

Charles Rose

Vigil

"You do it the way you put a dress on. You fit the cover over the seat and slide it on down like so. That's called dressing the seat." Jo Ann Hathaway lifted her arms and pulled an invisible dress off. "Undressing the seat, you slide the cover up, like you were taking a tight dress off."

Shirley Carmichael looked over Jo Ann's life insurance application. She slipped the application into her briefcase along with Jo Ann's check for the first month's premium. She should be on her way, but Jo Ann wasn't about to stop yacking at her. After Les died, Jo Ann had gotten this part time job sewing up the covers of school bus seats. Jo Ann had to tell Shirley about dressing and undressing the seats, how she supplemented what she made at Hair Expressions. "Patching them up, that isn't so bad, it's undressing them that gets me down." Jo Ann was back in her kitchen chair, her glass of iced tea dipping down a little. "You have forty or fifty seats to undress, all you want to do is get out of the bus. These kids have no respect for public property. And it's the kids who are well off that are the worst offenders."

Outside the open kitchen window, Traci, Jo Ann's six year old, swinging upside down on a trapeze bar, grabbed the chain on the swaying swing, jiggling Kelli, Jo Ann's four year old. Jo Ann called out for Traci to stop what she was doing right now. Traci swung herself right side up on the trapeze. Kelli dug her heels into a corduroy patch of exposed clay in the backyard's unmown crabgrass, like Shailah would do when she was that age. Shayne, Shirley's ex-husband, had repainted their swing set a soothing pink. Their back yard, Shayne had kept it mowed.

She'd go straight home, not to the office. She'd mail the app off tomorrow morning. Driving back, Shirley looked forward to showing Wiley the check. "You got it, then show it to me, Shir!?" "I got it right here for you, hon." she'd say, "but first I'm going to give you a big kiss." She had brought home a check last night, but Shayne had called before she could

give Wiley his kiss. Shayne had asked her to keep Shailah for two weeks. She'd said no, then said she would think about it. She'd told Wiley that too, she would think about it.

Having Shailah in the house for the first two weeks in November, two weeks, she could manage that without Wiley. Wiley used to take off when Shailah came. He'd say she's your daughter, not mine, and head south for the Gulf Coast.

The road ahead dipped as she passed the mill race frothing on her right, pond-pooling out on her left, how nice it would be to get your feet wet, take your clothes off, merge with the water, Nice, but it would never happen.

When she got to the house she lit a cigarette. It was a frame house sitting back from the road, paint scaling off the window frames, with a front porch Wiley never sat out on, a big back yard that ran back to the creek.

She found Wiley cane pole fishing down by the creek, on the near bank, a purple worm lure in his bait can. His head was all that was big about him now. The rest of him was all skin and bone. "I got a bite Shirl." Wiley yanked the line out, a worm lure jittering past her nose, plopped the worm lure back in the creek. "So how'd your day go?"

"It went as well as can be expected." Wiley should be talking to her, not the creek. "Actually, I had a pretty good day. I took my medication. I watched television. I trimmed my toenails. I turned the sprinkler on as you might have noticed, and as, you see now, I did some fishing."

It came to her, what he'd forgotten to ask. "You forgot to ask me if I got the check."

He didn't ask her to show him the check. She didn't say first she would give him a kiss. He shifted the pole so the bobber bobbed, creating bubbles that quickly disappeared. "We're going to need all the checks we can get, so we can satisfy Shailah's wants and needs."

"Two weeks." She tried to keep her voice down. "Is that too long for you? Can't I have my daughter with me for two weeks?"

Wiley yanked up the line, swung the bobber, slapped the worm lure back in the creek.

None of the things Wiley Peichart had done before was he capable of doing now. Wiley had been a keyboard player in a

country and western group in a north Nashville honky-tonk, had sold life insurance, had been a post office clerk temporarily, a Catholic Action Bible salesman in New Orleans, been a keyboard player in Biloxi, a dance instructor in Pensacola—fox-trot, waltz, jitterbug, tango, rumba, cha cha, mambo, he could do them all.

