

*Charles Hayes*  
**Between The Cracks**

**A**s autumn gets a firm foothold on the Appalachian coal country, the old man's mood seems to change to one of vigilance as he looks ahead to what will soon be required to get by. Requirements that seldom change and always bring a melancholy type of purpose to his life by offering up the carrot of another spring if he gets it right. Along the river the leaves have changed and the chill has set deeper with each passing day, bringing the time when being apart becomes personal and selfish. His infatuation with things like good land, clean water, and air, seems rather bothersome to those who are in power. To them he might be considered an outsider. But he was here first and he knows that the real outsiders are the ones who dig and carry away their finds to an appetite in far off places. Knowing there is little that he can do about it, he tells himself that it's ok, for he has looked all over and even with the alienation this is the place that he understands most. He can feel the right to be here in the pushback of his steps through mountain orchards with rotting apples lying among the fallen leaves on a ground marked by deer tracks. A ground ready for another season of sleep. His hair is white now but his step is still light enough to hear the rustle of wildlife in the thickets as he nears. They are also trying to get it right. Neither too hard nor too soft, it is a good place to dream and prepare.

Long ago, when he didn't know how to stay away from those consumptive masters of men that longed for his mountain's riches, he embarked upon the flight that eventually led him back to this land and the rich colors of dying leaves. Now, hardly an ending of the colors goes by that he doesn't remember how he came to take that journey. It all began as a boy wandering the coal digs, watching what he thought belonged to him get shipped away. And it seemed then that all things were destined to leave that place.

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A huge grey coal truck with a plume of coal dust streaming from the black hump of its load barreled down the narrow road toward 10 year old Danny. It gave him just enough time to turn his back as it blew by and showered him with fine cinders. Every morning the trucks were part of his trek to the school that was located up a hollow a half mile beyond. And every morning, for those few seconds that he was buffeted by the trucks he would feel as angry and insignificant as the coal camp where he lived. Sometimes he would catch a glimpse of the driver high in the cab, grasping the steering wheel like a machine gun as if he were in some sort of war. One thing was for sure, if he tripped and fell at the wrong moment he would end up squashed flat and probably no one would even know until they finally had to scrape him up.

Beside the road the creek flowed it's usual mustard brown from the rain and mine waste that found its way there. Out in the middle of the passing waters a big double size mattress was stuck on one of the rocks and the banks were littered with cans and bottles. No wonder not a living thing could be found there. When Danny was a little younger he used to fish there until he finally realized that the only things living in that sludge

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were just in his imagination. Then he knew why the miners would joke with him about catching the big one. And he had felt foolish. Now, with all pretend left for the snot noses not old enough to see the truth, the creek was only good for shooting at bottles or rats with his BB gun. That and standing by the road at night, guessing from their headlights what kind of car was coming was about all there was to do for people like him. He had never lived in any one place long enough for it to really matter so he didn't feel deprived, he just wanted out of the way of the lousy coal trucks. With a dad that had black lung and couldn't work the mines any more and a mom that was always down in her back, his wish didn't seem real likely to happen anytime soon. They were squatting on mine land, living in an old shack they had patched up, and there just didn't seem the need to go anywhere else. When times would try to nudge them out of their squatter's shack there would always be talk about Detroit and making cars but they had been able to wait most of those nudges out so far. That was fine with Danny since he couldn't see himself around all those Yankees and their fancy ways to begin with. No sir, when he left he wanted to go South where the girls were clean. And where Elvis Presley came from. Until then he reckoned that he would just stay around his little West Virginia hollow and learn the best way to do that.

His thoughts of one day getting away from the soot spouting trucks were suddenly interrupted by the distant wail of a siren. It had suddenly turned damp and through the early morning mist and drizzle the muted sound of the siren reminded him of the mournful call of a loon on a pretty lake over in Virginia where he and his dad used to camp. That was back before black lung got in the way and Danny saw first hand what the mines could do to a person. He well knew that the siren had nothing to do with pretty lakes, or pretty anything for that matter. It meant that there was an emergency up at the Benwick # 2 mine, which was up the same hollow as his school. Hardly a month went by that there was not something going wrong up there. Mostly it was roof falls from trying to dig too much coal without spending enough on roof bolts and mine props. And when that caused the mountain to come down on a man it made for worse than a kid hit by a coal truck. His dad used to say that maybe black lung saved his life by getting him out of the mines. But that was before he started spitting up blood every morning. He didn't say that any more. Sometimes after a roof fall it took days before they could even find anybody. And when they did find them the dead were so messed up that they couldn't even open the box at the funeral to say goodbye. That's one of the reasons that he hated mining and knew he would never do it. Saying goodbye had always been important to him, he was good at it, and he didn't want to be cheated out of one of the things he did well. Detroit and making cars with the Yankees would come before that.

