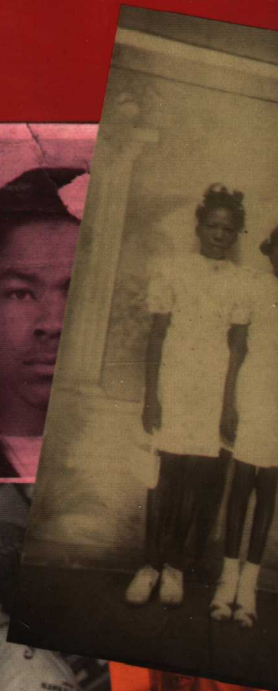




The Haygoods of Columbus

A Family Memoir

Wil Haygood



*"A grave and beautiful
surprise" —Reynolds Price*



WIL HAYGOOD

*The Haygoods
of Columbus*



A Love Story

A Peter Davis Book

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

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*The Haygoods
of Columbus*

A LOVE STORY

BOOKS BY WIL HAYGOOD

TWO ON THE RIVER
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY STAN GROSSFELD)

KING OF THE CATS:
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR.

THE HAYGOODS OF COLUMBUS:
A LOVE STORY

FOR STEVE FLANNIGAN

What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage

— EZRA POUND, CANTO LXXXI

1



ANY LIFE seems an accumulation of events, fate, some luck. When I was a little boy, in love with nature, with fishing, I'd walk alone the two miles to the Olentangy River dam in my hometown of Columbus, Ohio. I'd dance across slippery rocks, water swirling underneath and the dam gushing near my face, until I reached my favorite spot, which lay right below the center of the dam. I'd stand there on rocks, balancing myself, with rising woods in the distance, and I'd disappear into thought, fast-moving fish, sunlight glinting off the water, the water moving downriver. The dam at my back turned noiseless, the entire world went silent. It was the one place in the city, however, that my grandmother did not wish me to go. Boys sometimes disappeared at that dam, beneath its cold waters, the life drained from them. But I fished happily, kept safe for some mysterious reason, falling now and then but never in water past my waist, and even then rising quickly with a deep secret in my chest: I did not know how to swim.

Not long ago my mother, Elvira, handed me a watch. It's a beautiful timepiece, squared and edged in maroon, dead of time now, just old. It belonged to her father, Jimmy, my grandfather. It is the first thing my mother has ever given me that has led back to her family. My mother has never made a habit of looking back. Jimmy received the watch from his Uncle Doc, my great-great-uncle. I remember Uncle Doc, an old shiny man with grainy eyes full of mystery. He lived alone in a rooming house on Mt. Vernon Avenue, back in the days when a man could live in a rooming house and still hold his head high.

I never knew what my grandfather Jimmy and Uncle Doc did before arriving in Columbus. There were things in my family I guess I was not meant to know. I never knew Jack, my father, never knew him like a son knows a father, even as I came to love that man, his voice heavy and sweet. I never knew why my mother sometimes disappeared. Never for more than two days. Her destination could be near as Mt. Vernon Avenue. Sometimes it was more exotic, all the way up to Detroit, Michigan, three pairs of dangerous high heels in her suitcase, a weekend of partying with relatives. Still, it seemed like an eternity. My tummy would fill up like a cup with loneliness, and I'd cry. For years I didn't know about my brother the pimp, Jack's bastard son, who in due time came rolling thunderously into all of our lives.

The things I knew seemed fine enough. I knew how to find my jar of marbles in the dark. I knew that living on the north side of Columbus in a green house with yellow trim, a back yard with a dirt hill, a raspberry bush to run circles around, I was happy. Sometimes I floated; I swear, it felt like I floated through days, mornings, afternoons. Even now I sometimes wake up on the edge of sleep and try to summon back that time and place, the way the air felt in that midwestern town,

the leafy autumn days, human voices butterfly through screen doors, the shuffle of old men's shoes — Jimmy's brothers, my great-uncles. I never thought about why we lived with our grandparents. I certainly never thought about how oddly matched a couple my grandparents seemed. Or why it was my grandmother's voice I heard telling me to stay away from the Olentangy River dam, not my mother's.

My green house: I believed forever meant just that — forever. We'd live in that house forever. But we didn't. In the summer of 1968 my mother moved our family to the east side of Columbus, across town and over the St. Clair Avenue bridge. She disrupted my life and tried to renew her own. I could hardly blame her for doing that. But it was an upheaval, and it seemed not only strange but scary. By the end of that first summer, there were only two things I wanted to do in the whole wide world. I wanted to learn how to bounce a basketball better. And I wanted to get to know Elvira, my mother. She had started that disappearing again.

She was up on Mt. Vernon Avenue mostly. There were nightclubs on that avenue. There were men in straw hats who drove Hudson automobiles. Actually, there was more than that — my mother met my father, Jack Haygood, on that avenue, in front of the Pythian Theatre. The Pythian had acts on its stage from New York City. The Pythian even had a rococo stage. My mother thought she might become a fashion model. A photographer had hung a photograph of her inside his studio on the avenue. She became a waitress instead. It was the kind of avenue where you kept smiling even if your best dream got turned around.

