

Haylow: A Novel

By Gray Stewart

"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 ax. 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 Pontiac's momentum. Henry squeezed the steering wheel between his knees and steered with his legs, turning the car by pushing up and down on the balls of his feet. Travis raised his head from the comic book in his lap. The black vinyl seat was slippery with sweat, and his Bermuda shorts left no room for error—any movement and the vinyl burned 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 splotched 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. Charlie's 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 dashboard 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 Atlanta, 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. A seasonal hazard this far South, the tiny black bugs clouded the bottom counties in Old Testament plague, waiting to whine into eye orbits and feed on the fleshy corners. Travis and Henry were from the city and unprepared—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 they crossed the line into the swarm. But not yet.

Outside the windshield, an obstacle cropped up down the road. Travis leaned forward and removed his glasses for better vision. A tractor plodded down the right lane, fat tire treads choked with earth and stamping red clay in its wake. The driver sat erect, shoulders back, chin up, a proud sun-baked statue, his straw hat shading dark skin underneath the tatty brim.

For a moment, the space between the Pontiac and the tractor seemed fixed, unbridgeable, 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 between them vanished. Travis stamped a foot to the floorboard, shouted and closed his eyes. Just before impact, Henry raised a knee and the steering wheel turned. They 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 either, other than to lean back.

“I saw a man who had been chained to a tree and killed with an ax, once.”

Travis shifted his legs and the vinyl seared. “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 Granddad’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, too, and we got out and followed him. Back not too far, all these people were standing around a tree. A man had been chained to it and someone had taken an ax to him.”

“An *ax*?”

Travis tried to imagine it but couldn’t. The thought made him numb. Henry nodded his head in confirmation. “Back before the Interstate.” 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 slant of 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 giant magnolias that now block the view are saplings just planted. Exposed, the center tower rises high in Victorian splendor. The wide veranda 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. 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 around the green represent the twentieth century and crowd out the builder's vision. 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. Cigarette butts litter the ground around the posts. Somebody smokes here. 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 Du-

bois 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 mustache and goatee for the interview. The semester's imminent beginning is in the air. He is 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 floating 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 Klan Bell. The Business Department. 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 supply closets are dedicated for office space, these days.

A construction project blocks his route, and it's 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. A sign on the fence 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 Hall 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. The entranceway neck is made of glass and attached to a bloated thorax and abdomen of classrooms and offices. On the roof, men shout to each other in Spanish. Mariachi music adds a happy note as they operate around a roofing kettle of hot tar. Travis wrinkles his nose at the smell and imagines that they are defending the humanities disciplines under siege and keeping watch

for the next assault, vats of boiling pitch ready to dump the molten load onto attackers below.

He hustles into the neck of the bug. The hinge on the door is busted and the door slams hard behind him. The glass rattles. In the hallway, the light diminishes as it goes. Fluorescent tubes above are in need of replacement. His worn but freshly polished loafers squeak all the way up the stairwell to the top floor. Do squeaking shoes portend good luck or bad? He can't remember. He is calmer now. Relaxed, even. He is ready. Around the corner, the Chair of the History Department stands beneath an analog clock mounted above a classroom door. Dr. Davis looks exactly like she sounded on the telephone the day before. A diminutive black woman on the gray side of middle age, she is professionally dressed in autumn fashion.

"Did you enjoy the campus, Mr. Hemperly?"

"There is certainly a lot of history here. Thank you for the map."

"No, no," she holds up a flat hand. "You can keep that. I'm sure you noticed the construction." She pulls the door to the classroom open. "Across the parking lot? That will be the new Humanities Tower," she beams.

"Really? That's impressive."

"And long overdue," she adds in collegial commiseration as she gestures inside. Travis says after you but she insists, so he inhales slowly, looks for his center, and enters.

Sunlight dwindles through window glass on the far wall, and the classroom looks drab and neglected like they always do, slowly breaking down as they always are. A few ceiling tiles knocked out of square. Cinder block walls a dehydrated urine, with smudges and scrapes from the usual student abuse, the careless damage from daredevils leaning back in their chairs. Four student desks have been pulled from the ranks and placed before the teacher's desk up front, center stage. They are arranged in confederation against a lone wooden chair, *Propty of Garvey Hall* stenciled on the back. The hot seat, Travis thinks and tamps down the urge for a smoke. He tries to get a feel for the rhythm of the room, but there

is no rhythm.

