

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

Charles Hayes
Ester (A Mother)

The years following World War II were a time of beginnings. Peace was beginning, families were beginning, and America was beginning to take a new shape. It was expected that people would try new things and go new places. But among the ancient mountains, known as the Appalachians, things did not take on change like the rest of the country. Few roads were built through the mountainous hardwood forest of this rugged area. Life held on to those things that could provide the most relief from an isolated existence. In the areas where coal was found, men mined it, lived by it, grew old and died by it. Their women raised their children and provided the men with what they could as the trains and trucks carried the product of their labors and most of the money out beyond the mountains to the growing cities of the Northeast.

Some of that coal began its journey near the little town of Matoka, West Virginia. Located along the train tracks that carried much of the traffic, Matoka was the home of a family of merchants that owned and ran the town's only feed store and a small movie theater. Of that family was Ester Williams and her two older sisters. There had been an older brother but he had gone down in a bomber during the war. Ester's father was also deceased but her mother still lived and managed the two small businesses. They were an industrious family that knew the value of money. Ester, however, was the least business oriented among the family. Instead, she was more interested in music and loved to play the piano and sing, leaving the matters of business to the rest of the family. Her family supported her in this and considered her to be more or less their contribution to the arts. Consequently, she became quite good. In the tough environment of the coal fields such an individual could hold a place that was, while rather different, respected and sometimes admired. The struggle of mining life sometimes required a softening of the hard edges that necessarily developed. Music could do that.

Ester was unusual in more ways than just her avocation. She was a twice married single mother. Many years earlier, she had eloped with her high school sweetheart, a handsome but penniless boy named Ben.

During the heights of the great depression Ester and Ben returned to Matoka after marrying. Neither had any way to earn a living. Ester's family had enough to help them out some but Ben came from a poor family who didn't have enough to even pay off their debts at the coal company store. Plus Ben hated coal mining and could not hold a mining job. Mining was tough.

It wasn't long before Ben, whose character strengths did not match his good looks, succumbed to depression, borrowed a gun, and shot himself.

He was buried following a small funeral with only his mother and father and the Williams family in attendance, his prior popularity having vanished among the staunch conservative community. Ester's family paid for the funeral and burial. The expenses were never discussed between the two families nor did they stay in contact. It was like nature had annulled

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the marriage between Ester and Ben. Ester returned to her music and the rest of the family continued their trade while Ben's little family, now childless, returned to their life in the coal camp. The great depression was no respecter of persons--life was luck and it must go on.

Sitting on the front porch of the family home in an old rocker, Ester recalls the days of her marriage to Ben and wonders if they played a part in her leaving Buddy, her second husband and the father of her two year old son. Determined to let the past be the past, she quickly tries to dismiss this thought. But Buddy is her son's father and that is different. It will never be the past.

She can't help but remember the day that she left Mathews, Virginia for good, Or the letter and phone calls from Buddy begging her to come back. She felt sorry for him but told him that it was over. Did she do the right thing? Like a film in her mother's movie house, it plays in her mind, different parts and times flashing forth like a Picasso.

A naked baby boy barely able to walk, struggles toward the ocean waves, falls face first into the sand, giggles, and rights himself. The brilliant blue and white mixes with the wind and sounds of surf to flood his senses. As he nears the froth of the receding surf Ester suddenly runs to the water's edge and grabs him. Ester is a stoutly built woman wearing a modest bathing suit of the post World War II era and the child is Charles, her son. Telling herself that she had better keep a close eye on him, she looks to the sky and determines that the sun will soon be too hot. Holding Charles, Ester bends down and picks up the little shovel and bucket and carries them to the grassy top of the sand dune where a little red wagon sits. Putting them and her belongings in the wagon, she pulls on a smock, puts cover on her boy, and pulls the wagon along a sandy street that runs through the seaside fishing and farming community of Mathews, Virginia.

