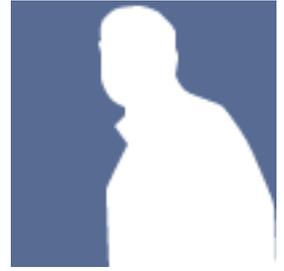


# Dancing to Ray Charles: Ch 07, Summer Inactivities

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“I guess it’s about time we had that little talk.” Jake Cahill stood in the doorway to the crowded laundry room, watching his son pull clothes from the dryer.

“Oh, I already know all about that stuff,” said Mark. “The stork brings the babies and leaves them under a cabbage leaf.”

“So that’s how it’s done. And all this time I thought Doc Miles brought them in his little black bag.”

“Maybe he does. But first, he has to go by the cabbage patch and pick out a few fresh ones. After all, he’s got to get the little critters somewhere.”

“Makes sense to me. And speaking of little critters, I ran into your ‘Uncle’ Ray at Lions Club today. He asked how you were doing. He also asked if you were going to work for him again this summer. Which is, in actual point-of-fact, why we need to have that talk.”

Mark was on one knee, fishing out the last of his underwear. The position and task gave him a chance to think. There were many things he’d rather do than go back to work for Johnston Oil Field Service and Supply. He did that last summer and had no illusions about what it meant to be a field roustabout. Ray Johnston was one of his father’s oldest friends and thought of Mark as the son he’d never had. But none of that meant anything out on the job.

Even on good days, the work could be monotonous, dirty, and hard. Bad days meant manhandling heavy wooden planks while building a board road out to some oil field drilling site. Disassembling a road was even worse. The planks were either soaked and muddy or stuck fast to the hard, dry ground. In Mark’s opinion, either job was a form of torture.

On the other hand, the extra cash would be nice if, by some miracle, Bebe agreed to more than one

date. But most of all, he'd rather spend the summer laying a four-lane board road across hell than risk losing the respect of his father and Uncle Ray.

Mark got up, shrugged, and began folding some underwear. "I was going to stop by and see him and 'Aunt' Louise in a day or two. If he needed me, I figured on maybe starting work next Monday. Uh, how is Aunt Louise?"

"She's fine," said the senior Cahill, extending a hand. "Give me that."

Surprised, Mark glanced down at the once white briefs, then handed them over.

Jake Cahill ran a finger through one of its many holes. "Now I know why you were doing your own wash. If your mother ever found out you were wearing some raggedy thing like this, she'd have a small to medium sized fit. Throw all of them away. Then stop by Benny Brewster's store and buy enough for another year. Ask him to put it on my account."

He shook his head and tossed the briefs back. "I think your work boots and hard hat are out in the garage." He started to leave, then paused and looked back with that same, amused expression. "Oh, and make sure you've got enough work clothes. I wouldn't want you to mess up your nice blue jeans and 'work shirts' with sweat and dirt."

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"Well, let me tell you, good people, it's like this." Mark had joined Willie and Bob in the cluttered storeroom of the Dixie Pride. They greeted his statement with looks of open suspicion.

"I'm broke," announced Willie.

"Me too," said Bob. "And you can't date my sister."

Mark did a quick double take. "But you don't have a sister."

"That's right," agreed Bob, in his unhurried, matter-of-fact drawl. "And you can't date her."

"Well, so what?" Mark's voice dripped with mock indignation. "A life without dating your sister would be like a life without poke salad."

Willie rose to the defense. "Hey man, don't you go around bad-mouthing Bob's non-existent sister. He's saving her for me."

"Like hell, I am. I'd rather have her dating some inbred, syphilitic goober from Rollins than a Baptist preacher's son."

Mark whistled. "Damn, but that's strong talk."

"Yeah, there goes my dream of being the Sammy Davis, Jr. of Pinefield."

"What does not dating my sister have to do with you not becoming a one-eyed Jew?"

"But you haven't got a sister," repeated Mark.

"That's right. And since you two have been so rude, neither one of you can date her."

By then, they were laughing so hard at themselves it was impossible to keep up the routine. Mark dropped into his Foghorn Leghorn voice to call for a time out. "Wait a minute, son. I say, wait a minute. We've skipped a groove. The record, I say, son, the record's stuck."

When the laughter subsided, he continued. "Besides, I'm here on serious business."

Before he could launch into an explanation, the store was filling up with an unexpected surge of customers. "Duty calls," Bob said, as he and Willie headed toward the registers. With no audience left, Mark found a spare apron and went into the main store to help.