The day before, his telephone conversation with Dr. Davis had been short and to the point. Was he available for an interview tomorrow at ten? The position was a one year non-tenure track appointment, she clarified and apologized for the short notice.

Like most of the faculty, she had left town during the Olympic debacle—the college having canceled summer classes to host the event—and she'd just returned to find a stack of messages on her desk: directives from administration, invitations to exotic conferences out-of-state. And on top of the pile, a curtly-worded resignation letter (“Dear Dr. Davis, I quit.”). This was bad news, schedule-wise. Four fall classes were suddenly unstaffed, and the semester began in two weeks. She had to find a replacement immediately. As fortune would and did have it, Travis’s application letter and curriculum vita were next on the pile. “Travis Hemperly” sounded like an Anglo name. Dr. Kalamari wouldn’t like it, but why not a little diversity? She reached for the phone.

Outside the windows, the construction site fills the glass with a panorama of grinding and banging. The dump truck beeps as it backs up, audible above the noisy window unit, which could use some freon. It’s set on High Cool, yet the air rattling from the grill is tepid at best. On the phone, the chair had explained in a way that sounded like an apology that the college was investing in the humanities. The new provost was an economist, she’d said, and he intended to bring the logic of the marketplace to the college. He understood the importance of the liberal arts, as the construction outside demonstrated.

Three members of the History Department faculty have answered the chair’s call and made it in for the interview. None of them seem happy to be here. A heavy black man—300 pounds at least—leans against the teacher’s desk before the green blackboard. He is casually outfitted in monochrome: a gold velour jogging suit with a racing stripe on each leg to suggest athleticism. A thin woman in denim dress and salt-and-pepper hair sits upright

in a student desk. Beside her, a rumpled man with white hair and a hook nose stares blankly out the window. When Travis enters the room, all heads turn. The heavy man stands, and the desk creaks in thanks. Introductions are made all around, greetings and handshakes all around, and Travis curses the fourth cup of coffee he poured before making the drive from the fleabag hotel, tries to hide the tremor in his hand by holding it low for handshakes. Dr. Longman in the gold, Tigony in the denim dress, and Klein with the beard. He repeats the names in his head and hopes that they stick. Firm protestant handshakes all around.

“You must excuse the disarray, Mr. Hemperly,” Dr. Davis says. “The Olympic Games have taken over everything. All will be in order before classes begin, of course.” She apologizes again for the poor turnout.

Longman’s stomach rumbles. “Excuse me,” he pats his golden belly. “My new diet disagrees with me.” His stomach complains again.

The chair offers the chair. “Please,” she says. Travis sits, his back straight and feet firmly on the floor. This is it. On the corkboard square behind the inquisitor’s row, a thumbtacked flier announces study abroad opportunities in Europe. A blonde girl, an Asian boy, and a black or perhaps Hispanic student of indeterminate gender smile shoulder-to-shoulder below the Eiffel Tower. Telephone numbers have been torn from convenient tabs. His chair wobbles back then forward on uneven legs, as the others take their seats. For a moment there is only the acrid smell of hot tar. Footsteps pad above the ceiling. He wonders if the roofing crew is hiring.

Dr. Davis settles into a desk beside the others and gets down to it. “First, thank you for coming in on such short notice.”

“I appreciate the interview.”

He expects to begin with an opening statement, but it doesn’t go that way. Klein starts off with a leading question. “Mr. Hemperly, you come to us from the University of Minnesota?” Travis leans forward and touts his alma mater. He tries to use his body language to advantage, sits up straight in the chair, dismisses his natural urge

to slouch, but isn't so rigid as to appear uncomfortable. Then he leans forward to show forthright interest. Klein looks down at papers on his desktop. Each of them has a copy of Travis's CV, which is notable for its thinness. His eyes dart, and his cheeks flush. He has recorded his accomplishments as fetchingly as possible, has highlighted his contribution to the discipline of Viking studies and shined light on his budding expertise, but he is at the bottom of his field and has inflated his resume accordingly.

"Tell us about your dissertation," Longman jumps in. A volley from Travis's left flank. This is a well-defended position, and he counters easily. His dissertation charts the Viking Diaspora and catalogues the spread of the Viking peoples across the globe. There are nods all around at this, a point scored in his favor, and he begins to relax. He is in his element, after all. They are all scholars of history come together in their natural habitat. Sharing historical areas, particularly when well-articulated, creates a bonding effect. How far from completion is your dissertation? When do you anticipate completing your doctorate? He's made great advances recently and, while it's always a challenge to find time to write (sympathetic nods to this), he hopes to have a completed manuscript by this time next year. He pinches his nose to hide any sudden spurt of growth.