Up ahead he saw a small crowd beginning to gather at the little camp store. Some were miners from the graveyard shift who always stopped by there to unwind before going on home and the rest were families trying to get some word of what had happened up at the #2. When he got to the store he stood off to the side of the crowd, watched, and listened until he learned that there had been an explosion and roof fall. The faces of the people waiting there told him that it was bad, women quietly sobbed while most of the men, angry and agitated, were yelling about how the

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mine was only using them to make money and didn't care if they got sick or killed. One old man who always hung around there in a wheelchair while sipping from a jar was telling anybody who would listen how he lost his legs in the mines and how the company kicked him and his family out of their company house because he couldn't work any more. Didn't matter that he offered to pay rent, they wanted the house for the able bodied who could mine coal. Danny had heard his story before and continuously lived it with his dad and, like many of the others, didn't need it. He wished he would be quiet. The few kids there among the crowd were younger than Danny. They looked scared and lost. For a lot of them it was probably their first time. The adults not yelling and cursing the mine owners or sobbing into their scarves just stood by the road, quietly chain smoking as they stared up towards the entrance of the hollow.

A couple of ambulances screamed by on their way to the nearest doctor at Whitesville while another one went the other direction towards the miners hospital over the mountain at Beckley. Then after what seemed like a long while a convoy of three ambulances, escorted by a sheriff's car and a state police cruiser, slowly came out of the hollow and turned towards Beckley and the only morgue in the area. A hush suddenly fell over the crowd and it seemed like time was frozen as they stared after the departing ambulances, as if looking for some unknown sign that could free them to live again. One that only they would recognize.

After a while Danny broke from the gathering and continued on up the road towards school and the hollow where the dead and injured had just come from. When he got to the bridge that crossed the creek to where most of the company housing was he was joined by Billy Naven. Billy lived in that part of the camp where the houses were usually painted and a little better than most of those along the roads and hollows. It was where a lot of the younger miners lived.

"Guess you might be lucky your dad's got black lung," Billy said, "could have been him in one of those ambulances."

"Yeah, maybe so but we ain't got no fit house like you got either," Danny replied. "What about your dad, he OK?"

"He don't work that shift no more," Billy said. "He's graveyard now, just got home a while ago. He's ok 'cept he's always too tired to do anything when he ain't working. We used to go and do stuff like fish or watch the football games down at the high school on Friday nights, but now it's like he's just not interested in anything but TV and a six-pack of beer."

Danny knew what Billy meant. The life of the coal miner was pretty much defined as far as he was concerned too. He had seen what had happened to his dad. One day when he had ask him about it, his dad had told him that young men who got married and entered the mines would be wore out before they had finished their thirties.

Danny learned that life in the coal fields was not very happy but it was where he was and where he had managed to establish a feeling of belonging to something. So it was better than nothing and he figured that one day he would get out. Heck, he was just a kid. He had time.

He asked Billy, "You getting out of here when you grow up?"

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Seeming to have never considered the possibility, Billy thought about what to say.

"I don't know, where would I go? Every place else thinks we're just a bunch of dumb hillbillies."

"Yeah I know, but maybe they're right, Billy. Maybe staying here proves that they are right. I mean there ain't much to do here except play a little high school ball and then go in the mines. I saw dad spit up blood again this morning and when he saw me looking he told me, 'Don't you ever mine coal, Danny boy,' and I ain't. I don't know how but when my schooling is over I'm getting out of here."

"I got a cousin from over Marsh Fork way," Billy said, "he joined the air force and got out plenty fast enough. He's over in Germany now seeing the world and drinking beer with those blonde girls, like the ones in the magazines. He says they all love Americans and can't tell where you're from. All they care about is that your American."

