

Charles Rose

A New Roof

What Samantha Hall did for Teejay Banks on the morning before her father drove up to visit her in his brown and beige Cadillac Deville, she did biscuits and gravy, cheese grits, three eggs over easy, whole wheat toast. Normally she saw to it he had granola for breakfast. She was worried about his cholesterol even though he was only twenty-two years old. She had to watch hers, for she was thirty-six. She didn't bring up her father right away. She waited. She spooned up granola and fat free milk, set her spoon down, and asked him to spend the next two days in a Best Western motel.

"He won't understand how we feel, Teejay. He'll think I'm using you for sex. Since that's just what we don't want him to think it might be better if you were somewhere else."

Teejay swabbed egg yolk with a piece of toast, then decided he'd better not talk while he ate. "So I should care what your old man thinks. We both know we're not using each other for sex."

"I know we do, but Daddy doesn't. Just do this for me, just this once, Teejay."

He said he'd do it one time only. He'd move into a Best Western motel for two days. He saw relief in her pretty blue eyes. She ran her hands through her thick blond hair, her big breasts flattening out a little. "I won't ask you to move out again, Teejay." Then her soft white hands were warming his. "I'm going to tell Daddy I have a wonderful man in my life. You, Teejay, only you."

He held the palm of her soft hand up to his lips. "What you tell your daddy is up to you. You do what you feel like doing."

They made love right away in Samantha's brass bed. Teejay honey! Oh Samantha. She made the bed with Teejay in it, pulling the sheet up past his chest, poking and pinching his arms and legs. She knew how to make him feel good in bed but it wasn't just sex they had going for them. There were things that made them feel close, hearing birds sing waking up at dawn, taking long walks, working crossword puzzles together. He would help her set up her still lifes, gladioli and pussy willows in a long-

necked vase, lemons and limes, a Florida orange, oodles, she'd say, of bougainvillea. Sitting quietly in her studio, he would watch her sketch and paint.

On his second day in a motel, a Best Western close to East Pensacola Heights, he got a telephone call from Samantha. He could come back any time, she said, her father had left a day early. Instead of going back to her house he asked her to come to him, get in the minivan her father had purchased for her while he was there and drive to the Best Western. That she did for him, came to his place. She brought an electric razor for him with her, a pair of levis, a tank top, mousse for his hair. He waited to ask her what she'd said about him to her father, until just before check-out time.

"When I told him about you, Teejay, he said he hoped it would work out for us." She unsnapped her bulging purse, searched through her many credit cards.

Two days later Teejay got word that his father had died of a heart attack. He'd called his father in Cantonment—the telephone ringing on and on, why didn't he buy an answering machine?—because the next time Samantha's father drove up in his Cadillac, Teejay thought he'd just head back home, spend the time in the house he'd grown up in. He got his old maid aunt on the phone instead; that's how he'd gotten the news. Something quivered, leaped, ran amuck in his brain. *The house is mine now. Sonofabitch is mine.* He put the cordless back in its cradle. *Last time I saw you you were dead drunk, in Momma's bedroom in your boxer shorts. You do that one more time I'll whip your sorry ass.*

He didn't ask Samantha to go to the funeral; he wanted to spare her that. The night before the movers came, Teejay slept in his mother's room. His mother had died two years ago, wom out, riddled with bone cancer. It was raining when he woke up. He had a bucket set at the foot of the bed. The roof had a leak in two places, at the foot of the bed, above her vanity. Something would have to be done about that. He moved the bucket on top of the vanity, seeing his face in the mirror, a surface that once had held his mother's face. His great grandfather's

Bible was still on the dresser, births and marriages written inside. An Olan Mills photograph taken in Biloxi was also there—his father in a rented tuxedo, his mother in her wedding dress and lifted veil. His father was wearing sideburns then. His mother wore her hair in butternut curls. They were holding hands in front of a latticed arch.

