

Excerpt from *Like Trees, Walking: A Novel*

by Ravi Howard

## PROLOGUE

JULY 14, 2003

Those of us already gathered along the beach check the wind. With matches cupped in our hands, we watch the smoke rise into the breeze that comes off the water. The conditions have to be right. The wind has to be blowing east. Rising tide and an overcast sky. Nights like these, when conditions are right along the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, the salt water from the gulf mixes with the fresh water from the rivers. The fish and blue crabs stop swimming then. Why it happens, I'm not exactly certain—something about the oxygen, the water temperature, and the currents no longer running true. The fish and the blue crabs are stunned, traumatized. At the place where the waters meet, they just float on the surface like they're dead.

When the tide rises in the early-morning hours, the silver sides of the flounder shine as they wash up on the shore. The crabs collect in the soft sand just below the surface of the water. We wait for them here. Some gather them with scoop nets and stakes while others pick them up in their bare hands and carry them home in washtubs and baskets. Nights like these are called Jubilee.

At night, Mobile is brightened by the shipyard beacons and the battleship lights, but on this side of the bay it's dark just like it should be. It took a few minutes for my eyes to get acclimated, but now I can see details in the darkness, the outlines that separate the water, the tree line, and the moonless sky. The only lights that connect the east and west shores are those scattered along the causeway and the ones on the bridge.

When my brother Paul and I were young, riding in the back of our father's truck, we lay on our backs and counted them, 240 each way. Once we turned off Highway 98 and left the bright spread of the bridge lights, only a few dim lampposts lit the waterside woods. There was more to hear than there was to see. The Edgewater Beach road was covered with oyster shells bleached by the salt water and sun, and the only sound I heard above the engine drone was the crush of our tires grinding the road shells into dust.

I make my way to the spot I like to claim, a rocky stretch at the south end where it's never too crowded. As I walk farther down, it's difficult to see who's speaking as folks say hello when they pass. Some I recognize, others just know me through my family. Most people in Mobile either know us or know of us. Strangers would come up to me all the time saying that they remembered a kind word my father or my grandfather offered when burying their loved one. They had seen our family photo on the church fans parishioners waved on hot days, trying to cool down the humidity or the Holy Ghost. Among the black funeral homes in Mobile, ours is one of the oldest and considered among the best. In the picture, my grandfather, my parents, my brother, Paul, and I stand

on the front steps of the funeral home. In black script beneath our feet—"Deacon Memorial: Seven Generations of Service." In some of the old churches we work in, I still see those fans, creased and faded, with the same picture that still hangs on the wall in the mortuary office. It was the last picture we all took together. I was seventeen then.

People tell me how much I look like my father, even though I know it's not true. In that photo, my brother, Paul, was a carbon copy of Daddy as they stood together on that bottom step. The lines of their faces were identical like their pinstripes. As I stood on the second step behind my father, I had the rare chance to tower above him. People only saw we look alike because I stood beside him church vestibules saying the consoling words that I had heard him say for years. Once my parents retired, I was left to say the words alone.

I carry my basin in one hand and my stake in the other. I carry tucked under my arm a grocery bag that contains, among other things, a Crown Royal sack. When Paul arrives, I can pour a little liquor like I always do.

It's 11:45 P.M., and the date on my watch is stuck in the space between fourteen and fifteen in anticipation of midnight. A few minutes from now, I'll be forty. Forty is supposed to be a milestone, a "big one," as they say. A party has been planned in my honor. My wife, my kids, and my parents have been up to something. They have that obvious silence about them of people trying too hard to keep a secret. I'm sure they've gone to a lot of trouble to get everyone together, so I'll act surprised.

I'll have a good time like I always do. July means family reunions, the Fourth, fireworks, and picnics. Most of all, July is a month I've always shared with my brother. He was born 362 days before me. We were, as my father would sometime call us, the damn-near twins. For three days every July, we were the same age.

"Old man Roy Deacon."

It takes my eyes a minute to adjust so that I can see him. I can only hear his voice at first. When I see Paul, I am reminded of how the years have treated me. I am much rounder in the middle even when I suck in my gut, and my hairline has gone its own way. Paul hasn't changed. Seeing us there together, it might be hard to imagine that we were born so close together.

"How's forty feel?"

"Wouldn't know yet. Got fifteen minutes left. Let me enjoy it."

"How does it feel to be on the verge of a grand transcendental moment?" he says. He likes to talk shit. "On the cusp of something greater than yourself."

"I'll tell you in fifteen minutes."

He seems satisfied enough to give me a moment's peace. I drop everything, and I'm lucky not to break the bottle when everything hits the sand.

"What'd you bring?"

I don't have to say it, just open the grocery bag to show him the purple Crown Royal sack.

"You always come through, Roy. Always did."

His face turns to a frown as soon as he sees what I have rattling around in my washtub, the other contraband my wife doesn't let me eat at home, a big bag of Funyuns, peanut brittle, and a can of sardines.

"If your stomach could talk," he tells me.