Ester and Buddy, a fisherman jack of all trades met after the war at a USO social in Bluefield, West Virginia where Buddy was awaiting military discharge. Ester had wanted a child beyond all else. And Buddy in his Merchant Marine uniform seemed like a God send to a young unmarried woman from a small town. Both were in their thirties and looking for a place to enjoy the expected peace and prosperity that would come. Times were giddy and, though they were from different backgrounds, they married quickly and headed to the Virginia shore where Buddy was from. However the good times never really had a chance because Buddy was prone to drink and many times the money that was needed to make ends meet was spent in the local fishermen's bars. Plus the crab boat that Ester's family bought them for a wedding present was hardly broken in before Buddy got drunk and sold it for far less than it was worth. Even though she was granted her wish and became pregnant, that sale broke Ester's will to keep the marriage going. She left Buddy and went back to Matoka to have Charles.

Buddy, a father removed, kept phoning and pleading for her to come back until, against the advice of her family, she carried Charles back to Mathews and tried once again to make a life for them. But Buddy seemed

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little different than before except that his drinking was more confined to the local area and seldom did he stay out more than one night.

Buddy had been medically discharged from the Merchant Marines because he had fallen from a mast and burst his skull. A metal plate was inserted to replace part of the bone and it was said that this contributed to his behavior. His family tried to make allowances for him but they were just able to make ends meet themselves. But he was one of their own so most of them tried to keep Ester on board for his sake. This proved to be hardly enough for Ester. She had made sacrifices in order to return to Mathews. She had liked watching her baby, studying music, and playing her mother's piano. In Mathews they could barely afford the rent for the little shack that they lived in, let alone a piano. Or even a good record player. But she had wanted to prove to her parents that they could make it so she tried to endure. It was not long though until she decided that their life could not go on like that. They were on borrowed time. This cast a feeling of melancholia over their relationship and the resulting resentment prevented both of them from honestly trying to come to grips with the situation. Frequently they would exchange guilty looks and quietly drift farther apart, each seeing their own vision of a doomed relationship.

Walking along the rutted beach road, pulling the wagon and Charles behind, Ester thinks about what will be waiting for them when they get home. When they left for the beach they saw Buddy by the station house talking with a large black man in fishing boots. The station house is a favorite place for those who like to pass a bottle around while discussing fishing or the hog prices over at the farmers auction. As Ester nears the place where the beach road joins the regular street she hears laughter coming from the direction of the station house and decides to bypass it, hoping to avoid seeing Buddy drunk.

Evening is quiet and Ester remains anxious when Buddy fails to come home for dinner. She and Charles listen to the radio until it is his bedtime and Ester tucks him in.

Suddenly a loud crashing sound comes from the front stoop.

"God Damn it Ester, how many times have I told you to keep the fucking toys out of the doorway!"

Ester hurries to the entrance and helps Buddy regain his feet. He had tripped over the wagon, knocking out one of the door panels.

"My God Buddy, the doorway is plainly clear enough for anyone who can walk straight. You smell like a brewery, serves you right. I suppose you drank up the money we were going to pay the rent with."

"Fuck the rent we're going to move anyway," replies Buddy as he lurches across the room and flops down in his favorite piece of furniture, a huge pink arm chair.

Ester's eyes fill with tears.

"Just where to. We don't have any money and the last time I checked there are no places around here that are rent free. It's just another one of your moves because you drank up the money. I told you Buddy I can't

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keep moving. It's not good for Charles and it's not good for us. We need a place we can count on."

"Hell Ester, don't start that got to get ahead bull shit again. We can take that little garden cottage behind John's. He says that I can work on his boat to make it up plus a little extra money besides."

John is Buddy's older brother. He fishes for anything that he can sell off his truck over in Gloucester, mostly crab. He needs help setting and retrieving crab pots--it is hard work bringing them up and setting them from the back of his small boat. And Ester knows that Buddy can't do it.