He got up and went to the living room, already puddled in several places. He walked out on the front porch and watched the traffic on U. S. 29 nosing through the rain, Gulf beach-bound vehicles with Tennessee license plates or with Ohio or Illinois plates whose occupants stared straight ahead. The rain stopped before the movers came. Teejay led the moving van back to Pensacola in the pickup truck Samantha had purchased for him. Samantha's house looked good to him, Samantha coming out on the front porch with a paint brush behind her left ear. Teejay got out and went to her right away, while the ramp was coming down from the truck.

What belonged to his father was sold. His mother's dresser and vanity, the television set his mother had watched—game shows, talk shows, sit-coms, day in and day out until she died—Samantha made a place for these things in an upstairs room in the back of the house, with a nice view of the bay. It was somewhere for Teejay to be by himself. He kept the photographs on the dresser. His great grandfather's Bible he also kept. Sometimes he opened it and read the births and marriages, a sheet of tiny printed inscriptions from before the Civil War on up to his great grandfather's marriage and his grandfather's birth, in 1918. In a broad hand was his father's birth date, William Banks, in 1935. No one had ever called his father William. He had always been called Willie.

He stayed in his mother's room while Samantha worked in her studio. Instead of watching her work, he stayed up this room, watching talk shows on the television set, looking out at the sailboats on the bay. Looking up from the open Bible once, he felt a spear of probing sunlight between his eyes. The letters B...A...N...K...S were shimmering, floating away from him. He raised one hand to shut out the voice, Willie talking to him, *I'm talking to you. You can have it all with this woman.* He closed the Bible, let the sailboats go on cutting swathes in the bay. He got out of the room in a hurry. He took a walk down the sandy road.

When he got back he went to the studio and put his hand on the door-knob to her studio. *You can have it all.* He'd tell her what his old man said, but the door, he couldn't open it.

In bed with Samantha, it wasn't the same. He would roll over afterwards and go to sleep. He'd be out of bed before Samantha was, making coffee for them in the kitchen just so he could be away from her. Still, he tried not to show what he was feeling. Not much seemed to change in their life together. They went fishing off the bay bridge. He made stretcher bars for her canvases. He drove her paintings to a Gulf Coast art show in the new minivan, and when she didn't win best of show, not even an honorable mention, he did his best to make her feel okay about it. He said the best of show painting made him want to vomit. Samantha shouldn't give up her painting because someday she would be recognized.

He decided he had to put his house up for sale. He listed the house with Deen Real Estate Agency in Cantonment because he felt Hugh Deen should have the listing, not Buddy Purvis, he was telling Samantha, the only other real estate agent in his home town, because everyone knew Buddy drank like a fish.

"He was my daddy's big buddy but he sure isn't mine." He waited for Samantha to set up three long-stemmed calla lillies in the long necked vase. She ran her pink tongue along her lower lip, looking out at the sailboats speckling the bay.

"Neither one of them sound very reliable to me. Why don't you let Daddy handle it? He has some good friends in real estate, right here in Pensacola."

I'm talking to you. You can have it all. He had to pull his eyes away from the calla lilies.

Hugh Deen told him over the telephone he was only interested in selling land now. Lori Torbert was handling house sales now. Teejay met Lori Torbert at the house. She parked her Nissan Sentra in the driveway. She came up to him on the front porch and sat next him to him on the porch swing. Her skirt was a little too tight for her, and there were,

streaks of orange in her short blond hair, but she was still a nice looking young woman. He saw she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

The house needed a lot done to it. A fixer-upper, Lori told him. She thought he could get eighty-five thousand for it if Teejay put in a new roof. Yes, the roof leaked; something had to be done, he thought, but where would he get the money? Not from Samantha, or Samantha's daddy. So he asked Lori to sell the house as is.

"All right, but that's going to take a while. At least get someone to clean it up.

"I can do that. I think I can take care of that."