I am ashamed to say I haven't changed all that much. The habits I made when I was young I still carry, especially the ones that started on this stretch of beach. Our favorite part about summers on the bay was Jubilee time, and Paul looked forward to them more than his birthday. Of course, you always know when your birthday is coming, so it's never a surprise. Jubilee nights are different. They only happen in the summer months, twice, maybe three times a season. Every few years one would fall somewhere between our birthdays, and we would celebrate here.

I miss those days. My father told me when I was young that things change between brothers when they get older. My father's not as healthy as he used to be, and he sees his only brother once, maybe twice a year. He always says there's not enough time to catch up on all the days you miss. I didn't understand it when I was younger, but now it's clear.

Paul and I started coming to the Jubilee when we were children, but it was more fun when we were old enough to come alone. After we claimed our spot, Paul would catch an hour or two of sleep until the surf came in. I would wake him, and then we'd talk and drink whatever we'd stolen from the liquor cabinet. We listened to WBLX on Paul's transistor radio while we made our stakes, setting ten-penny nails into the ends of old broom handles and filing them down to a point. These we used to pierce the shells of the blue crab and drop them into the washtub.

I would always scoop the crabs while Paul collected the fish. He ran a lanyard through the mouths and gills of the gathered flounder, bunching them like bananas on the end of a string. The other end of the rope carried a steel spike that he drove into the sand. As the fish lay in the shallows, their sides expanded and contracted as the surf washed over them, keeping them alive until we were ready to take them home.

When he pulled the fish from the water for good, they flapped their heads from one side to the other, waiting for the gulf tide to pass across their gills once more. Instead, they found the air that choked them. When I was a child, I stared into the buckets and watched

the wide, staring eyes of the fish as they grew weary of trying. In the end, they just went still.

I still have some of those same tin basins. I keep them stacked beneath the worktable in the corner of my garage until nights like these when I walk across the sand, stake in one hand and washtub in the other. Once it's filled I'll need two trips to get everything back to the truck, but I don't mind the walking.

A constellation of matches, lighters, and flashlights peppers the dark, flickering like a far-off city. For as long as there have been people here, these nights on the Eastern Shore have been mystic hours. Before the slaves and settlers, the Mobile Indians gathered what the waters left at their feet. The explorers who came here named this place the Bay of the Holy Spirit, trying to appease the shallow waters that endangered their vessels. The bay bottom is covered with the remains of ships that got battered to pieces.

The slaves called the waters sacred as well, but for different reasons. They believed these waters were spirited by slaves who died on the boats, their bodies thrown into the night waters. When the Jubilee nights came, the slaves called what the waters left their manna. They were said to have believed that the waves were God's hands pushing it to the shore. *Jubilee* was a word that meant everything to them, freedom or heaven—whichever came first. For some of the Africans that lived here, these nights were the only times when food was plentiful. All these years later, such nights have become recreation. For me they are an escape from the world on the quiet end of the beach. A night of solitude before a birthday with too many candles.

“What's on the menu for tomorrow?” Paul asks me.

“Same old same. Cake and ice cream. Gumbo, liquor.”

“Not all at the same time, I hope,” he said. “But with your greedy ass I guess it doesn't matter.”

Paul has his shoes off. He has those high-arched feet that barely touch the ground, look like they're always ready to run. When he was a child, he would stand in the tide waiting for the Jubilee to brush against his feet.

On the north end of the shore, the procession of headlights is still coming around the corner from the beach road. They pass the signpost that carries the familiar greeting. “Welcome to Daphne, the Jubilee City.” I've passed that sign on the road no telling how many times to swim, to fish, and to gather on birthday nights, Jubilee or not, even if it's just long enough to drink a little liquor and pour a little more onto the sand. Just a little something I do to mark another year's passing.

We all have our habits. My mother saves the newspapers from our birthdays. Tomorrow's early edition will come off the press soon. In the morning, she'll add it to the

*Mobile Press-Register* stacks neatly arranged in the RC Cola staircase, stored away from the sunlight.

It used to seem silly to me, but I suppose I should be thankful for forty years' worth of newspapers. Every week, I deal with the loved ones of people who'll never have another birthday. Many of the people are folks I had known. My father told me that times would come when the people who came across our table would be friends.

Near my mother's crates of front-page birthdays, she has a small filing cabinet where she stores her important papers. Among them, news clippings and mementos from watershed days. Facts to share with her fourth-graders. First black man elected to some office. First black woman to reach some milestone. Lest we forget, she still likes to say. Files and files of monumental days, each labeled in neat school-teacher handwriting.

Some of those days don't need mementos. It would be nice if forgetting could cancel them, show us how the world could have been if those days never happened at all. Forty years' worth of days and ones like those are what I remember the most.

Among the keepsakes in that cabinet, my mother kept the news clippings about Michael Donald, neatly trimmed and filed in chronology, as if putting them in order helped it all to make sense. The first of the lot was a story from the evening edition. March 21, 1981. That was a Saturday. That morning my brother found Michael's body hanging from a tree on Herndon Avenue. Michael Donald was a friend of ours. Forty years' worth of days, and ones like those are the ones I remember most, not because I want to but because I have no choice.