It wasn't what he'd planned on doing. But he didn't mind. In his opinion, bagging groceries was one of the best jobs in town. The work could get hectic. But it was never that hard. You got to flirt with girls, joke with guys, and fool around with little kids. All that, and sometimes you even got a tip.

For the next two hours, a steady stream of customers kept Mark and the paid staff busy. "Aren't Monday afternoons supposed to be slow?" he asked Willie as they passed in the parking lot.

"First Monday after a holiday is all I can figure." Willie was pushing a cart filled with over-loaded brown paper sacks.

When the rush passed, Mark leaned against Wanda Druitt's cash register. "You know, that came close to resembling real work."

"Well, we appreciate your help." Sally Hemphill was counting the cash in another register. Bob's mother was one of the hardest working women Mark had ever known. While a nice enough person with a dry sense of humor, she could display all the warmth and personality of a dead fish when tired. "Now once all the carts are in, you boys can take a little break if you need to. I'm sure Wanda and I can handle things up here."

"I'm fine," said Bob. "But Mark's bound to need a break. Two straight hours of honest work is about all a lawyer-to-be can handle."

On the way to the storeroom, Mark tried to defend his work ethic. "Honest work, my ass. You cream

puffs work in air-conditioned comfort. It looks like I'm going to be outside again this summer, breaking my back for Johnston Supply."

In addition to Willie and Bob, the group he was denouncing, now included D.C. Wright and Dewey Washington. D.C. worked part-time as a fix-it man, stocker, fill-in cashier, and delivery driver when he wasn't helping his father put out "The Standard."

Dewey Washington was big, black, easy-going and a little "slow." He did some stocking, bagging, and most of the clean-up work. A town fixture, he walked everywhere and lived with his aunt, Gussie White. She had a reputation for being the best housekeeper in town. She also had a reputation for being nosy, superstitious, and prone to flying off the handle if scared or provoked. In addition to cleaning private homes, she and Dewey took care of Willie's church and the town's two movies.

"When do you start?" asked Bob.

"Next week. Which is why I stopped by. It's past time for an overnigher at Bear Lake. And we need to do it soon. Dewey, I don't know what you and D.C. have lined up. But I'm going to be kinda busy Saturday night, and these two lovebirds have women on their schedules all weekend." Bob and Willie, the two lovebirds in question, smiled in contented agreement.

For the last couple of summers, Libby's parents had let Bob spend every other Saturday night at their home in Shreveport. On the other weekends, she'd come to Pinefield and stay with her aunt and uncle, Mandy and S.J. Marshall.

Thanks to Amy's interrogation, everyone knew about Willie's new girlfriend and that he was going to Alexandria to meet her parents on Saturday. If all went well, there'd probably be an encore visit on Sunday.

D.C. snorted and said he and Dewey would be working at the store on Saturday so Willie and Bob could be with their women.

"That's why we need to do this soon," said Mark. Everyone agreed. Any excuse would do for spending a night at Bear Lake fishing, drinking, and lying. The problem was the store would be staying open late that night, like it always did on Tuesdays. Willie and D.C. were tied up on Wednesdays, one at prayer meeting and the other printing that week's edition of the paper. With everyone else busy on the weekend, Thursday night was the logical choice.

Two days later, Amy wandered into the Dixie Pride just before closing time. She'd left home saying she was going for root beer. While the house supply was low, after spending the day helping her mother at the library, she was bored, and none of her friends seemed to be home. She had even called Penny Harrison, thinking maybe they could make-up. But Penny's mother said she had a night class.

The store was empty except for Wanda Druitt. The cashier looked even more depressed than usual.

Amy made a quick pass through, then put two six-packs of root beer, a tube of lipstick, a box of vanilla wafers, two rolls of breath mints, and a five-dollar bill next to the cash register. "Wanda, why the long face? The store's about to close."

"It's nothing," was the automatic reply. Amy waited and was soon rewarded for her patience. "It's just that all the guys have gone with Mark out to Bear Lake," said Wanda, in a tone of self-pity. "And it just kinda makes me feel lonesome and all."

"When you say, 'all the guys,' are you talking about Bob and Willie and D.C.?"

Wanda nodded and sighed. "All of them, plus Dewey."

Along with most of the town, Amy knew Wanda had a huge crush on D.C. After having lost some weight, Wanda looked a lot better, even cute, although she was still a little chubby. But on the plus side, she had long black hair and deep blue eyes framed by beautiful thick lashes. She also possessed a remarkable bosom the slim Amy couldn't help but envy.

With her life-long weight problem, Wanda had little self-confidence. What she did have was a reputation for being "easy." Amy didn't know if the rumors were true or not, and didn't care. She liked Wanda and felt sorry for her. Although she had to wonder how anyone could think D.C. Wright was a prize.