It was the dancing he let go of last. He'd put a tape on, open up his arms, cock a foot out, *come on Shirl let's dance*. She'd feel his hot hand flat on her spine, his fingers pattering up her back, they would waltz and she'd step on his feet. But the cha cha, that wasn't so difficult, *now remember Shirl you step out on two, like ONE and TWO I taught my baby how to cha cha cha, cha cha cha, cha cha cha so you swing your hips, you shake it Shirl*, that she could get into special for him, and he would turn her, they were doing the waltz, *he was the waltz king, he was dancing with his sweetheart to the Tyyyy...naaseeee Wahhhllllluzzzz!*

They had made this pact, Wiley's idea. When he decided it was time for him to overdose on Halcyon, he would let her know so she could be with him. He wouldn't off himself behind her back.

They kept the bottle in the medicine cabinet, a sturdy sentinel guarding a shelf full of after shaves Wiley no longer had any use for. The Halcyon caplets had a threaded middle, tiny plastic eggs that you could pull apart.

Shirley called Shayne on a Saturday. She'd keep Shailah for two weeks so Shayne and Betty Jean could go on their November Caribbean cruise. Because she'd said yes to Shayne, Wiley had moved the Halcyon bottle out of the medicine cabinet. He'd taken it out to the creek. He'd put a hook in one of the caplets, used the ruined caplet for bait. She went out to him without making a fuss and told him quietly, "return the bottle please." He pulled the bottle out of his creel and handed it over *no comment Shirl*.

Coming in after work a day later, Shirley went to the fridge to get a beer. The Halcyon bottle was in the crisper. She was sure some caplets were missing because this time Wiley had left her a note. "I hide, you go seek, Shirl." She grabbed

the bottle and made for the back door. She found Wiley sitting in front of the bird feeder, arms Xed over his knobby knees, egg droppings haphazardly mixed in with the seed.

"You want to kill yourself, here be my guest," shaking caplets out of the bottle, shoving them at his nostril hairs, "come on, show me what you're made of."

Maybe he'd hide the shotgun next, and all the knives and razor blades. He'd come in to pee while she was in the shower. He had taken the caplets out of the medicine cabinet. He hadn't flushed the John because *as you know Shirl* that would screw up the water pressure. And don't forget to squirt the shower tiles with shower tile cleaner because you couldn't count on Wiley to do it, get rid of mildew stains, stains on the John, couldn't count on him to do anything that might be a little help to her. Cleaning up after him before she got in the shower, shaving cream blobs in the cheapo pedestal sink, stains rimming the toilet bowl, squinch up the sponge in the scummy water, apply Comet, scrub hard, wipe the bowl free of hairs, she'd done all that but not today, scanning items lined up on the toilet tank lid on each side of the prominently displayed, yes legible note, first his shaving brush sprouting out of his mug, his battery operated nostril hair trimmer, seldom in use, seldom applied to those adorable tufts of nostril hair, yes and the sopping wet bath mat, how did that happen, the slippery tile, how many times had she told him *please Wiley put it back where you found it, just hang it up over the shower curtain like a good boy, all right?*

He had the nerve to lay out her pink chemise on his side of the bed. The missing bottle imprinted his pillow. He still had the set on mute when she got to the living room. He was watching a baseball game in his gunked-up bathrobe.

He had agreed to keep Shailah for one week if she would do the cha cha for him. In her cherub pink chemise. She had the Halcyon back in the medicine cabinet, had Wiley back in bed, his big head on the pillow. She pulled the bedspread up over his chest. She wouldn't know what he might do with his hands while she was doing the cha cha. He used to tell her he'd rather lose his legs than his arms or hands.

Does that mean you 'd rather play the keyboard than do the cha cha? I'd rather put my arms around you than do the cha cha, that you know, Shirl.

Across the road from the Lazy Bee pampas grass shimmied in the curlycue wind, needling her shoulder blades, topspinning through her hair. She was trying to pat her hair back into place when Shayne got out of his Buick four door. The vented coat in his navy blue suit snapping out, he managed to get past the Exxon pumps without swiping his hair down more than once.

He sat down across from her, held his open-in-friendship right hand out, "Great to see you, Shirl, but you could have come to my office "

She felt the fleshy mass at the base of his thumb press deep into her thumb and forefinger vee. "I haven't been out this way for awhile. Not since we were both with Liberty Mutual."