Lori asked him how she could get in touch with him, and he left her Samantha's telephone number. The next day he called Magic Maids in Pensacola and arranged to have the house cleaned. He sat out on the porch swing while the girls did the job. He dropped by the real estate office to leave word that the house was ready to show. Lori Torbert turned in her swivel chair, and gave him the news. "I'm not really sure I can sell your house unless you put in a new roof. "

"Try selling it without one. Come down on the price if you have to," he said.

Three weeks later, Lori Torbert called him right before lunch. Samantha picked up the telephone, handed it over without a word, and went off to the kitchen. Lori Torbert sounded put out with him. She had shown the house on a beautiful day, no likelihood it would rain, she thought, but after she'd shown the house to these people it had rained on the way to the car. "You can imagine how I'd look to my clients if it had rained while they were in your house. That would be one sale I could kiss goodbye."

Samantha was waiting for him in the kitchen. She had a pot of split pea soup simmering, whole wheat toast in the toaster, an endive lettuce salad already made. She was stirring the soup with a wooden spoon.

"That was my real estate agent on the phone. She wants me to put in a new roof. If I don't it might not sell so quick."

He told Samantha it had started to rain while Lori Torbert was showing the house. "She told me that old roof of mine leaks like a sieve," he said. "She said that was one sale she had to kiss goodbye."

It was the first time he had lied to Samantha. Nothing showed in his voice, nothing showed in her but irritation over the way he was handling the sale. Two slices of toast popped up in the toaster.

"You ask me, this woman doesn't know which end is up. I mean she isn't professional. She should have told these people the roof leaked before she had them inside to look at the house."

"So next time she tells them," Teejay said, "and the time after that too."

Samantha set down her wooden spoon. "All right, Teejay. You can have your new roof. My checkbook is in my purse. Would you please go get it for me? You fill out the check. I'll sign it."

"You get it."

"All right I'll get it," she said, and laid the spoon down on the cook top.

She came back with this bulging leather purse. He couldn't stand to watch her poke through the clutter—change purse, pink tabbed keys to the van, tubes of lipstick, the pink flowered checkbook cover. You can have it all, but not at this price, no goddamned way he would write out the check. Something snapped in him, made him be mean to her.

"You sure your Daddy would want this? If he found out you were paying for my new roof, he'd say you were using me for sex."

Samantha bit down on her lower lip. "He won't find out about your new roof because I don't intend to tell him about it."

"Well, you ask me, you should tell him. Ask him to pay for my roof. That way he'll have to write out the check."

Split pea soup gushed out of the pot, the pot clapped down on the linoleum.

"Get out of my house! I mean it! I want you out of here!" Samantha yelled at him.

He got his razor and toothbrush, a change of clothes, his parents' wedding photograph. The Bible he left where it was. He climbed in the pickup truck and drove away to Best Western.

He pawned the pickup truck to pay for the roof. He went down the next day to a pawn shop—we keep the title but you keep the keys—and came out with seventeen hundred dollars in cash. Next he went to a

roofer and got a date for getting the job done. He would have to wait a week; he would have to live in a motel until the new roof was on the house. After that he could live in his own house, be there when Lori Torbert showed the house, and when she sold it he could get a decent job and find an affordable place and get his truck out of hock and start living.

Samantha called him that evening. She said she had to see him. He watched her pull the minivan into the parking lot. She brought sandwiches in a picnic basket, paper plates, and linen napkins. She spread their picnic out on the bed, and opened a bottle of cold beer for him. Her soft plump arms opening out to him made him want her again, like before.

Teejay was sitting out on the porch swing, watching the traffic go by. It was his house now, not his father's. Hammers—one after the other, two at once, four at a time—were whacking brads into shingles. Big black men and little white men were laddered against the sloping roof. Their flatbed truck was parked behind his pickup. Rotten shingles were stacked between the pecan tree and a cluster of sun-browned pampas grass. Teejay had a mattress in his pickup and a floor lamp and two table lamps, Samantha's kitchen chairs, a small ice chest, a hot plate, his mother's television set.

