

## Charles Rose

### *Mr. Hardcastle*

After Katie and I called it quits, she took up with a ball bearing salesman, Freddie Snipes, and they got married and moved to Valdosta, Georgia. Freddie Snipes wanted to adopt Tommy, but I wasn't letting him do that, even though the child support was hurting me. In the last four months, I had only been to visit Tommy once, and that hadn't turned out well. I got into it with Freddie Snipes, over being behind on the child support. Katie had to pull me off of him.

Lately, I had been spending my Sunday afternoons fishing on the Alabama River with Cole Hoskins. We were house painters at Dixie Paint. His trailer was down the road from mine, and if you kept on going down that road you got to the Alabama River. I still went fishing with Cole Sunday afternoons even though Cole's wife Charlene and I were seeing each other on Saturday afternoons. Cole made it easy for me to be with Charlene. On Saturday afternoon he took Dyan, their little four year old, downtown with him; she was with him shaking a tambourine while he preached on a street corner half a block from the state liquor store.

One Sunday afternoon while we were fishing, Cole told me about his eye problem. He had trouble reading his Bible unless he kept his left eye closed. They came and went, these zigzagging motes in his eyes. He was afraid he might be going blind, and he didn't know what to do about it.

I was still doing odd jobs for my neighbor across the road, Elinor Williams. I'd replaced I don't no how many thirty-amp fuses for Elinor. Elinor used to tell me the next time she married it wouldn't be for love or money. She'd marry a man who knew how to do the things she couldn't do for herself. After I put in a float in Elinor's toilet tank one Saturday afternoon, I brought up Cole's vision problem. Elinor looked up at me from a novel she was reading, sipped on her Canadian Mist and soda. I felt the sun's flat rays heat up my neck and moved my lawn chair in toward Elinor.

"Cole says he won't go to an eye doctor."

I knew Elinor would set me straight. "Who says he has to, Wesley." All my friends but her call me Wes. I'm just beginning to get used to Wesley from her. "Tell Cole he should go to a drugstore and buy a pair of readers. That would be a lot cheaper than going to an eye doctor." She took another big sip on her Canadian. I didn't know how she put so much away every day.

Catch her early enough in the afternoon, what she said still made

some kind of sense. "All Cole has to do is put his readers on and he can read his Bible to his heart's content. You tell Cole these drugstore glasses are cheap. He can get a pair for nine ninety-five. I'm sure that's what you must want to tell him so I won't say anymore about it now."

Elinor dipped down to her book, waiting for me to say something.

Instead I asked myself just what had made her settle down in this trailer park. She liked it here by the river, with your kind of people, she told me once, because she was so far away from the people she'd known while she'd been married to Rutherford. She'd moved back here from Athens, Georgia, to not far from where she'd grown up, which was just this side of Wetumpka.

Rutherford was a paleontologist at the University of Georgia. She had never had much in common with him, so their marriage hadn't lasted very long. Rutherford would talk your ear off about fossils, she'd say, but he didn't know beans about the human heart. She'd say the human heart, for Rutherford, was just a muscle.

The novels Elinor read meant nothing to Rutherford, less than nothing he used to tell her, because they weren't about people who did something in the real world. I didn't know Rutherford, didn't want to. But he might have been right about Elinor's novels. She kept them in her mother's bookcase, a golden oak job with glass doors which she had with her now, in her trailer.

The binding was loose on the novel she was reading—a long one with pen and ink illustrations, a Victorian novel, she'd told me once. I offered to slap some tape on it, but she knew I had this other thing on my mind. She was waiting for me to get to Charlene Hoskins.

Instead I asked her about Mr. Hardcastle, what was he up to today, in what looked like about two fingers worth of her novel. "Is Mr. Hardcastle still blaming the wind for how he feels?" I asked her, swinging my foot up across my knee. Mr. Hardcastle blamed everything on the wind. If the wind was blowing from the north, he'd say that's why I'm pissed off today. From the south, hey man I feel just great. From the east he'd be crying a bucket. From the west he didn't give a shit about anybody. "I never knew a dude like Mr. Hardcastle," I told her.

"Well you see he's a little eccentric. That's how he's supposed to be. The wind can do Mr. Hardcastle that way because he's a character in a novel."

"You ask me, he's a weirdo."

"You, Wesley, might think so because you don't know what winds blow your life around."

"Are you telling me I'm not in control of my life?"

