

Haylow:
a novel

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“La vérité historique est souvent une fable convenue.”
—Napoleon Bonapart

Prologue

When Travis Hemperly was twelve-years-old, his father told him about a man who had been chained to a tree and killed with an axe. They were driving south in the Wide Track Pontiac, speeding down I-75 through the flat farmland south of Macon and toward the Florida border. The car didn't have air conditioning, so there was no relief from the July heat and none coming. The sun was high, both windows rolled down, the inside broiling, hot air whipping through. When Travis asked his father why he'd bought a car with no a.c., Henry glared back cross-ways and set his teeth. "Think, son. Think. The compressor alone weighs almost 500 pounds. Don't you know how that would slow a fast car like this down?"

There wasn't much traffic on the highway this far south. A logging truck struggled northbound, pine trunks stacked, debris flying in its wake. A buzzard swooped in a lazy circle, riding the updraft, looking for lunch. The Pontiac's engine drowned out everything. At this speed, Henry had to shout to be heard--and so he did, yelling in bursts of enthusiasm and anger and amazement about shadow societies and puppet masters, about three families who manipulated the global economy and controlled all governments everywhere. And aliens had visited the earth—not aliens from Mexico but from another galaxy. They'd come thousands of years ago, found the Mayans down in the Yucatan, and the Mayans had worshiped them like gods. They even built great stone temples for them and carved pictures of their spaceships into rock. The proof was right there. All you had to do was look. Then the Mayans all disappeared! Vanished, just like that! every single one

of them! No one knows what happened to them to this very day. But they don't want us to know that, either. They don't want us to know any of it. How do you get people to wake up and see what's happening?

"I don't know," he said, replying to himself. "I don't know what to do."

The speedometer needle dropped back as the effort of his protest killed the car's momentum. Henry squeezed the steering wheel between his legs and steered with his knees, turning the big car by pushing up and down on the balls of his feet. Travis raised his head from the comic book. The black vinyl seat was slippery with sweat, and his Bermuda shorts left no room for error--any movement and the vinyl seared a brand. He pinched the bridge of his glasses and pulled them off, leaned into the open window and the gust roared in his ears. A green field rushed by, then brown furrows plowed back to the tree line, then more cows—four of them at a feeder, all standing in the same direction. "There's a man in the Soviet Union who can bend a spoon with his mind and levitate whenever he feels like it."

"It stinks," Travis said.

"Pull your head back inside the window, son." Henry inhaled. "That's manure. They use it to fertilize the crops."

A lull settled in between them. Outside the windshield, there was nothing to see but smashed bugs and the vanishing point. Another insect splotted the glass and Henry triggered the windshield wipers, with grim results. Before too long, Charlie Hemperly's ghost caught up with the car and slipped in through the driver's side window. He squeezed past the headrest and took up his old spot on the back seat. His funeral had been not two weeks before, his body not two weeks in the ground, and he was just beginning to get a feel for his haunting skills. As always, the flat shelf before the slanted rear window made for a good speedway. He motored a Hot Wheel up the vinyl and across the ledge, then retraced the route.

"Are we almost there?" Travis asked. "So, what are you reading?"

“Nothing. Just a comic.”

“About three hours. What’s it about?”

Travis looked down. On the cover, a white man with rippling muscles and long blond hair swung a large mallet at an off-stage threat.

“Viking polytheism.”

“Huh. Well that’s...huh,” Henry said. He adjusted the rear view mirror, checked his teeth, then reached out for the radio dial. The FM signal hadn’t lasted an hour outside of the perimeter highway, and now all they could get was spotty AM, *Your Cheatin’ Heart* and a preacher testifying through the crackle.

A few miles down the road, the Gnat Line swarmed across the interstate. The black bugs clouded the bottom of the state like an Old Testament plague, waiting to whine into eye sockets and feed on the fleshy corners. Travis and Henry were from the city and so uninitiated—Travis because he’d never been this far south before, Henry because it had been a while and he’d forgotten. Only a few miles to go before the Pontiac crossed the line. But not yet.

An obstacle cropped up in their lane. Travis leaned forward and removed his glasses for better vision. A tractor plodded down the interstate, its fat tire treads choked with earth. Red clay stamped the road behind and left a wake. Its driver sat erect, shoulders back, chin up, a proud sun-baked statue, his straw hat shading his face from the heat, skin dark underneath the tatty brim.