"Really?" Danny thought about the poster of Uncle Sam pointing his finger at him down by the store and decided that the air force wouldn't do for him. Maybe the Marines. They have those pretty uniforms and they're the toughest, everybody knows.

"What about you," Danny ask, "you think you might join the Air Force?"

"I ain't smart enough probably," Billy moaned. "My cousin graduated high school and I'm having a hard time making it through the fourth grade. Maybe the mines is all I can get come that time."

"Aw, come on Billy, maybe not the Air Force but maybe the Marines. You and me could join together when we get big. Audie Murphy was only sixteen when he joined the army during the big one. They wanted all they could get then, smart or dumb. Maybe we'll get into another one and they'll be begging us to sign up. What do you think, Billy? Think maybe we could do that? Think of all the fun we could have traveling around in our clean new uniforms. Wouldn't that be something? Sure beats mining coal and spitting up blood."

Billy seemed to light up a little bit.

"Yeah maybe we could get in another fight and then they would need me. I wouldn't have to be so smart. And it sure would be nice us going together. It's sure something to think about, ain't it?"

"Sure is," Danny said as they turned up the dirt road into the hollow. It had rained hard the night before and the road had about two inches of mud on it that sucked at their shoes as they trudged up the grade.

Every now and then a coal truck came down the hill splattering mud and driving them almost into the ditch.

A few miners were still walking out of the hollow, carrying their dinner buckets and looking like the walking dead. Usually they joked around with the kids and tried to put on a little fun but that day they didn't seem to even notice the boys, or themselves for that matter. Big black sticks of human figures with two sunken white spots for eyes that saw nothing,



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they passed the two boys as if they weren't even there. Danny looked at Billy and could tell that he was scared. Death hung heavy in the air.

As they topped the first muddy grade up the hollow the sooty white wooden schoolhouse, perched on a little flat place against the mountain-side, came into view. With the flag pole as its only adornment it wasn't much to look at. Since it only had three rooms made up of two grades each and one large room for the lunch cafeteria, there were only three teachers and that included the principal.

The kids that went there were mainly from the mining families where education was simply a resting place before entering the mines. There was not much difference in most of the kids but there was one kid, name of Alan Stover, who was different. For one thing he rarely came to school and had failed sixth grade so many times that he was almost old enough to quit school altogether. Perhaps for that reason he was also the toughest. But Alan, when he did come to school, didn't mingle with the other kids much and even though he was the toughest he didn't bully. With Danny he seemed to let down the wall he kept around himself and sometimes when Danny was alone he would come up to him and ask questions about school or some of the places Danny had been, like he was interested in what Danny had to say. Hard to explain, but he acted like Danny could help him with his life or something.

When Billy and Danny arrived at school they could see that Alan was absent again because he wasn't in his usual spot outside smoking and waiting for the bell to ring. But everyone could see his cousin, Butch Stover, standing on the school porch and checking lunch bags to see if he could get a free treat. Butch did bully and most kids tried to stay away from him when they could.

Although cousins, Butch and Alan were worlds apart when it came to how they treated the other kids. Alan was smaller and by the way he dressed Danny could tell that he had less than most, yet he still held himself over the others with a quiet pride that went beyond his dress. Butch, who had failed at least once too, was bigger and enjoyed using his size to push others around but he never messed with Alan who simply ignored him. It seemed that Butch also knew when Alan wasn't around because at those times he would get meaner and that morning was no different as Billy and Danny somehow snuck by and into the school while Butch was taking some first grader's Baby Ruth.

When the time for recess came they had to stay inside because of the rain and mud. Other than Billy, who was a grade lower than him and in another room, Danny didn't have any real friends to talk to and he felt trapped in the small crowded room. Outside recess he could play marbles, talk to Billy, or just run around and choose the kids that he wanted to be with. Plus there was an old basketball hoop out back. But it didn't get used much because the only basketball was flat and nobody bothered to fix it. About the only thing Danny could do during recess on rainy days was watch the girls who all stayed in one part of the room doing their private talks and glancing at the boys occasionally. A couple of them were pretty. He didn't know that girls could be so interesting much before, and now that he knew they seemed to not want anything to do with him. Still it was something to watch them and see if he could catch them looking back.