He hadn't turned off the utilities yet even though he hadn't any way of paying for them. He hadn't asked Samantha to pay the bills for him. He'd been to see her after she came to him, had slept with her on her brass bed, their love cries echoing in his mind. Teejay honey. Oh Samantha! And yet he heard her coming down on him the next day, in the kitchen. You can do what you like with your tacky old house. You can turn it into a museum and live there the rest of your natural life. He tried to tell her he wasn't doing that. He would live there until the house was sold. He would move back to Pensacola and find a place of his own after that, but that didn't mean they couldn't see each other. But he wasn't about to be a kept man. Kept, you think I want to keep you. You're the one who asked me for money. Someone must have let Lori

Torbert know he was here because around noon she showed up in her Nissan Sentra.

The roofers were off on their lunch break. Teejay made room for Lori on the porch swing. He had to put his feet on the porch to keep the swing from rocking.

"So I see you're putting on a new roof"

"That's right. That's what I'm doing." He felt Lori's arm brush his elbow. "And that's not all. I'm moving in. I'm going to stay here until you sell the house. I got a mattress and some kitchen chairs in my truck and some other things I need to live here. I'm serious. Here's where I intend to stay until you sell this place.

"You'll have to move your things out when I show the house.

"I can do that," Teejay said. "I can move them out to my truck." He rocked the porch swing just a little, and she put out her feet and stopped it.

"You are actually going to live here?"

"Sure am. I have to live somewhere," he said.

"I know but I may not sell your house for a while. I think you should be reasonable and find a place to live in Pensacola."

"I had a place in Pensacola," he said, "but that place is no longer available."

He looked away from the stacks of shingles, the ladders, the passing cars and trucks, shutting Samantha out of his mind. He eased his body close to Lori Torbert's, kept his eyes fixed in hers.

"Could I ask you something personal, Lori?"

"Some things I'd rather you didn't ask."

"I'm not prying into your personal life. I just want you to know why I moved out from the place I was in, that's all." He found the words he wanted without looking for them. "What I'm asking you is would you live with an older man if he were your sole means of support?"

"I'm my own sole means of support," she said. "I sell real estate. I get along."

He felt the porch swing move a little, aware that both of them were moving it. "Supposing you met an older man who owned a Cadillac Deville."

He touched Lori's instep with the toe of a boot, and she giggled, rocking the swing. "Who wants a Cadillac Deville?"

"If I stayed with this woman I know I might be driving one someday."

"I wouldn't want you to give up a Cadillac."

"I wouldn't want to either but I might."

Lori put out a long leg to stop the swing, looking out at the traffic, controlling her voice so it sounded like how she was on the telephone, her bright blue eyes boring into his. "Why don't you come to my house tonight? I'll cook dinner for you and we'll watch a video."

"I wouldn't want you to cook dinner for me. But I will watch a video with you," he said.

That night they ordered takeout Chinese. He let Lori pay her half of the bill. She poured out Chablis in long-stemmed wine glasses and when the movie started she refilled them. They held hands, watching the movie, and then he put his arm around her, dropping his fingers to her breasts. She took his hand and let him fondle her breasts. Her lips fluttered when he kissed her.

Later, naked, drinking Chablis, she turned on her side and showed him the strawberry birthmark high up on her left buttock. "When I was a little girl my mom told me it would go away. But like a lot of things it didn't go away."

"I won't be going away until you sell my house."

"Well maybe I never will sell your house."

The next night he was back at Lori's place. They drank a pitcher of margaritas. She pointed out the antique furniture she had from her grandmother, really nice things, she said, a tea table with a marble top, a bonnet table with a drawer for gloves, a hall tree in glossy golden oak. She sat up on the carpet, swept one hand toward the hall tree. "That bastard I was married to tried to talk me out of the hall tree."

"What would he want with a hall tree?"