"You can't stick to that. You've tried it and Lord knows you can't. Besides that cottage doesn't even have a bathroom. I told you when I came back here that I would not live like that and you promised that we could have our own place. You said it would be different. They don't even like me. They think I'm stuck up. Buddy listen to me--I won't do it!"

Ester is crying.

Buddy stands up, pointing his finger.

"You are stuck up and you'll God damned do what I tell you to do!"

Ester, rushes over to Buddy and grabs him.

"Please, Buddy, please don't do this. I won't do it...I can't do it...I'll leave you, I'll take Charles and I'll leave. And this time I won't come back. Can't you see that?"

There it is, the unspoken thought that inhabits their lives, finally said out loud.

Buddy looks down at her as she clings to him and for a moment they hold each other's gaze. As if to terminate any tie that holds them together, Buddy pushes her away.

"Go on and leave then! You never belonged here anyway...too high and mighty for the likes of me...go on, leave, I'm tired of never being able to please you! Take the kid with you...going to turn out to be nothing but a momma's boy anyhow... you wanted a kid...now you got one. Call it my contribution, go on, leave."

Ester stumbles backwards and falls over a foot stool, landing with a loud thud as her bottom hits the floor. Lowering her head into her hands, her soft sobs are broken by the sound of another louder cry. In the bedroom door stands Charles, his big teary eyes searching first the face of his father and then that of his mother's.

Ester quickly stands and takes Charles back into the bedroom while Buddy, looking bewildered and lost, slowly walks out the front door. Looking at the light coming through the broken door panel, Buddy mutters, "Oh what's the use," shoves his hands in his pockets, and makes his way toward the station house.

Ester knows that the greyhound bus to Richmond will pass through shortly. She also knows that this has been a long time coming so it may as well be now. She will take Charles and return to her family with the money she received from them earlier and hid away. It was enough to

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get them on the bus to Richmond. Enough will be leftover to go by train from there into West Virginia. She doesn't know the train schedule but she knows that the major coalfields of Southern West Virginia call for much rail traffic. And that includes some passenger trains that bring the big coal company executives, their families, and the coal business in and out of the region. Along with the rich in their sleepers, there will be room for the poor in coach. They might have to spend a night in the station but that is nothing she and Charles have not done before.

There is not much to pack---a small cardboard suitcase and a small bag of toys along with a jar of peanut butter and half a loaf of bread. Ester places the food and toys, along with Charles, in the little red wagon and pulls them behind her as she carries the suitcase.

The bus stop is about a mile away and it takes her about 30 minutes to walk the distance to the shelter and bench beside the highway. She doesn't have long to wait before she sees large headlights in the distance. It has to be the bus. Nothing else that big runs through here. Stepping near the edge of the road and waving, Ester watches the bus slow and pull over.

The driver gets out and looks over at Charles setting in the wagon.

"Heading toward Richmond," he asks, "just you and the kid?"

"Yes," replies Ester, "we have a train to catch."

"You're not going all the way into downtown Richmond," the driver asks, "want me to drop you at the train station?"

"Yes, please. That would save us some trouble making the connection and it would be much appreciated." Ester is glad that the driver is willing to do this. She can't spare cab fare.

"No problem at all," the driver says as he stows the suitcase under the bus and looks at the red wagon.

"Sorry I can't take the wagon without charging you extra. The company is very strict about that. Want me to load it as well?"

"Just leave it," replies Ester.

She feels a moment of sorrow but immediately pushes it away. The wagon had served them well and Charles had few toys, she will have to get him another one. Or maybe something a little more complicated like one of those toy cars that you can pedal.

Lifting Charles and their few belongings from the wagon, Ester pushes the wagon to the side of the shelter and hopes that someone will make use of it. She pays the driver and learns that Charles can ride free as long as he is carried aboard.