"Well I'm still with Liberty Mutual." *Would you please let go of my hand?*

"And from what I hear you're hanging in there." Shayne was talking to her like she was still married to him. "For me you've always been a winner. And if you ever think about jumping ship, I'll be glad to have you on board at Prudential."

"Thanks Shayne, but I'm satisfied where I am."

Shayne glanced at his manicured fingernails, lifted his hands from the picnic table as if the scuffed paint might be contaminated. One week, not two, she was telling Shayne, she would only have Shailah for one week.

"Shailah can stay at your mother's for one week. You know that as well as I do," she said.

Across the road pampas grass shimmying just for him, for Wiley. *Come on Shirl let's dance. Shayne might as well be talking to a brick wall Shirl.*

But Shayne wasn't, he was talking to her. He wasn't yelling at her; he was reasoning with her, what he did when he wasn't yelling at her.

"I want you to know when Wiley goes—and he will go Shirl—you'll wish you'd spent more time with Shailah. You won't have Wiley for an excuse. You won't have anyone to blame but yourself."

She scrunched her toes up till Shayne finished. Pampas grassshushshushshushing, shimmying pampas *grass, for you, Wiley, I'm doing this for you*, but with Shayne's white teeth in her face she had to get away, just go.

She pulled her hair tight on her scalp, One week, one week only Shayne.

On the road, she filed Shayne away with the other bad things in her life. But she couldn't file Shailah away. Shayne was right, she didn't see Shailah enough because of Wiley, the way he was when Shailah was there. She thought of Wiley peeing off the back steps because both bathrooms were in use, how when she took Shailah to church he'd sit out in the car and honk the horn during the service. She'd give Shailah a birthday party and he'd go out to the creek and smoke a joint.

Instead of going home, she drove out of her way to the high school. Shailah wouldn't see her parked down the street from the parking lot. Shailah had died her hair a brassy orange. She had on blue tinted glasses the size of poker chips, hip huggers showing sickles of bare butt. She was fooling around with a skaggy boy. She plumped her butt down in the passenger seat of a Toyota Camry, swung one leg out of the open window. Shirley could feel the ache in her arms from wanting to hold Shailah close, feel Shailah's heart beating. She wanted to comb out the tangles in Shailah's hair. She wanted Shailah to come back home to her, but already Shailah was too far away.

Wiley had tried to mow the front yard, but only ten feet of September grass had been cut. She had to put the mower back in the garage. The keyboard, the amps, the synthesizer, and now the lawn mower he'd never use again.

Wiley was laying out cards on the coffee table. "As you might have observed I tried to mow the lawn today. I gave it my all but I didn't get far."

"We'll pay someone to do it. That won't be any big problem."

She watched Wiley scoop up the cards and shuffle the deck. "Another thing I ought to do around here is move the

cable into the bedroom. I'll be spending all my time in bed pretty soon."

They had moved the set two years ago. They'd tried watching TV in the bedroom, but they'd get to fooling around and miss something they really enjoyed watching.

Wiley started dealing, he did it rapidly, one face up, six face down, talking to the cards, not her. "I'm thinking we should get it done soon, while I'm still ambulatory. You'll need me to pull the cable through." He looked at her the way he did when decisions had to be made, and he wanted her to do it his way.

"All right. We'll do it this weekend. Is Saturday morning all right with you?"

Saturday morning was good for him.

She had to crawl under the house and move the cable. That used to be Wiley's job. After they'd decided where the set should go, he'd drill a hole in the hardwood floor, put his work gloves on, click the flashlight. It was Wiley who used to crawl under the house; she used to be the one looking down at the hole he had drilled, looking at the beam of Wiley's flashlight, at the cable nut wiggling up through the hole, not under the house wigwagging the damned cable.

On a Saturday morning in October she increased his dosage of morphine from five hundred to eight hundred milligrams a day. She spooned a laxative, made sure Wiley got it down. If his bowels locked he was finished, that his home care nurse made sure Shirley knew. She gave Wiley an enema twice a week. She set a morphine caplet on the tip of his tongue. The bent straw poking out of a paper cup, she lined it up with his jittering lips, kept it steady until he was sucking on it.

