

THE CROOKED MILE
a novel
by
Robert E. Randolph, Jr.

Prologue, Spring 1990

The church was quiet. It begged for movement and music but there was none. The Spirit was not in this place.

Pastor Williams walked so fast that he seemed to run into the church. As he flung open the doors, the old building moaned. The Rock of New Jerusalem Holiness Church was a modest structure, painted white and crowned with a small yet proud steeple. The modest church, for modest people with modest spirits, was located on Tarboro's East Side, one of the poorer parts of the riverside city. The Rock, as it was called by the locals, was only a quarter mile from the meandering Tar River. Pastor Williams thought it was an ideal church because it was easy to baptize new members the old fashion way. He didn't believe in baptismal pools. Williams' footsteps were heavy as he rushed to the altar. The wood floor creaked with anticipation of something more and yet in this symphony of sound he heard nothing. Silence. He had much to confess this morning, and it was his custom to pray before service. He never faltered in this respect. However, on this morning, he would gain the absolution he so often prayed for.

A dawning light filled the church. The sun shimmered through cheap stained-glass windows, and rays of primary colors slashed the church into splendor. He removed his suit jacket slowly so as not to disturb the silence. He placed it on a pew. As he knelt before the altar,

he read the words “Do This In Remembrance of Me” carved into the front edge. The alter, a small, sturdy table was as modest as the church itself and looked just as worn as the floor. Pastor Williams laced his fingers and began to pray. The church was quiet. It begged for movement and music but there was none. The Spirit was not in this place.

Williams mumbled softly to himself, searching for supplication to replace his rambling. “I’m sorry,” he said again and again. “Dear God, remember me,” and “By your stripes, I am healed.” He was contrite, he always was. But he was never sure his words found their mark. Just who was listening to his pleas. He began to tremble, and all the while the rambling grew louder. He began to cry, as his old knees ached for relief. Pastor Williams was an enormous man. When he spoke from the pulpit he seemed to tower over the modest church and his modest parishioners. He never used a microphone, as his rich baritone was as big as his massive chest which provide the resonance he needed. To The Rock’s worshippers, he spoke with power and authority that ushered them into an ecstatic frenzy. To those willing to receive him, he *was* the voice of God. As his rambling began to subside, he felt a sharp pain in his knees, they’d had their fill but his not soul. He remained there with his head bowed. If knee pain was the only penance he had to pay for his sins, he could endure it, he thought.

Williams loved the Lord and didn’t mind telling the world. Of course, this was evident to the parishioners of the Rock of New Jerusalem Holiness Church. There was no doubt in their minds. As he bought stamps, the occasional postal worker would get a sampling of his upcoming sermon. Or he would punctuate his conversation with the Food Lion cashier with small parables and scriptures. The postal workers and cashiers and anyone heard him knew he was sincere. He loved attending church with his grandmother, a Primitive Baptist. So enthralled by the simple pleasures of worship and devotion, he had given his life to God when he was only ten years old.

He was sweating now, the pain now creeping up this thigh. His eyes darted back and forth behind his eyelids, his hands would not be still, and his voice cracked in between every ‘Please, Lord,’ and ‘Dear God.’ He was beyond the small sanctuary, beyond this world, wadding through emotions he struggled to share with others, including his wife.

Mrs. Williams entered the sanctuary with a heavy heart too. She struggled with her conscience, as she tried to conceal rivulets of rage. Her usual fuchsia pinks or lavenders were not appropriate today, not this morning. She was dressed in black. And her dull eyes found her husband nearly exhausted at the altar. She wanted to confront him. Instead, she walked slowly to the first pew. She took off her hat and place in on her husband’s folded suit jacket. Unlike her modest dress, she wore one of her signature hats. They were always larger than life, much like her husband. This one’s had a wide brim, folded slightly in the front, and tilted in the back with a sequined band and a single faux black gardenia, which topped off the masterpiece. She sat for a moment and allowed herself to get lost in the time before the misery began. They were a beautiful young couple once, she smiled. She had devoted so much to him, to the church, and her hands felt empty. The only son, Malcolm, died when he was only 10 months old. The loss consumed her slowly and then all at once. But she had her husband’s love to keep her from old vices and her sisters to remind her of what a good mother she would have been. Being a caring, nurturing auntie became enough for her. And while she had her own relationship with God, she always envied her husband’s calling. It was only now her own calling became clearer.

Pastor Williams moaned and swayed. By now, he’d come to his little hymn he sang as he prayers at the alter ended. Mrs. Williams knew he’d be done soon. So, she got up and stood directly behind him. She looked at him with simultaneous with pity and anger. “If only you really were a man of God,” she whispered. She suddenly felt the weight of the pistol in her hand.

She aimed the gun at Williams' head, and with a shallow breath she pulled the trigger, shooting him just as he was rising from his prayer. The shot startled her. She had not expected it to be so loud. Her husband fell onto the altar. Streams of blood crept to the edge of the altar and dripped onto the wood floor. Mrs. Williams walked back to the pew, place the gun beside her. and put her hat back on. Then she placed the gun on her husband's blue pin-striped jacket. She tried to stave off the tears by closing her eyes, but they would not be denied. She cried for him, not her husband, but for the little one she had lost years ago.

The church was still. It begged for movement and music but there was none. The Spirit was not in this place.

About the author

Robert Randolph, Jr. is a writer and thinker from DownEast, North Carolina. His research and teaching interests include 20th- and 21st-century African-American literature and cultural production, socio-cultural foundations of education, and Black feminist and queer rhetorics and pedagogies. Randolph holds a Ph.D. in educational and cultural studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and a M.A. in English and African-American literature from North Carolina A&T State University. He is working on his first academic book titled, "What Moves at the Margins: Black Queer Poetics and the Critical Pedagogical Imagination," which examines critical pedagogical discourses in the literary works of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Natasha Trethewey. Follow him on twitter at @rrandolphjr.