For a moment, the space between the Pontiac and the tractor seemed fixed, unbridgible, the heat between them, an adhesive. The air a coagulant. Henry leaned forward over the steering wheel, his eyes penetrating. He didn’t react, didn’t hit the breaks or turn the wheels. Then he stepped on the gas, and the distance vanished. Travis stamped a foot to the floorboard, shouted and closed his eyes. Just before impact, Henry raised his knee. The steering wheel moved. The Pontiac swerved into the left lane and blasted past. The tractor’s driver didn’t turn his head, didn’t flinch, and didn’t seem to notice them at all. Henry didn’t react, just leaned back into the seat.

“I saw a man who had been chained to a tree and killed with

an axe, once.”

Travis shifted his legs and the vinyl scalded. “Do what?”

“I did. I did. It was down here, at my grandfather’s—your great-grandfather’s place. My brother and me. Your Uncle George. We were coming back from Valdosta, going back to Grandad’s farm, and there were all these cars pulled off to the side of the road, all these people going off into the woods. It was hot, just like this. Granddad pulled over, and we got out and followed. Back not too far, all these people were standing around a tree. A man had been chained to it and someone had taken an axe to him.”

“An *axe*?”

Travis tried to imagine it but couldn’t. The thought made him numb. Henry nodded his head in confirmation. The Pontiac accelerated, the hot air through the windows louder now. He turned his head and looked Travis straight in the eye.

“I did.”

Heat wobbled up from the asphalt. How horrible a sight it must have been to witness, Travis thought. What a story it must have been to tell. The idea of it grew and stretched until it formed into something tangible, something solid, a high-pitched whine that flew into his ear, a screech of wings in and out, and then there was something in his eye.

Chapter One

Dubois Hall is the first stop on the self-guided tour. It's at the highest point on-campus and an uphill climb from everywhere, but Travis Hemperly likes to start at the beginning, so he hikes up the hill with a map unfolded before him like an accordion. He follows a path not-to-scale, a bold red line that worms its way around the sketched college green and leads him from one landmark to the next. Their illustrations look chubby, as if they've been inflated beyond maximum PSI. Below them, unrolled scrolls provide historical details in loopy calligraphy. *1867: Dubois Hall was the first building erected on the campus. It was built over a Confederate cemetery.* He makes a note of this, pauses to reorient himself, and squints into the morning sun. There it is, at the end of the College green: a hipped roof rising above the giant magnolia trees. On the cover of the map, a tintype photo of Dubois looks like it was taken the day construction was completed. The magnolias that now block the view are saplings just planted. Exposed, the center tower rises high in Victorian splendor. The wide verandah is inviting. The latticework is elaborate. Alone in a meadow surrounded by forest, it seems the only building for miles. This must have been quite a socially progressive project, he thinks, building a college for freed slaves on what were then the outskirts of town.

Nowadays, Dubois looks like a firetrap. The eaves droop. The porch sags. Time has siphoned mass and volume from each and every one of the peaked red bricks, and the surrounding buildings crowd out the builder's vision of grandeur. It is a splendid dilapidation nevertheless, Travis thinks, the only building on the quad with historical weight—even though the map says it's just a dorm these days. The other buildings down the line queue-up to the

College Green and represent the twentieth century. They elbow and jostle for attention like unruly children, but Dubois still sits at the head of the table.

Travis is out of his element. He has never taught on a historically black campus, has never been a minority on any piece of real estate he has ever set foot on. And he's dressed for the wrong weather, hot as it is. He hasn't worn a necktie on a college campus since... ever, he thinks. Not back at the University of Minnesota as a grad student and later as a history instructor. But job interviews call for a certain protocol. True, his element is the college campus, but he takes a slow breath to quiet the jitters. It will all be over in an hour, one way or the other. In sixty minutes, he might be gainfully employed in academia once again and return to the professorate, the one occupation he's really geared for. So far, all signs point to yes. The sky is big and blue, and there is not a cloud in it. A good omen. A good beginning. If he gets the job, he will have to move back south and return to the city of his birth. 'Back home,' he thinks, but feels no connection. He's been gone so long he's even lost the accent.