She called Shayne, told Shayne Wiley was worse. No way she could keep Shailah for him. Shayne hung up on her. She didn't tell Wiley what she'd done. She wouldn't give Wiley the satisfaction of knowing she'd done what he wanted her to.

Ethel Lee Baker had her space heater on. A shutter banged, starting up again when you'd just gotten used to not hearing it. Ethel Lee was spilling bills out of a Crisco can,

spreading them out on the coffee table. Shirley was counting out bills, twelve ones, a ten, a five, then fifty-nine cents for her coin changer, smoothing the creases out in the bills and putting them in her money belt, filling out receipts for the premium payment and signing each one, tearing them off her receipt pad.

She couldn't finish the glass of iced tea. She had to move on, get the route covered; she had two more places to go to and already it was a quarter to four. Coming out, moving on to the car, she felt the wind take hold of her hair and pull.

Driving back, she was sure Wiley had taken his life. She could think of his life as over. She could stop off at the office and put the cash in the safe, do her paperwork, make sure he had time to get it done. Make sure, that was a terrible thing to think.

It was dark when she got back to the house. The porch light was on, and a light in the living room window. The TV was on mute. Wiley wouldn't take the Halcyon with the TV on, not Wiley, *I'd rather go quietly Shirl*. She lit a cigarette, unable to go to him yet. She went to the bathroom off the hall, laid her cigarette in the soap dish. No rush, she even had time to comb out her hair, put on lipstick, touch up her eye shadow. She took another drag, opened the medicine cabinet. He'd scotch taped the note to a shaving cream canister—*I hide you go seek*.

When she got to the bedroom, Wiley turned the TV off. Right away she told Wiley Shailah wasn't coming.

Wiley opened and closed his fingers before he folded them across his chest. With his head propped up on pillows, he looked like he might float off the bed and around the bedroom like a sailboat cruising around a lake. But that didn't keep him from bullshitting her.

"We've been through some tough times, Shirl. Shailah would have been another tough time."

"For you, maybe."

"No, for both of us. But if she had come we would have gotten through it. Just like all the other times, we would have found a way, Shirl."

At first she didn't want to get near him. But she had to pull open the bed table drawer, shake it out, golf tees, package of condoms, dental floss, a cascade of paper clips.

"You and me, we're partners, Shirl. I have a right to know what you're doing."

She had to ask him where he had hidden the Halcyon caplets.

"I didn't hide them, Shirl. I wanted to, but I couldn't. They're right here, under my pillow." He took her hand, patted her knuckles, she felt the force of him pulling her toward the bed. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking down at him, poor sick Wiley.

"We'll find a way out, believe me, Shirl. Do you remember that basement room in north Nashville? Remember, you called it the midget room. Two inches of clearance above your head. You had to duck under the furnace pipes to get to the toilet, wasn't that fun? But for two days we got through it."

It was no fun then, and it wasn't now, but if she had to she could play Wiley's game. "After two days we packed up and left. Bye bye Music City."

Hot air was rushing out of the vents. Shirley wanted to turn the thermostat down, but she couldn't pry Wiley's hand loose from hers anymore than she could keep him from running his mouth. "You remember that night in Biloxi. I mean the first night, before I started that gig at The Shores. We checked in at this old hotel on the beach. Remember it said on the marquee, newlyweds could have the bridal suite. And you said we can't check in as newlyweds because neither one of us is wearing a wedding ring."

That hadn't stopped Wiley from wanting to stay there. For Wiley, old beach hotels had class. They could sign a tab for their meals and drinks. Later they had found something cheaper, a rent-by-the-week, beach-view efficiency. It was over, the rumba, the cha cha, what they did when he came off his gig at the Shores. It was over and done with so why make a face, why are you dragging your mouth down like that, what is it? "What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"You have to tell me."

She saw words floating out of Wiley's big head, what he said, that didn't matter as long as he felt he could say it, say anything, what he had to say to justify what he had done.

"I had a dream while you were gone. In the dream you were thinking I'd offed myself, and then I saw you standing beside me. It felt like I was between two plate glass sheets. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak, but I was conscious, I knew you were there. I was god damned dead and you weren't. So when I woke up I had to ask myself, how would I feel if you'd come in here and I'd really done it?"