"And what is . . . L'Anse Aux Meadows? Klein asks. "I'm not familiar with that institution."

"L'Anse Aux Meadows is a research environment on the coast of Newfoundland," Travis says. "It's an archaeological site preserving and protecting the location where the Norse peoples, the Vikings, arrived on the North American continent." He details the dynamic educational space. The settlement provided him access to an interactive teaching laboratory, a unique opportunity for hands-on education for both student and teacher. "It allowed me to continue my research in the field and was a most enriching opportunity," he nods effusively and milks all he can from the year he spent as a tour guide at a tourist trap.

At the beginning of the previous academic year, there were no teaching jobs available, or at least none for him. The University

of Michigan was tightening its belt, and his instructor's position had been eliminated overnight. The notification in his mailbox explained that they had appreciated his service and he was to leave his office key with the department's administrative assistant. Three years and thousands invested into pursuing his degree, and there he was, out on the street. He'd heard stories of peers with newly minted doctoral degrees taking positions in the food service industry. Can I take your order, Ma'am? Travis was stubborn and refused to surrender. Academia didn't want him? Okay. He'd find a way to use his book learning, anyway. He packed-up and left the U.S. for a Canadian work visa and became a reenactor at the first Viking settlement in North America. L'Anse Aux Meadows was the windy, rocky knob where Leif Ericson beat Columbus to the New World and become the first invader from Europe. Now, a thousand years later, the settlement had been recreated by archaeologists and the Canadian Tourism Commission—and they were hiring Vikings. His hair already grown long as a cost-cutting strategy, he stopped shaving too and spent the past academic year in period costume, lecturing anyone who would listen about the Viking Age and pointing the way to the rest rooms. The tourists were Canadians and Europeans, mostly. Lots of Fair-haired Swedes who mistakenly believed that the settlement had been founded by their ancestors. He was always quick to correct this error: Norwegian Vikings made the discovery. Swedish Vikings went east to Russia—but the tourists never seemed to appreciate this clarification. "I was fortunate to have the opportunity to participate at the Center," he plays it up a little more.

The interrogation returns to the University of Minnesota. They discuss his teaching philosophy, and his experience at the archaeological site goes over big here. He is a dynamic educator, and he rejects dry doctrinaire lectures for participatory exercises. He introduces his students to the World Wide Web—it's the future, after all. His buzzwords sit in their proper order and wave flirtatiously.

Tigony leans forward, eyes narrowing. "Have you ever taught an African American student?"

This one was to be expected, of course. There weren't many black students at UM. There weren't any black tourists at L'Anse aux Meadows. Something deep inside him releases oil. He thinks *not many* but says *of course*. Every instructor must be sensitive to the cultural realities that each student brings into the classroom.

"Are you familiar with the learning styles of different students?" she presses.

Yes, certainly, he says. Every student has his own method of learning, and this must be taken into account for successful pedagogy. This is a basic philosophy of effective teaching, in his opinion. She smiles at his answer approvingly. He sits up and the back of the chair jams into his shoulder blade. The interview is winding-down. He can sense the energy dropping and lets his guard down.

"Mr. Hemperly," Longman clears his throat. "How do you teach the origin of civilization?" Travis senses a loaded question. For a moment, he is inert. His chair wobbles. They all lean forward. Tigony's eyes narrow.

"I don't understand the question," he says. "Nile River valley? Is that what you mean?" His heart rate quickens. Fight-or-flight kicks in. So close. So close.

Dr. Davis speaks up. "Could you please give us a few minutes, Mr. Hemperly?"

And that's it. Klein crosses his arms. Tigony wipes her nose. Longman looks at the floor. Davis strands up. She thanks him again for coming. Would he please wait in the lobby across the hall? Travis doesn't realize that he's falling from the wall until it's too late. Elbowed from behind, knocked from his perch, he is an omelet in the making. Below, the king's men try in vain to calm their restless mounts. Gravity gets its grip. There is nowhere to go but down.

The cinder block walls in the lobby are unblemished by decor or personality. Branching off of the main hall, the small room is Un-. Unoccupied. Undecorated. Uninspiring. Unremarkable.