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The other boys didn't seem all that interested in girls but Danny liked to see what kind of dresses they wore and even on such a rainy day, in their muddy shoes and socks, their legs were still pretty and fun to just look at. However he had to be careful to hide his looks by peeking over a library book that he pretended to read.

It rained pretty near all that day and when the final bell rang it was so nice to get out of there, even with the slushy mud all over the place.

On his way home Danny could usually avoid Butch by getting him in sight and then maneuvering to stay behind as they came out of the hollow. But this day Butch had decided to stop along the side of the hollow and hurl insults and threats as the other kids walked by. When he saw Danny his eyes lit up and there was no way for Danny to avoid him short of turning around and going back to school. But he couldn't even do that. That would only piss Butch off and he would be sure to come after him. So Danny fixed his eyes on the muddy road just ahead of his steps and continued on, wishing he could disappear. When he drew even with Butch he heard the sarcastic bait.

"Hey teachers boy, are you going home to your momma?"

Danny pretended not to hear him and kept going with his heart beating a mile a minute.

"Hey, Daniel! I'm talking to you. You'd better stop and give me an answer or I'm going to smear you and your fancy new jacket in the mud."

Butch was now walking along to stay even with him.

Danny had just been given a new white jacket by his mom and he was terrified that Butch would throw him down in the mud so he stopped and fearfully looked up.

"I'm just going home like everybody else. I have to feed the dog and make sure he stays in the yard," Danny said. Desperate to keep Butch from following him home he quickly continued, "He's a mean dog and mom and dad can't handle him but he does whatever I tell him to do."

Butch seemed to consider that for a moment then walked up close and said, "Well let me tell you something smart ass. If I see you walking this way tomorrow I'm going to kick your ass up between your shoulder blades. You better find another way home you little piss ant. You got it?"

Danny felt a surge of relief when he realized that he was going to get out of there without getting beat up.

"I got it," he said and quickly put distance between himself and Butch who was now strutting down the road, creating a wide path among the other kids.

Situated in a half hidden gully over the bank of the muddy road sat a derelict coal company shack not too unlike the one Danny lived in. It was just a couple of rooms with no running water and a coal fired stove. In front there was a long dilapidated porch and out back beside a black stream of mine wash was the toilet or outhouse as most called it. An old broken down couple squatted there and somehow managed to survive. Maybe they were kin to Alan Stover and maybe not but some days when

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he was supposed to be in school Alan would walk the railroad tracks with an old burlap sack and collect the big lumps of coal that had fallen from the passing trains and lug them up the hollow to the old couples shack. This had been such a day and there on the front porch of that shack, unseen by either Butch or Danny, stood Alan. He had seen and heard the whole thing between Butch and Danny.

All that evening Danny worried about Butch and getting beat up, then finally accepted his fate since there was no way he could avoid it. He would just do the best he could. Maybe Butch would forget about it or find somebody else to pick on.

The next day in the classroom where Danny's fifth grade sat on one side of the room and Butch's sixth grade sat on the other, Danny tried to avoid looking at Butch but a couple of times he couldn't help it. When Butch had his attention he would slowly smile as he wagged his finger at him. That caused Danny's fear to return full force and made him know for sure that it was going to be a very different kind of school day. Something else was different about that day too because in the last row of the sixth graders, half asleep, sat Alan.

As the final bell rang and school let out Danny hung back as most of the other kids hustled out the door, across the play yard, and onto the road. He was going slower than usual but it wasn't long before he saw Butch standing in the same spot as the day before. His heart began to pound.

A large group of girls were a little ways behind him as he approached Butch. And behind the girls, out of mind and out of sight, was Alan trailing them all, walking slowly and smoking a cigarette.

Danny felt terrible, he had a crush on three of the girls and they were about to see him shamed by Butch. Or worse.

When he got to the spot where Butch was waiting he cringed as he heard him say, "Just hold it right there you little twerp."

Everybody stopped and Danny could plainly hear the girls giggling which for Butch was too good to be true. He had an audience of girls to show how tough he was.

"Didn't I tell you to not come by here?"