"I'm only saying you could be more in control. So for that matter could Mr. Hardcastle. That's why he's in this book, so the reader can judge for himself how wrong it is for Mr. Hardcastle to attribute everything he feels to the direction of the wind. His putting everything on the wind is irresponsible of him. If you read this book you would see that."

I sensed Elinor was floating up over the pines, above the trailers, way up over the river, and since I didn't want to pop her little balloon I said,

"If you ever get finished with that novel, you lend it to me and I'll read it. I mean carefully."

"Yes, carefully, Wesley, that you should do."

I let the subject of Mr. Hardcastle alone because I had something else to talk to Elinor about. I told Elinor Charlene and I had had a fight last Saturday, last time I'd seen her. Instead of dragging her off downtown so she could shake that tambourine, Cole had taken Dyan to see Charlene's grandparents in Montgomery. I had to tell Charlene she should be the one to do that. That should be your job, not Cole's, I told her. Charlene told me to stay out of her life with Cole. I said I'd try to do that in the future, and she said we wouldn't have a future if I didn't give her and Cole some respect.

I got a strong beam of disapproval, not Elinor's usual fuzzy focussing.

"Here you are sleeping with this woman and you think you should run her life. If Charlene stopped washing the dishes for Cole, you'd probably come down on her for that." Reaching over to pick up her glass, she let her other hand run through her matted gray hair like she needed to loosen it up.

"Let me tell you something, Wesley. I tried sleeping around for awhile.

About a year after Rutherford left me I would go to the bar at the Holiday Inn. I'd go on week nights, when men my age were there. They'd be moving on the next day, so both of us knew what the score was. But Charlene, she obviously doesn't know the score. She thinks she can keep Cole for a husband and have you on Saturday afternoons."

"Remind me to ask her what she thinks. I mean who knows what goes on in Charlene's head?"

"You don't know because you don't want to. You're only interested in yourself."

I saw a lizard crawling off the patio and thought of Cole going blind. He wouldn't be able to lace his boots or squint down the barrel of a shotgun. Charlene came out of their trailer and dropped a bag of

garbage in the garbage can. She had on the tight short shorts she was wearing the first time I knocked on her door. She waved at me from down the road, and I waved back, knowing I'd go to her unless Cole and his little girl Dyan came back from downtown while I was sitting here. If he did I'd tell him what Elinor told me, you get some readers and see if they don't help you see better.

I was looking at a Methodist church across from Burger King, it had a rec center and an outdoor basketball court. I was watching four boys shooting hoops, the basket ball dropping through the net. We'd been out in the hot sun painting a big house. We'd taken our lunch break without saying when we'd be back. Cole wasn't worried about going blind anymore. He'd gone out and bought a pair of readers first thing, and right away the zigzagging motes went away, and he was able to read his Bible again. He put them on while we were ordering and read off all the specials to me.

Cole was talking about Bible movies, what Hollywood did to the Bible, twisted and changed it, Cole said. I asked Cole why that mattered since some of the things in the Bible plain just didn't happen. I said no one Israelite could slay that many Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Cole's blue eyes never wavered. "What you don't understand when you say that, Wes, is what the good Lord is showing us. He's showing us He can intervene in our lives just like He did in their lives. He helped Samson smite his enemies, and then He punished Samson for sinning."

"So how would the Lord intervene in your life? What does Samson have to do with you?"

Cole spoke slowly, without raising his voice. "Samson's story has everything to do with me. It warns me to shun the harlot's bed. I'm a man. I can be tempted. I was tempted and I gave in. The Lord has seen fit to punish me."

I didn't want to ask how it happened. I watched one of the boys across the street do this nice move with a basketball, holding it up in one hand, letting it ride on his fingertips. Then I made him look at Cole's blue eyes, still set on the path he was following.

"Charlene had gone to the Gulf Coast with Dyan to see her mama. I was painting houses at the time. We had this woman in our crew. Her name was Rena, Rena Latham. Rena asked me to take her home one Friday night? I got to drinking with her and then it happened."

"That's all you have to tell me, Cole?" I watched another boy pivot and sink a jump shot.

"No, that's just the beginning. Saturday morning, Rena Latham shows up at my house. She's all dressed up, ringing the doorbell on me. She's wearing this pretty flowered dress. I was hoping I had

locked the door, but I hadn't. I didn't know what to do next."

"So you waited for her to come in. Or you went to the door and let her in?"

"She had walked from her house to my house. I went to the door and let her in. She had a bottle. That was part of it."