Now that she knew who was in the group, Amy understood why Mark hadn't invited her. It was one thing to be the only girl with three guys when they were all old friends. The four of them had spent many nights together out on Bear Lake. But having two other men present, even Dewey and D.C., changed the rules.

It occurred to her that there might be a way to get things back in balance. "Wanda, you're feeling lonesome, and I'm bored so here's an idea." It didn't take long to sell Wanda on the plan.

Two hours later, Amy and Wanda were toting a large, plastic ice chest with a big paper bag on top. They emerged out of the muggy, Bear Lake darkness into the group of "fishermen" gathered around a smoky fire. "It's a plague of loose women," groaned D.C.

Mark lifted a can of beer to salute the new arrivals. "I do believe the dancing girls have arrived."

"Dream on, Cahill," grunted Amy, as she and Wanda set down the ice chest. "Besides, I thought Bebe was your dancing girl."

"Don't pay him any attention," said Willie. "His little mind's kinda fuzzy tonight."

"His little mind is nothing but fuzz," said Bob. Dewey broke into a fit of cackling.

"You bottom feeders are more to be pitied than scorned," said Mark. "But the question now before

the house is what to do with these female-type human beings? After all, they have violated our sacred sanctum.”

D.C. slapped at a mosquito. “I vote we toss ‘em in the lake.”

“Not a bad idea,” agreed Mark. “But they might get one or two of us first. And I’d hate for you to get wet, D.C. Besides, there may be mitigating evidence. For instance, what’s in the ice chest and the sack?”

“Chips, peanuts, and the cheapest beer we could find in Hawthorne,” announced Amy with a touch of pride.

Willie nodded his head as if in sage contemplation of the issue. “In light of this new evidence, I move we let ‘em stay.”

“I second that emotion,” said Bob, shaking an empty can to emphasize his point.

“Okay, then me too,” grumbled D.C. “But Amy’s gotta stop running off at the mouth and give me another beer. And the first time either one of them pisses on the fire, they’re both going into the lake.”

Amy fished two cans of beer from the ice chest. After passing one to Bob, she gave the other a long shake before handing it to Wanda. “Would you mind ever so much taking this to dear little David ‘Clod’ over there. And Wanda, tell him he can bite my royal butt.”

They were on a low bluff behind a narrow beach. Nearby was the small dam built during the Depression to create Bear Lake. Across the lake were several private camp houses. One had its lights on. Since his return from Viet Nam, Amy’s big brother Walt had been staying in the one her family owned.

Prior to the female invasion, the conversation had been focused on women, dirty jokes, and football. Now the discussion turned to gossip, race, and football.

After taking the beer from Wanda, D.C. scooted over to let her sit on the log he and Dewey were sharing. Now he yelled, “Hey, Willie, how you and the Tigers going to do this year?”

“Oh man, we’re going undefeated.”

There was a loud pop followed by a spray of beer foam rising into the humid, night air. After reaching an impressive height, it curved downward and landed so close to Amy she couldn’t keep from flinching. Having once again demonstrated his uncanny ability to aim beer spray, D.C. acknowledged the applause and praise that was his due.

“Never happen, Willie,” said Mark, getting back to sports. “The only Tigers that might go undefeated this year are the ones at LSU. Grambling always manages to lose at least one game.”

“Not this time,” promised Willie. “This is gonna be just like my senior year. As you may recall, that’s when the mighty Black Knights of Kisatche High went undefeated and won state.

Ignoring the jeers and hoots, he continued. “An undefeated season is a cinch. After all, we real Tigers have the best quarterback in the country.”

Willie glanced over at Bob, waiting to see if he’d accept the challenge. Unable to resist, Bob sighed and shook his head in apparent disappointment. “Harris is good,” he conceded, in his slow, patient voice. “But he’s not even the best quarterback in north Louisiana. I’ve got just two words for you, Terry Bradshaw.”

The good-natured argument between Willie and Bob over who was the better quarterback, Grambling’s James Harris or Louisiana Tech’s Terry Bradshaw was a long-standing affair. “No doubt Bradshaw’s got a great arm.” Willie looked around at his friends and grinned. “But James is so good he reminds me of--me.” The remark generated a new chorus of insults and groans.

The unexpected sound of Dewey’s halting voice interrupted the catcalls. “N—Now Willie, I—I don’t know ‘bout y’all not losing. Mr. Sam, he t—told me Southern was going to whup your,” he paused, perhaps remembering that women were now present, “uh, well, whu—whu—whup you real bad dis year.” Ulysses Samuel, who owned the town’s black funeral home, was a rabid fan of Grambling’s archrival the Southern University Jaguars.