"Yeah but there ain't no other way to go. I have to come by here."

Danny felt like throwing his books down and making a run for it but he just couldn't with Virginia, Nancy, and Peggy Sue watching. He didn't know what he would do but he couldn't run.

"Well ain't that just too bad," Butch said as he closed the few feet between them. "Looks like I'm going to have to kick your butt."

Danny's eyes filled with tears as he stood there waiting for it to begin.

The girls turned silent and drew closer together.

Then suddenly before anything could happen everyone was surprised by a loud voice as Alan stepped from behind the girls.

"You ain't gonna kick nobody's butt Butch Stover."

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Alan had a bow legged way of walking and he was shorter but as he strode up to Butch and glared up into his face Butch seemed to lose two sizes.

"Hey, Alan what you doin' here? I'm just having a little fun with momma's boy here. Don't mean nothing. I wouldn't waste my time with him."

Alan was small but his clenched hands at his sides were the largest Danny had ever seen on a boy.

"Well why don't you try me." Alan said, "That be a waste of your time too, Butch?"

"Hell no, Alan. Everybody knows you don't take nothin from nobody," Butch replied, so scared that he was actually shaking.

"You're a big tough guy, Butch, always picking on those smaller than you. I'm smaller than you, come on, pick on me," Alan kept on.

There was silence for perhaps five seconds as the two looked at each other.

Then as fast as a rattler's strike Alan's left hand opened up and swung around to the side of Butch's face.

The smack sounded like a 22 rifle had been fired off, making the girls gasp and everyone but Alan jump. Then with his coal black curls hanging down over his forehead, his jaw jutted forward, and his hands back fisted at his sides in a flash, he continued to glare up at Butch as he pushed on.

"Do it Butch. You want it, come and get it right now!"

Butch's lower lip quivered as his face twisted and then he began to openly cry.

Alan glared at him for a few seconds then slowly looked to the ground, spat and said, "That's what I thought."

Then he turned to Danny like he was talking to his dog or something and said, "Go on home Danny, he won't bother you no more."

As they continued on out of the hollow, each with their own thoughts, nothing more was said. And when Danny chanced a look back, there stood Butch in the same spot, his clenched fists at his sides, his head hanging and crying so hard that his whole body was jerking with the tears.

Butch never bothered Danny after that. In fact he seemed to change. His bullying fell by the wayside as he finished up grade school and finally moved on up to the high school down the road. Danny followed him there and onto the athletic field a year later where Butch ended up blocking for him. The time Butch was put down by Alan was never mentioned but Danny never forgot it. Like a snap shot he could always recall that face off between them amid the hard life of the coal camp.

He didn't see Alan around much after that partly because Alan never made it to high school. But Danny knew that he stayed out of the coal mines because he heard that he got into the army and was killed in one of the early Vietnam battles while helping the South Vietnamese Army fight.



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Billy never made it through high school either but, like they had hoped, by the time Danny graduated the country was begging for enlistments so he and Billy joined the marines on the buddy plan and shipped out of the coal fields. They stayed together through training but got split up when they were sent to Vietnam. Danny ended up around Marble Mountain near Da Nang while Billy got sent up north to Khe Sanh where he was killed on Hill 881 during the big battle there. Every time Danny thought of Billy he remembered how excited and happy he had been those many years ago to learn that you didn't have to be smart to fight in America's wars. And at the same time he always rued the day that he had taught him that.

Butch stayed out of the mines and the war by getting married and moving to California. Seems they got set up out there by some of his wife's relatives. And last Danny heard, Butch was out there working as a prison guard.

Danny, after he got back from the war, wasn't good for much so he just drifted around picking up jobs as he went. Along the way he met a looker down in a Texas bar that he was tending and got married. That lasted until he killed a man he caught her sleeping with and did a little time. The jury figured the guy deserved killing so Danny only got a couple of years.

He thought his wife deserved killing too but had decided that would probably be too costly.

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Now back in the Appalachians, white haired and as far away from most other people and the coal mines as he can get, Danny just quietly gets old as he practices his vigilance for the end of colors. He's not, nor ever was, what you would call a real contributing member of society. But then the way he learned it, that was for those destined to never return to the Appalachian coal country.