A man and his wife and two teenage girls wearing shorts and not much on top came in, moved on to gawk at the specials. I heard something beep, the french fry machine, or maybe it was an oven somewhere, letting us know that its time was up, whatever was in the oven. We won't be letting you guys out alive, was what the beeper might have been saying.

"I knew right then I would pay for it, but for a long time nothing happened to me. Then one night in that same house Charlene and I were together in bed. We heard someone ring the doorbell. Charlene said I should answer it and I told her, Charlene it's midnight. I told her someone must have the wrong house, but that doorbell kept on ringing."

"And you answered it?"

"No way," Cole said. "I let the doorbell ring until it stopped."

"Are you saying that had something to do with the Lord?"

"I'm saying it did," Cole said. "I'm saying it was like the Bible says, when the Lord comes down on sinners. He was letting me know I'd done wrong before He came down on me for it."

I had to ask Cole how the Lord came down on him. Cole didn't hesitate to tell me how.

"The next time I tried to make love to Charlene, I couldn't do anything, Wes. It's been going on for a long time now, ever since I heard that doorbell ringing."

Coming back with their trays of fast food, this family had nothing to say to us, not the father with his tiny mustache or the mother with her big handbag swinging and swaying and bumping her hip, the girls with their acne and silly talk, they kept to themselves. Cole put his head in his hands. I looked at Cole's coffee getting cold, the slashed pink packets of Sweet'ner.

The next chance I got, I went to see Charlene while Cole was preaching downtown. There were the two of them on a street corner, Cole preaching, Dyan shaking the tambourine. I passed them on my way to the state liquor store. I thought I would stop and listen to Cole. He had a permit to use speakers, so his voice carried all the way to my car. He had to compete with the traffic, a burring monotone of passing vehicles. Cole was going on about Sodom. The Sodomites were hardened sinners. Lot never should have tried to reason with them.

Nobody paid Cole any attention, not even when Cole brought in fire and brimstone.

I stopped fishing with Cole on Sunday afternoons. Cole was painting his church, working for the Lord, he told me at Burger King, the French fry machine dinging away. I told him not to get carried away, he didn't have to sacrifice his Sunday afternoons, and he said since he'd talked to me he'd decided he had to serve the Lord first.

"Charlene says I should get paid for painting the church, that our church can afford to pay me. I've thought about that a lot, how much it means to me now not to get paid." Cole's simple blue eyes bored into mine.

"I mean it's helping me accept the Lord's will," he said. "That's all that matters."

"For you. But what about Charlene? What about your little girl Dyan?"

"Don't they matter?" I wanted to get across to him he'd better climb down off that church steeple.

"Of course they matter. Don't you understand, Wes, if I'm right with the Lord, then I'll be right with them too."

Out in my boat thinking back on it, I felt my stomach knot up. A crosswind was blowing my line around, so I had to shift my boat around so the stern was into the wind. I got to thinking about Mr. Hardcastle, would the wind have affected his fishing? What would it be like to be him, I thought. If the wind was right would I be a good man and give up this thing with Charlene? Would a north wind make me blow my top and a south wind cause me to laugh like hell or like Mr. Hardcastle ride my good steed over the moors, and let no one get in my way? Would a west wind send me back to my bed with the drapes pulled and the lights out?

It was time to get back to fishing. I had the idea of trying it close to the shore, so I took off my beetle spin lure. I worked the tail of my worm lure into the shank of the hook, about to snug it up to the eye of the hook. I stuck myself with the eye of the hook, something I almost never do. I slashed the ball of my thumb working the barb loose. I had the anchor down and the river was calm, nothing stronger than slow moving wavelets. Out here on this aluminum boat with no one, entirely on my own—what if I had a heart attack? Bad things I had done came back to me, back when I was married to Katie. One time Katie showed me a letter from an old boy friend she had before she had Freddie Snipes, and I hit her; I slapped her hard. The river glittered with sunspots. It brought back the sweep of my open hand, the flat pop, Katie's face jerking. It wasn't long before I hauled up the anchor and dropped the bass I'd caught back in the water. I took the boat back in



to the boat dock, and hitched it to the boat trailer. I got in my automobile and started driving, slow. Charlene was outside the trailer getting her mail. She was flipping through a stack of junk mail. I could tell she wasn't happy to see me show up. She bit her lower lip and walked away from me so I had to follow her to the patio. I had to go to her, that's how she wanted it. She set the junk mail on the gas grill, pulled the edge of her mini-skirt down so her thighs weren't showing so much. Dyan was inside watching TV so I couldn't come in. Right away she had to talk about Cole. "I see you been fishing without Cole?"