Unseemly, even. The only furniture, a connected section of seating from the Olympic Stadium, logo rings molded into the seat backs. If need be, the History Department could pack-up and clear out in fifteen minutes, leaving few clues: a paper clip wedged between the carpet and baseboard. Tiny scraps of maroon paper. A few fingernails, crudely cut. On the wall above the row of seats, a framed cork-board makes no announcements. Someone has fooled around with the thumbtacks and arranged them into a smiley face. Two red thumbtack eyes and a red thumbtack smile, its grin a mouthful of broken teeth. Travis sits on a stadium seat and waits for the blow off. Thanks for coming in. We'll call you. His insides writhe in gurgling turmoil. In the fixture overhead, all the fluorescent tubes are functional, and the harsh light glares on everything. His interrogators have reconvened in the Chair's office, right over there, not twenty feet away. He channels all his thought into hope for a positive outcome and aims it at the solid core door, trying to pierce the veneer, plywood, and ultimately the skulls of the interview committee and sway the discussion in his favor. Disasters are averted at the last second all the time. The speeding truck misses the child on the sled. The right wire is cut on the ticking bomb. He has never been much of a clairvoyant. He's just catastrophizing, he thinks, and it isn't long before the door opens. Klein strides over, arm extended. Tigony behind in poker face.

"A pleasure meeting you," Klein avoids eye contact.

"Yes, a pleasure," Tigony says. They seem sincere enough, Travis thinks.

Behind him, Longman looks like he's put on a few pounds since the interview. "I'll see you next week, Dan." He waves at Klein's back retreating down the hallway, hitches up his pants, and walks over.

The big man leans over face-to-face and winks conspiratorially. "Looks like I have a new office mate. Welcome to Blackademia." And the angels begin to sing, all of them on-key. He has returned to the academy. Best not to react to the blackademia crack, he thinks, so he doesn't.

Suddenly, noise out in the hallway: footfalls echo in the stair-

well and then on the hallway linoleum, coming fast. Heavy boots stamping closer. Longman looks toward the commotion and steps backwards to clear the doorway.

A thin black man bursts into the room, dreadlocks stuffed into a knit hat of black, red, and green yarn, the colors of Afrikan revolution. He is dressed for combat from the waist down. His desert camo BDU's are bunched up at his knobby knees. Keys jangle from a string of carabiners dangling from a belt loop.

Longman greets him by title, stands in deference and smiles, but the tardy prof makes only the slightest acknowledgment of his presence, barely a nod. He ignores Tigony and Travis altogether, bustles past in a bee-line to the Chair's office, stops abruptly and raises a fist to knock, thinks better of it (apparently) and grabs the door knob.

Travis could sure use that smoke about now. Perhaps there is an emergency? The speedy man barges into the office and slams the door behind him. The cinder block walls and solid core door do their job and muffle all the words, but Travis tries to listen anyway. He leans forward, head cocked in obvious eavesdropping stance. The conversation appears to be one-sided. Tigony flees the lobby. Longman looks up at the ceiling and whistles a ditty at the acoustic ceiling tile. An explanation is appropriate here, Travis thinks, and he tries to catch Longman's eye, but he doesn't accommodate until the awkwardness between them inflates to bursting.

"That was Dr. Kalamari," he finally says, then, just as abruptly, "It was good to meet you. I'll see you next week." Travis blinks, and Longman is gone. He moves fast for such a big man.

The door opens abruptly and Kalamari stands with one hand on the doorknob, half in and half out of the office, both coming and going. He is loud and clear now and complains stridently about Atlanta's rapid transit system. A late bus has caused him to miss the interview, and he insists that they hold another one with him in attendance. The Chair raises her voice and demands professionalism. Kalamari stiffens, turns and slams the door behind him. He stands with back toward the office, exhales and balls a trembling fist, then takes notice of Travis for the first time. Keys

jingle as he walks over. He looks Travis in the eye. “Welcome, my European brother.” He extends a fist, fingers balled.

Travis stands up, perplexed by the greeting. He’s never been to Europe. He considers Kalamari’s fist and thinks: Rock, Scissors, Paper?

“Travis Hemperly,” he presents himself and offers his hand. There is an awkward moment between them, and then Kalamari daps Travis’s protruding thumb, tapping it on the tip.

“Kalamari,” Kalamari appraises him with a disappointed down-up glance.