"He's renovating an old house in Pensacola. He says the hall tree is rightfully his because he was the one who refinished it. That's how Bill determines ownership."

There were photographs in her bedroom—she must have a big family, he thought—and a framed Cantonment High School diploma. She

showed him her majorette photograph. She was in it with six other girls, kneeling in front of a drum major. He liked Lori as a majorette. He was sorry he hadn't gotten to know her then.

The next time he was with her they drank another pitcher of margaritas. Waking up in the middle of the night, he reached out to the woman beside him. Samantha, he heard himself saying. Lori turned over on her side. She didn't say anything to him, but when he touched her strawberry birthmark she grabbed his hand and shoved it away. He got up and went to the bathroom, and when he came out Lori was asleep. Or faking it, he couldn't tell which. He put his clothes on, and said goodbye to the hall tree.

Lori called him several days later. She was spending the day in Pensacola; she would come by his place when she got back. "I've got news for you, Teejay," she said. "Someone is interested in buying your house." But by nine o'clock Lori still hadn't shown up. He thought of going to see Lori at her place; then the Nissan pulled into the driveway and Lori was at his front door.

He tried to kiss her but she pushed him away. "I'm showing the house tomorrow at ten. So you need to be out of here. I came over tonight to tell you because you need to clean up the place."

"Out? I live here," he said

He nudged a beer can with his foot, and went up to her and put his hands out. She took one of his hands in both of hers. "It's not that I don't want to see you, Teejay, but right now isn't a good time. We can see each other after I sell your house."

She let him kiss her before she left him. He stood out on the porch for a while, watching the traffic go by. He didn't want to go back inside the house right away. Lori Torbert was like the other girls he'd known. She probably would have made life miserable for him. The first girl he'd had sex with, he'd taken her to a high school football game. He'd had her in the back seat of his father's car. When he got back home, there was a light on in the bay window. His mother and Willie were dancing. His mother's hands were locked behind Willie's neck. Teejay'd driven around the block several times. They must have heard him pull out

of the driveway because when he got back the lights were out all over the house.

He swept up the kitchen and took the garbage out. He loaded his things on the pickup, the floor lamp and table lamps, the kitchen chairs, the hot plate and the ice chest, his mother's television set. The wedding photograph he put in the glove compartment.

He stayed in a motel in Cantonment, across the highway from Kentucky Fried, and the next day he sat in his room until ten, watching game shows and talk shows, as his mother had for so many years. He got in the pickup at ten-fifteen and headed back to his house. He drove by the Nissan Sentra, the brown and beige Cadillac Deville. It figured it would have white-wall tires. He tried to figure out what had happened, knowing what if not exactly how. As for how, that he would never know. He gassed up at a full-service station, had the oil checked, the windshield cleaned. Returning, he passed his house again. The Cadillac must be on its way back home, to wherever it had come from.

Hugh Deen was in his office waiting for him. He was half a foot shorter than Lori Torbert, an old guy she couldn't be interested in. Hugh Deen told him Lori Torbert had gone home early today. She was going on vacation tomorrow and she wanted to get started packing. Hugh Deen had the earnest money for the house. He counted out fifteen crisp one-hundred dollar bills, and handed them over to Teejay.

It started raining when he got to Samantha's. Drops of rain puckered the white sand along the narrow road that led to the bay. He left his earnest money in the glove compartment, put a tarpaulin over his things in the truck. He wiped his shoes off on the throw rug by the door so he wouldn't track up the living room. A still life was set up on the coffee table, double blossomed camellias in the long-necked vase. He moved quietly through the big dining room to the kitchen. Samantha was washing romaine lettuce, patting each beaded leaf dry, folding wet lettuce up in a towel.

It rained on into the afternoon. They made love in her room, on her brass bed. Teejay honey! Oh Samantha! She had to ask him do you love me? He heard himself saying, "I do, Samantha," rain drumming on their storm-tight roof.