Wiley spread his fingers out flat on the sheet, he raised his head off the pillow, his. She held his head up, pulled the bottle out from under the pillow. It looked like most of the caplets were there but she couldn't be sure how many were gone. She laid dry fingertips on his forehead. *Go to sleep, Wiley, let it all go.* But he wouldn't let go, not Wiley.

Even now he couldn't keep his hands off her. He put his hands on her hips, shake it Shirl, swing your hips like so. They used to do ballroom dancing after Wiley got through at The Shores. We did the cha cha, we did the fox trot, we did the mambo, we did the cha cha, she'd have to do it herself, on her feet swinging her hips like so, one two, one two three. She would dance for him, she would stay by his side, but that was all she would do for him.

On her way back from Jo Ann Hathaway's she stopped at the Lazy Bee for cigarettes. She had delivered Jo Ann's policy, picked up three referrals, form letters by Jo Ann recommending Liberty Mutual.

Parked in front of the house, hers now, she decided not to light a cigarette. The ash tray was loaded with cigarettes. She had scattered Wiley's ashes over the creek, all but a tablespoonful, which she'd kept in a spare sugar bowl—that's how Wiley wanted it so that's what she had done. She's given his keyboard to Goodwill. She'd flushed a handful of Halcyon capsules down the toilet.

She go out of the car, tugged her coat tight around her neck to keep the cold out. She'd left a light on in the living room. The light in her living room window, like the others

along her street, kept the same intensity and hue. Wiley had said about lights in windows, they reminded him of fried eggs sunny side up. But that wasn't how she saw hers now. Anyone passing by would think of life going on inside her window. Normal life, not Wiley's kind.

She started walking, hunching her shoulders to keep out the cold. It hadn't quite turned dark yet. When it did, she knew it would get colder. She passed discarded flower pots that hadn't been picked up yet. She passed a light tintured, sodded front lawn. She passed windows impacted with TV glows, others curtained, yet light slivered, walked beneath clicking twigs, bare branches, under streetlights. The lights in Shayne and Betty Jean's front windows were off. They must have gone to the movies, all three of them, or were they eating out at Denny's like she and Shayne and Shailah used to do. Or was Shailah with another skaggy boy, doing what she didn't want to know? But maybe Shailah wasn't with a boy. Maybe all three would be back later on.

She hadn't seen Shailah since the funeral. Shailah had come to the house afterwards, Shayne too. Sitting across from her in the love seat in the front parlor, Shayne had tried to comfort her. Shailah hadn't worn her blue tinted glasses. She had washed and combed her hair. She had a pretty dress on and high-heeled shoes, just the right touch of perfume. Her embrace was brief, why wouldn't it be? Yet there was warmth in it. Since then, Shailah had not been back. Shayne had. He'd offered her a job at Prudential, but she wasn't having any of that.

Five trash bags lined up behind the curb showed her Shayne had sucked up dead leaves with a blower. Shayne used to rake the leaves when they married. She'd help out, holding open the mouths of the bags. Shailah too would help out. They would take turns, all three of them, filling the leaf bags.

Returning, she passed the same window lights. She shivered, walked faster. When she got home she would turn the heat up. She would drink a beer, smoke one cigarette. When then? What then? She would make a salad, heat up a frozen dinner in the microwave. Shake lentils into a stock pot, bring eight cups of the water to a boil. Sautee diced

carrots, a diced onion, sliced mushrooms. She would keep watch over her lentil soup until it was just right, stirring it with a wooden spoon. She would keep it overnight in the fridge; it always tasted better the next day. Tomorrow night she would call Shayne, ask to speak with Shailah. What would she say to Shailah? Not come over and sample my lentil soup. She would say something better than that.

Thinking of what she would say to Shailah, she looked up at the darkening sky, sprinkled with traces of fading light. Her house lay still, ahead of her, waiting.

Charles Rose received an Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellowship for 2004-05 in literature/fiction. NewSouth Books recently published his memoir, *In the Midst of Life: A Hospice Volunteer's Story*. He has published short stories in numerous reviews, including *The Sewanee Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Blackbird*, and *Shenandoah*. One of his stories appeared in *Craft and Vision: The Best Fiction from The Sewanee Review* (edited by Andrew Lytle). He retired from teaching at Auburn University in 1994.