and don't deserve this job. Time is money. If you can't go any faster you better find something else to do. You will not cut it here."

He is starting to twitch a little and I know that it is time to walk but I have to get fired first. With a mask of calm and a voice that can not be pegged one way or another, I let it go.

"Just take it easy before you have an accident. It'll get done but I'm going as fast as I can and you little tantrums will not move me faster."

He starts pacing back and forth, his hands trying to grasp a bald scalp.

"Aheeeee I can't stand it! You're no good! You're too slow! You don't belong here! You'll never listen to me.....get out of here!!!"

Tossing my hand rag to the work bench, I walk off.

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I will hear later that he rues this day. Because no one will stay in this job, it is eliminated, leaving him to do the work. My only regret is that I don't get to see it.

John Haverly, a co-worker at my new job in a group home, is about 10 years younger than me. He is also single, liberal minded, and likes the outdoors. Born and raised in Seattle and up on the Northwest and what it has to offer, John teaches me a lot about the Puget Sound region and its people. And I, in turn, expose him to some of the culture of Appalachia.

During one of the coldest snaps in Seattle's history I get kicked out of my living quarters for getting on a drunk. The city is at a standstill because of several feet of snow. Nothing I'm not used to where I come from, but here people are dying...and I am suddenly homeless. John Haverly takes me in and gives me a place to stay until I am able to find a studio apartment on Capitol Hill, just above downtown Seattle.

Here, for the first time, I see men kissing men. The gay community is everywhere. I have always been liberally inclined but life here on the hill is exposing me to just how liberal things can get. Living in such an environment takes some getting used to, but I manage to work, mind my own business, and stay out of trouble within the anonymity of the city.

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In the spring as I prepare to leave Seattle for back East I start drinking and can't stop. Taking a large bottle of Vodka, I leave anyway, sticking to the interstates and, except for a few hours of revelry with the locals of some East Oregon town, I drive straight through to Twin Falls, Idaho and crash at the home of a friend I know from my younger years back East.

Moving on a couple of days later after taking a quick, but painful cure, I drive a used diesel VW rabbit. I have to go under the rabbit sometimes to tighten the fan belt that keeps the battery charged. In Kansas the assembly connector that I have tightened so many times breaks, forcing me into a roadside auto shop to get it welded. Not taking it kindly when I decline to have the shop reassemble it, the owner frowns and charges me \$19 for a half inch weld that would have cost \$10 most places. He stuffs the twenty I give him in his pocket and offers no change. Lying in the rain, I put the piece back on the engine and continue on across middle America to the Appalachian foothills. Turning South through Tennessee, I cross the Smoky Mountains into Asheville, North Carolina.

Checking in to an old time boarding house, I quickly land a job doing the same type of work that I left in Seattle. But it isn't long before the authority figures that I have tried to dodge in my post war life start rubbing me in ways that smart. As the only male and "un-motherly" employee of the agency I guess it is easy to let me go when I don't fit the mold. Consequently, I throw it in for North Carolina and hit the road again, heading up the east coast to Delaware.

Grant and Kinesse Livson, my old neighbors from the mountains above me on Fox Run, live with their four daughters and a son on a large tract of land in lower Delaware. Back near the D.C. area where they are originally from, they are a staunch conservative family of evangelical Christians that have built a new life. Back when we first met they had

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lived in a candle factory by the railroad tracks in Wilcox, the nearest town to Fox Run. Then it was just Kinesse as a single mother of a young daughter and Grant as a roustabout hippie who settled there to drop out and make candles. However it wasn't long before Grant and Kinesse were out of the candle factory and living on the mountain in a log cabin as crude as the shack that I lived in except that they didn't even have electricity. But they did have hundreds of very peaceful and quiet mountain top acres. I enjoyed visiting them from time to time when I roamed the mountains.

Like a blast from the past, I blow in on them and get put up in an old dilapidated camper on the back of their property. No bathroom or even an outhouse but plenty of woods.

Like hundreds of times before, I quickly, and painfully, dry out and take a job as a laborer laying pipe for a new housing development. Grant is the foreman and the crew are all younger and in better shape than me. Most work atop backhoes and other heavy machinery while I hump with a shovel at their call. The only day that I do not almost collapse, I flag on the highway.

My last day on the job I clear brush all morning and am on constant demand in the afternoon. It is the only job that I have been on that does not supply water for the laborers. The others carry water on their machines.

It is a particularly hot and humid day and I get pulled from the brush detail by the young owner of the company who is running a backhoe. He tells me to get at it with a shovel and expects me to keep up with the fine digging behind the rough cut of the backhoe. There is no way, and I know that if I don't pace myself I will never make it through the day. Seeing me lag behind, the owner jumps from his machine, where he has been sitting all day, and snatches the shovel from my hands while telling me that I am slower than his grandmother. His tone is angry and insulting as if I am lacking because of some moral flaw. It really pisses me off and if I wasn't so exhausted I might take it to another level. But that would make it bad for Grant as well so I just curtly reply, "Yeah, but I'm almost as old as your grandmother too."

His eyes blaze as we stare at each other. I think he is going to hit me but he just stews for a moment, climbs back on his machine and motors off.

That evening on the long ride home, Grant tells me that I have to go.

I learn of Point Man Ministries, a Christian based organization that helps combat veterans in need. Started in 1984 by a Seattle Police Officer who had served in Vietnam, Point Man has chapters spread over the United States. I call the number of the vet currently running it and he quickly sends me a copy of his book and encourages me to seek help from the Point Man Organization when I return to Seattle. The book arrives right before I shove off from Delaware. I read it straight through. His story starts out in a place like Fox Run with a couple of guys who are like me and tells what it is like coming back from Vietnam. Many times during the reading it seems to be a story about me. Not since the movie "Platoon" have I been captured by another's similar war experiences. Packing the book with the rest of my gear, I feel like I have a place to go.

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With very little money--not enough to get a place to live--and no friends except John Haverly, I thank the Livsons and set off, putting the miles behind me as I again head West. November is winding down and I expect bad weather further West. Plus the glow plugs for my diesel engine are not working properly. After shutting down the engine it will not restart. I need assistance getting started in South Dakota and again in Sundance Wyoming after a snowstorm forces me into town for the night.

A couple of young locals push me to get the car started and I do not shut the engine down for the rest of the trip. Crossing the continental divide late at night and during another snowstorm, I drive by referencing the reflector posts along the road that stand higher than the snow. Everything else is white and it is the only way to tell where the road is. Dropping down into Washington not long after that and pushing across the arid lands of Eastern Washington, I summit the Cascades. They are also covered by snow but the VW Rabbit's front wheel drive barely keeps me going. Fishtailing around other cars that are spinning out, I am lucky to get across the Snoqualmie Pass and drop down into the Puget Sound region, back to where I started only months before.

**P**OINT MAN, over a period of a couple years, gets me rehabilitated enough to keep on keepin on. They also open my eyes to what can happen when one finally makes a stand someplace where people have an idea of who you are. There will be many rough times ahead but here among the worn trails of others like me, the way on is not so ill defined. I manage to get old and remember.