You learned about things on Mt. Vernon Avenue. About things that hummed, that flew: life. I came to learn that it was the one avenue in our town that kept the town honest. It had honesty and — although I didn't know what the word

meant at the time — seduction. Things were done under the cover of darkness. My grandmother Emily was fond of saying — and saying it slowly, which gave the words a chill all their own — “The things you do in the dark will come to light.” A brother who hung out at the Vernon Club on Mt. Vernon Avenue and talked of going to Hollywood made it to Hollywood. But when I went in search of him years later, I found him on Skid Row in a cardboard box, the sunny look gone from his handsome face. My half-brother, Macaroni, the pimp — how ridiculous that word now sounds — was a Mt. Vernon Avenue legend. That is, until he had to flee. Bounty hunters were looking for him. I had to chase after Macaroni too, found him in California too, settled high on the Marin County hills by San Francisco with a beautiful view of the ocean. It was the west wing cellblock of San Quentin Penitentiary.

By the time my mother handed me my grandfather’s watch, I had become a writer, someone always flooded with questions, accustomed to traveling and running down answers. Time haunts and a clock gets rewound; old unanswered mysteries start to pull. Fresh off Mt. Vernon Avenue, I too journeyed. My brothers went west; I went east, to New York City. I didn’t drown in that dam, but I found myself staring at the world from a dingy seventeen-dollar-a-night room in New York, shaking with fear.

This is the chronicle of a family’s odyssey, about how we got from there to here, and the misfortune — and luck — along the way. It is about the things that came to light. It is about Jimmy and Emily, my grandparents. And there are some things here about my mother’s Mt. Vernon Avenue, the blood and rhythm it offered a town, that special way it could draw a long-necked woman out of her waitress uniform and into her girdle, her sequins and lamé. I guess my mother wore

a girdle to make her behind look tight. I guess that's what made those high heels so dangerous. Elvira preferred the Idle-a-While, a darkened bar up on the avenue. You might run across some rude characters; it could get a little raunchy. My mother thought the place had class. Pretty music floated from the jukebox. The bartender knew what she drank: she was a bourbon lady, always had been. When she was gone from the lock of my eyes, however, I pouted. I wanted my mother back. I didn't know what was out there in the dark. I wondered why my mother had to go to Mt. Vernon Avenue every Friday and Saturday night, leaving me wide awake to dream myself to sleep with this question on my mind: will she come back?



IT WAS A SMALL southern town that had suffered mightily during the Civil War. The Alabama River snaked through it, roiling beneath craggy bluffs. My mother was born, along with a twin brother, in 1932 in a tiny farmhouse in the woods of Selma, Alabama. It was March 18, and the woods would have been chilly. There were two colored hospitals in Selma, but they were considered a luxury. So the twins were delivered at home by a midwife. Both babies were sickly. It was feared that they would not survive. Their grandmother gathered herbs from the woods and fed them raw to the babies. She rocked in a chair, prayed, and watched as they steadily improved, becoming healthy.

Jimmy Burke, my mother's father, was a farmer. He learned farming on his father's farm with his brothers. There were eight Burke sons; Jimmy was the oldest. The sons were all hard men, short in height and good with their fists. They loved their mother deeply but feared John Burke, their father.

John Burke whipped his boys until he drew blood. That was his version of discipline. After a whipping, he'd go silent, his eyes as still as buttons. It was John Burke's fist that Jimmy and his brothers would always hear pounding on the door in the morning; the sun had risen, it was time to work — get up. John Burke was not talkative. He was an unsmiling man who hated to see any one of his sons sitting, whistling, daydreaming. Those who knew him in Selma regarded him as a dependable man and a good farmer, the kind of man who kept a little money in the bank. He rode around Selma in a Model T Ford, a possession for which he was admired. The sons got around in a horse-driven buggy. On their farm the Burkes planted collard greens, okra, tomatoes, peanuts, of course cotton. The twins, Elvira and Ira, hated picking cotton, complained about the sun and the wide fields, which looked as if they could swallow a child up whole. The Burke sons loaded their cotton onto steamships that sat at the docks behind Water Avenue in Selma, then watched the ships chug off down the Alabama River.

Both of my grandfather's parents had seen slavery with their own eyes in and around Alabama's Black Belt. It was called the Black Belt because of its dark, rich soil. Years later, after I had read books, I asked my grandfather about his mother and slavery. He shut down on me like a winter night. I never asked again.

Selma fell to Union troops on April 2, 1865. Looting and burning followed the clash. The town committed itself to rebuilding after the war. By 1925 it looked almost quaint. Those who weren't farming worked with the Southern Railroad. When they could find work, black women worked as domestics.