No one else is about. The students and faculty are getting in a last bit of the summer break before classes begin, no doubt, and he's glad for a little meditation time in this setting. The Olympic Games have just left town, and the physical plant hasn't yet removed the debris. Bunting draped along the wrought iron fence has faded into red, white, and blue litter. Along the street, American flags droop from light poles, exhausted from months of cheering. Travis wonders what Olympic event was held on the campus. Basketball?

Stop Number Two on the map is the Klan Bell. It is big and brass and secured to the earth between two solid posts. An iron wheel, like a ship's wheel, is mounted on the side, the mechanism for turning and ringing. The map explains: *The Alarm Bell was used to warn the students whenever the Ku Klux Klan attacked the campus. Upon its ringing, the entire college gathered at this spot.* He tilts his head at this detail and wonders if it's true, but there it is in print. Somebody

smokes here. Cigarette butts litter the ground around the posts. Travis rolls his own and feels the urge but holds off when he hears footsteps.

A young man—a student, surely—rounds the corner of Dubois Hall and strides down the brick pathway, purple windbreaker clashing with his combat fatigues. His paratrooper boots have been spray painted gold. The student hoofs it down the herringbone with a steady, determined step, his bald head shining, recently shaved. His costume makes Travis recall his days as a Viking re-enactor at L'Anse aux Meadows, back when his hair was long enough to braid. He still feels the loss of his bushy Viking beard, having trimmed it down to a Trotsky moustache and goatee for the interview. The semester's imminent beginning is in the air. They are breathing the stuff, the growing energy he always senses as the first day of class approaches. He feels a sudden fondness, feels the camaraderie he always does with students at the beginning of a new semester, notches up his necktie and nods hello. The student strides, head forward, eyes forward, staring blankly ahead. When they're so close that they almost bump shoulders, the student breaks wind, with zest. It is a sustained rumba in a key that Travis can't place, a fart that echoes.

He stiffens and braces for the stink but only smells cologne, something rugged yet sophisticated. He spins through his mental Rolodex: American history. *Brown v. Board*. Freedom Summer. "We Shall Overcome." *Scatology Today*. Spastic bowel? He recalls his own undergraduate diet, the lean years of generic mac & cheese and experimental chicken from the A & M. The purple windbreaker advertises a Greek allegiance in gold lettering. Was that a prank? The student plods off, golden shoelaces dancing with each footfall. Then he throws his head back and barks like a dog—a big one with a deep guttural explosion. *Hough! Hough! Hough!*

Somewhere down the hill, another big dog barks back. Travis is a cat man himself and doesn't know his canines, but the bark brings to mind a large pit bull hopefully chained to something heavy. The student in the purple windbreaker heads toward the

barking, and the bell tower down the hill begins to bong. It is time for his interview. His apprehension is not tasty, but he swallows it anyway.

Garvey Hall has been banished from the picturesque side of campus. The Humanities Department has been exiled from the college green, pushed down the hill and up against an abandoned housing project. It is the most unpopular postcard in the campus bookstore. When the students write dispatches back home, they first select postcards of Dubois Hall or the bronze statue in MLK Plaza striding forward and pointing North. Then go cards of the Business and Biology Departments. The Stadium. The Student Center. The Post Office. The Parking Deck. But there is always a surplus of Garvey Hall postcards stuck together at the bottom of the rack. Travis heads down the hill and makes his way over to the liberal arts. They are all shoehorned into the small building: History. English. Music. Art. Philosophy. Foreign Languages—and it's a tight fit. The closets are dedicated for office space, these days. A construction project blocks his route, a big one. A great hole has been chewed from the earth and a chain link fence erected around. Through the wire diamonds, a geology lesson. Sediment changes colors from dark to light, brown earth to red clay, as the strata offer clues to what came before. A Caterpillar excavator scoops dirt, the arm swings, and the load pours into a dump truck bed. The sign says "Hard Hat Area" and everyone in the pit is following the rules. Four men in yellow hard hats goldbrick over by the front end loader, orange vests hanging open. Travis takes in the construction drama as he skirts the fence to go around. They're building something big here. Whatever it is will dwarf the adjacent humanities building.

Garvey looks like an insect, a big brick bug beetling its way up the hill and trying to return to the postcard of the campus green, but its progress has been stymied by poor diet and lack of exercise and it can't escape the backwash of holly bushes. The bug's head is a theater auditorium, thin windows vertical and two stories tall.