Finding a seat not too far from the front of the bus and getting situated, Ester hears the swooshing sound as the driver closes the door and pulls back on the highway. A family of three is once again only two, starting a journey that is as unclear as the dark countryside beyond their window. Holding Charles in her lap as he falls asleep, Ester wonders what she can do once they reach Matoka. Her family will of course take them in but

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they will also expect her to find something to do with herself. Ester thinks of her music and how she might use that to make a life. Maybe she can teach.

At the station house Buddy sees the bus in the distance slow down and stop for a few minutes before continuing on. Maybe someday he can take his family on that bus to Richmond and they can have a real holiday---eat in a good restaurant, and stay in a nice hotel. Ester has complained and threatened before. One time she even left him, but she had come back fast enough. He knows it is hard for her but she will just have to give him a chance to prove to her that he can handle it. Just a little more time is needed. A man has to sometimes do things that people don't understand. That takes time. What things those are, Buddy can't quite figure. He loses his train of thought and doesn't remember where he started. Looking around and suddenly realizing that he is the only one left on the platform, Buddy gingerly slides from atop a large barrel and stumbles toward home hoping Ester will be in bed. He doesn't feel like arguing tonight. It will all get straightened out tomorrow.

As Buddy nears home he sees that the lights are on and tries to ready himself for more complaints. Noticing the broken door but not remembering how it got that way, he goes inside. It is all too quiet. Why has Ester not turned off the lights before going to bed? Only the bedroom is dark. He goes into the bedroom and switches on the light to find the bed and the old makeshift crib empty. The drawer where Ester keeps her clothes is open and empty. And the shelf where she keeps the few things for Charles is bare. A knot slowly begins to form in the pit of Buddy's stomach and he begins to feel sick---a wild kind of scared sick. He looks all around, panic in his eyes. He even runs outside and looks under the house to see if they might be hiding there. Coming back inside, he notices that the wagon is gone. Maybe they are just walking around somewhere but why would they do that. The unusual stop of the Greyhound bus suddenly dawns upon him. In a full panic, he half runs, half walks to the bus stop to find no one there. Nothing.

As Buddy is bending over to catch his breath he sees a flicker of light in the shadow of the shelter and draws closer to see what it was. At first only the handle bar lying in the dust is visible. But the whole thing becomes visible as Buddy further examines the object. It is a child's red wagon. The realization that while he was getting drunker he had watched Ester and Charles leave him hits him hard. Moaning from deep inside, he slowly sinks to the bench, curls like a fetus, and cries until he is unconscious.

Slowly rocking back and forth, again aware of the quiet Matoka street that she overlooked, Ester closed her review of the past and looked to her child playing along the porch nearby. She had done the right thing and she would prove it. With a resolve as hardy as her love of music, she set her jaw and swore to herself that, even if it killed her, she would make a life for herself and her son.

Ester Williams Hayes enrolled in a nearby teachers college and studied music. Through many years of moving around to substitute teach dur-

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ing the school year, while completing her teaching certificate during the summer months, Ester raised Charles as a single mother and lead many a school band as its conductor.

It was not easy. Away trips for state High School band competitions had Charles, still very young, donning his small band uniform and marching in the ranks, pretending to be the smallest music maker. There was no money to do it any other way and Charles played his part well enough that no concerns were raised. The travel and mix of older people stretched him in ways that were not so obvious at first. Later they led to a more liberal leaning in his nature. A fact that sometimes puzzled the more conservative Ester.

Charles' father was no longer in the picture, but when Charles graduated high school Ester loaned him her car to go back to the Chesapeake Bay area and look for him. Finding only his father's brother, Charles learned that Buddy had faded from even his own family's picture. The last anybody knew about him was that he was in an old soldier's home somewhere. It seemed that not much had changed through those years. Fishing and hard work left little time to keep up with those beyond the immediate family.

Charles returned to West Virginia and, as Ester grew older, went forth carrying those obscure parts of his father that would bedevil him and Ester throughout life. They were the products of the hard rocks of Appalachia. Where coal was king.