When there was time, Jimmy hunted with his brothers. They'd hunt mink, little elusive furry creatures that you had

to set traps to catch. The traps were set alongside logs out in the swamps. Lacy, one of Jimmy's brothers, proved to be the best mink hunter. Lacy was talkative, had a whiny voice, counted every penny he slipped into his pockets, and could stay in the woods alone for hours. When a mink had been caught in one of his traps, he'd raise the thing up to the light, then he'd grin himself all the way home. Lacy and my grandfather sent their minks parcel post up to the F. C. Taylor Fur Company in St. Louis. They considered the fifteen dollars they received for each pelt more than fair. Sometimes Jimmy and Lacy and the other brothers snared red foxes. F. C. Taylor Company paid only ten dollars for each red fox. Lacy smiled anyway.

The Burke brothers did, however, find time to play. There was a colored minor-league baseball team in Selma. The brothers were crazy about the Selma Cloverleaves. They'd hustle up into the stands and square their short, squat bodies in the seats, grunting, twisting, more controlled than animated. Jimmy and his brothers played the game themselves. Some afternoons, farming chores finished, they'd gather in a wide open field. Jimmy, built low to the ground, preferred the outfield. Bending over, working his jawbone, he would see blades of grass, earth, open sky, and the silhouette of the batter. Jimmy chewed tobacco as if it were food.

It was the Depression, with its wide claws, that wiped out the Burke farm in 1937. The sons scuffled off to find work. John Burke did not have an ounce of sentiment to give. The sons would have to find their own way out of the darkness. Jimmy got a job in the Selma brickyards. He made bricks, shoving them into hot ovens. They'd come out in all kinds of colors. But the job didn't last, and in 1938 he picked his family up, the three children and his wife, and moved the eighty-five miles over to Birmingham.

My grandfather Jimmy met his wife, Emily, on a Saturday afternoon in Selma. He courted her by taking her to socials and to hayrides. His smile was both tricky and infrequent: a man smiling to himself when he managed to smile at all. He did not tell jokes, nor did he engage in idle conversation. He was a one-way mirror — blunt, dependable, and heroic to himself. A woman had to take that reflection or leave it; it would not change. He dressed beautifully: stickpins beneath his starched collars, pleated and cuffed slacks that fell just so, cottony three-button roll suits. He could not stand unshined shoes. When the heels on his dress shoes began to show the slightest wear, they were replaced. Often he would size a man up by the kind of shoes he wore. Emily liked the fact he had a job in the Selma brickyards, never missed a day. “Anybody who had a job was somebody,” says Aunt Bell, my grandmother’s sister. Emily feared John Burke, and when she and Jimmy eloped to Anniston — a double ceremony with another couple — John Burke was livid.

Jimmy found work in Birmingham as a groundskeeper out at the Bob Riley Airport, pushing a broom, raking. Emily found work ironing and washing. She also sewed. Her Singer sewing machine had been a gift from her mother, Minnie, who had purchased it from a traveling salesman who traveled Alabama with the sewing machines swinging from the back of his mule. Emily had long black hair and high red cheekbones. She was part Cherokee. Her father, Thornton, had been an orphan during the Civil War. He roamed the woods, his pockets filled with red pepper. Cornered by strangers, he’d throw the pepper into their eyes and flee. I’ve seen pictures of Thornton Powell, my grandmother’s father. He looks the way Booker T. Washington looks in all those schoolbooks: proud, severe, and unshakable.

In a span of two years Emily and Jimmy had three children

— the twins, Ira and my mother, Elvira, and their sister Creola — then abruptly stopped. My mother looked up one day into the sky and there was Jimmy, zooming over a field in an airplane. It was hard to believe. My mother and her brother and sister squealed. It had only been thirty-five years since the Wright brothers had first flown their wondrous contraption at Kitty Hawk. Now here was Jimmy Burke in an airplane. It was just a crop-duster, and he was just a passenger, but still, my mother talks about it to this day — the first black man she saw in an airplane, her daddy, floating, flying over segregated Birmingham.

Jimmy and Emily Burke wanted to leave Birmingham. There was always food on the table; no child under their roof ever felt hunger pangs. They just couldn't see opportunity in the South for their children. The children were always complaining about being out in the cotton fields; Jimmy's salary was paltry; Emily had to compete with all the other women who were ironing and washing clothes for pay. There was always news about big steel plants in the North, about jobs and better wages. The North was far enough away that sometimes it merely seemed like a dream. Then my great-great-uncle — Uncle Doc — hoboed his way up through the Carolinas, hopping trains, rumbling around the mountains of Kentucky: our Christopher Columbus. He landed in Columbus in 1939. That was a wicked year, and he was just happy to be out of Alabama.

Uncle Doc was a muscular man with a mouthful of pretty white teeth. He had a strong jawbone on his square face and bloodshot eyes. His voice was deep, musical. In Columbus he made his way over to Mt. Vernon Avenue. Already the avenue was in constant motion, all jumpy, some juke joints and all-night bars in action. Big bands were wailing over at the American Legion. Uncle Doc could feel the earth move a