“Ulysses Samuel don’t know diddly about football,” replied Willie, with surprising anger. His father and Samuel had long been at odds over tactics in the civil rights struggle. Samuel was an accommodator and member of the Urban League. Reverend Carter was more militant and led the local chapter of the NAACP.

“Easy now, Willie,” said Mark. “You gotta remember, Mr. Sam’s the last guy who’ll ever let you down.”

A moment later, Wanda got the old joke and exploded into loud laughter. Bob made an insincere effort to cut her off. “Please don’t. I know you mean well. But laughing at his jokes will just encourage him to tell more.”

Mark shot his friend the finger and asked Amy, who was sitting nearby on the ice chest, for another beer. After retrieving a can, she gave it a long, vigorous shake, then tossed it in his direction. He made a one-handed grab, pointed the top in her direction, and began a slow reach for the pull-tab. “Don’t you dare, Mark Henry Cahill,” she said, wagging a finger at him. “If I go home all stinky with beer, we’ll both be in a world of hurt.”

With a sigh, Mark aimed the can behind her and sent a long spray of foam shooting into the woods. “Now Willie, if Amy and I can get along so well, then you and your dad should be able to tolerate Mr. Sam.”

“The boy’s got a point,” said Bob.

“On top of his head?” asked Amy.

“Nope,” said Mark. “I’m talking about the point you single digit IQ types all missed. If black folks can’t get along, how are they ever going to deal with even semi-normal white folks, much less the White Citizen’s Council types and the Klan?”

“We gotta get some more smoke,” said D.C., tossing a handful of pine straw on the fire. He and Wanda had both just slapped at, and missed, something on one of his pale, skinny thighs. “These damn skeeters are about to eat me alive.”

Mark stood up and stretched. “I keep trying to spread the word that there’s no need for all these marches and protests and sit-ins for black folks to have an equal shot. Just make sure they get the vote and play a lot of Ray Charles country songs. Once white folks dance to some of those, they can never think of black people the same way.”

“Sure beats getting your head caved in,” agreed Willie. He’d heard Mark’s unique formula for better race relations many times.

“I’ve got it,” said Bob. “When you guys register to vote, walk in singing “Here We Go Again.””

“With our luck,” said Willie, “the Sheriff and his goons will be standing in the doorway singing “Hit the Road Jack.””

The group broke up, laughing. “Damn, I wish I’d thought of that,” said Mark.

Amy stopped trying to open a bag of chips. “I still say your idea sounds just like something a Goldwater supporter would say.”

“In my heart, I knew Barry was right,” said Mark, referring to the campaign slogan of the conservative, 1964 Republican candidate for President. “Besides, why elect some two-faced, lying, son-of-a-bitch from Texas as President when there are so many qualified Louisiana politicians available?”

Wanda asked, “And who are you gonna be for this time?”

“Oh, I’m a Hubert Humphrey man all the way. Us LSU guys gotta stick together.”

“From far right Goldwater to far left Humphrey,” said Amy. “I know there’s got to be a pattern there somewhere.”

More than just political inconsistency was puzzling Bob. “Humphrey’s from Minnesota, he didn’t go to

LSU.”

“Wrong as usual, super slow Hemphill. Hubert Horatio got his masters from LSU, otherwise known as the Louisiana School for the Unfortunate. He and our honorable United States Senator, Russell B. Long, were on the same debate team.”

“Well, I’ll be sheep dipped.”

“Too soon. It’s not Saturday night.”

Later, Dewey, D.C., and Wanda noted that unlike some people they knew, they had to work the next day and left.

After the goodbyes, Amy sat staring up at the stars as the guys collected more wood and built up the fire. She waited until they were all sitting before asking her question. “Do y’all think there’s anything to Mark’s idea about dancing to Ray Charles? You know, how white folks can’t be the same about race once they’ve danced to a black man singing country and western?”

Bob and Willie looked at Mark, then at one another and shrugged. “I don’t suppose it could hurt,” said Bob. “In comparison to some of his weird notions, that one sounds almost rational.”

“Put me down as undecided,” said Willie. “But like I said before, having Ray Charles do a little missionary work at Ol’ Miss or Selma, Alabama sure beats getting shot, arrested, beat-up or lynched. Why’d you ask?”

Amy nodded. “Well, my know-it-all sister says when Mark was dancing with Bebe Boudreaux, it was to Ray Charles country songs. So I was wondering if that had turned her into a civil rights activist.”

Mark leaped to his own defense. “Hey, now, I didn’t say it reversed their way of thinking. It just kind of gets things started, so to speak.”

Mark dropped into the singsong voice of a tent revival preacher. “But, oh dearly beloved, Brother Carter here has inspired me to take up the struggle. I’m dedicating myself to spending next Saturday night doing missionary work. I’ll be toiling in the vineyards and striving against the bitter weed of prejudice that so afflicts that poor, pitiful child.”

Bob seemed impressed. “You gotta be the one person, living or dead, who would claim a date with your lust object was a holy crusade.”

“Amen brother,” said Willie. “You got nobility, not to mention sanctification, you ain’t never used.” He continued in a quieter voice, “Just don’t kid yourself about what she’s like, Mark. You and I both know she’s always hated, black folks. And something tells me neither you nor all the Ray Charles songs in the world can ever change her.”

“Yeah,” grumbled Amy. “But what do you bet she’ll let our missionary here try again and again.”

If Mark heard the negative tone in the voices of his friends, he pretended not to notice. “What can I tell you? Helping wayward women see the error of their ways is a thankless job. But, somebody’s got to do it.”

Before long, mosquitoes and the cool, damp, night air convinced them to call it quits. However, their primary motivation was an attack of the “midnight munchies.”

There was no place open but the Hilltop. Willie couldn’t go into the main room without risking a major blow-up, and the rest weren’t going anywhere without him. In the past, they piled the “colored only” dining room, a small area with two oilcloth covered tables just inside the kitchen’s screened back door. Being even-handed racists, the Hilltop’s owners didn’t like whites eating there. That was no problem if Duffy Grubbs was on duty. The Hilltop’s long-time graveyard shift cook liked the company. But he was back in the Veteran’s hospital drying out from one of his semi-regular drinking binges.

“We could get something to go, I guess,” Amy said, in a tone that reflected her low opinion of the Hilltop and its owners.

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Mark. “Why don’t we go collect our golf clubs and meet back at your house? We’ll grab something for breakfast and go play a little golf.”

“Why my place?” She already knew the answer but felt obligated to her parents to make some protest.

“Because your folks sleep like logs and their bedroom is a long way from the kitchen,” said Mark, who then turned to Willie and Bob. “My clubs are in my car. So Amy and I can head on over to her place while you two go get yours. Once we’ve eaten the Marshall’s out of house and home, we’ll park at Sacred Word and slip into the country club at first light.”

Willie had played golf many times at the all-white country club. But it required sneaking onto the secluded back nine in the early morning. They’d been doing this for years. But pulling off such a covert flaunting of authority still seemed like fun.

When Willie and Bob arrived at Amy’s house, a large stack of fried egg sandwiches and a pot of coffee were waiting. They took their time eating. After fixing big “go” cups of coffee, they headed over to Willie’s church to wait for the first signs of early morning light.

Sacred Word Baptist Church was a tall, cross-shaped, wooden building located on top of a low hill. From the church’s gravel parking lot it was a short walk down a little-used path through second growth timber, saw-briars and thick brush to the tree lined banks of tiny Dry Creek. As its name implied, it was dry most of the year. After crossing over, a quick climb past more scrub trees, brush, and briars led to the back boundary of the Pinefield Country Club.

By the time the sun broke through the pine and oak trees, everyone had lost track of their scores along with several golf balls. Sleepy and tired, they decided to call it tie and head home. Besides, the later they stayed, the greater the risk of running into club members playing an early round.

On the way back, they agreed the night had been long, but a very satisfying success. In so many ways it'd be like when they were kids. Back then they were together all the time and summer nights seemed made for their enjoyment.

They reached the parking to find Reverend Ike sitting on the wide steps in front of his church. The four friends exchanged glances. He'd never approved of their sneaking onto the golf course. Now they prepared for some serious rebuking.

Coming closer, they noticed a vacant look in his eyes. When he said nothing, Willie broke the silence. "Poppa, what's the matter?"

"I couldn't seem to stay asleep last night." His voice sounded flat and somber. "After awhile, I just gave up and decided to come over here and work on my sermon."

He paused and then looked around the parking lot. "I saw your cars when I drove up," he said. "I figured you were playing a little golf."

Everyone nodded, a little puzzled. He'd fussed about it for years. Now he didn't seem to care.

"I was sitting in the car," he made an aimless gesture towards his old, black Buick, "thinking about you young people and the future. That's when I heard the news on the radio."

There was a long silence, until Willie asked, "What news, Poppa?"

At the sound of his son's voice, Issac Carter looked at his small congregation and maybe into the future. "The news that last night, in Los Angeles, somebody shot and killed Bobby Kennedy."