"That's right. I think it's better this way."

"Cole might like to go fishing with you. But what you do is what you do."

I saw a green lizard crawling past Charlene's foot, along the carpeting Cole had tacked down, a cheery sky blue surface for lizards.

Charlene was saying she'd been doing some thinking.

"Like about me?"

"That's right, about you. This is going to come back and come back to me." Charlene put her hands on her hips and the lizard blurred into a green blob. "Look there's something I ought to tell you. About how Cole came to find the Lord."

This green blob slithering toward my feet, I couldn't stomp on it so I slid my foot away. "Okay," I said to her, "tell me how Cole came to find the Lord."

"Cole's first wife ran off from him. He couldn't get over losing her. He wanted to throw his life away." What Charlene was saying, I knew it meant something to her, but it didn't mean anything to me. "Cole told me he got in his car one day and drove out on County Road One Seventy-Nine. He was going to drive his car into the first big truck he came across. It would have happened, but something else happened instead. Cole saw a little girl on a tricycle, and he forgot about ending his life. He stopped the car right away, and got out—she couldn't have been more than three years old. He asked her where she lived, and she told him. Cole put the tricycle in the back seat and took this little girl home. It was this little girl that saved Cole's life."

It took a lot of concentration, but I made those tufts of blue carpeting come back again, Cole's well spaced carpet tacks showing forth for me. I wasn't seeing a green blob now. So it was easy for me to say something Charlene would want to hear. "That little girl, who was she?"

"It was the preacher's little girl, at this country church."

"The preacher's little girl. If that isn't something."

"You ask me it was a miracle, Wes."

CHARLES ROSE

I thought of Cole up on a ladder, slapping paint on the boards of the squat little steeple that seemed stuck on, not actually nailed down or in some way built, the sun beating down on the back of his neck, Cole painting his way down from the steeple because he thought the Lord wanted him to. I would have said it, where does that leave you and me, Charlene, just to get started again with Charlene, make her feel like having sex with me was okay, but I couldn't speak, I couldn't even move. Sunspots flashed on the gas grill. I couldn't blink the green blob away.

I didn't have sex with Charlene that afternoon because Dyan was inside watching TV. I spent the afternoon in my trailer with a cold wash rag on my forehead. I watched the Braves lose to the Marlins. In the seventh inning I remembered the date, that today was my son Tommy's birthday. He was four years old but I had forgotten, not that he would soon be four years old, I had forgotten it was today. I turned off the TV and picked up the telephone and called Katie, but all I got was a busy signal. An hour later I called again. All I got was the answering machine.

Once the sun went down and it cooled off outside, I left my place and walked over to Elinor's. I knocked but she didn't come to the door. I heard her tell me to come on in. She was sitting in her favorite chair, by the book case in front of the television set. She was listening to the radio. The radio was turned down low, and the music was soft, music for dancing I said to myself, only I didn't feel like dancing. She had the lights off, her book in her lap. A mug of black coffee sat close at hand, on a low wicker table in front of her. She had positioned a chair beside her, for me.

"There's a can of beer in the fridge if you want one."

I didn't want one, not tonight.

There wasn't much light in the trailer. A moth lit on Elinor's novel, then spiraled on up to the ceiling light. He'd had enough of Mr.

Hardcastle. Mr. Hardcastle, he might look like this old man I used to see when I lived in Birmingham. This old man was vigorous for his age. He turned up all over the city. That's how this old man spent his life, moving from one public place to another, hospitals, the public library, city parks. He had a bald head and a gray beard, and in warm weather he wore his shirt sleeves rolled up. The books in the book case, the bindings were running together so I had to look back at Elinor. I saw her clearly for a little while, closing her book, marking her place with a book mark. She picked the mug up with both hands, sipped on the coffee, set the mug back down, her hands jittering from the effort.

"This thing with Charlene, it's doing things to my eyesight."



"Your eyesight isn't your problem. Elinor turned off the radio. She moved her chair close to mine. "Your shiftless way of life, that's your problem."

"Shiftless is how I have to live."

"You have to do better than that."

Fork tines, I felt them scratching my eyes. My left eye was burning, specks jittering, zigzagging floaters speeding up. Floaters, that's all they were, no way I would go blind.

"You can change, Wesley. You can be a new man."

A new man, like Cole Hoskins on Highway One Seventy Nine, saving that little girl on a tricycle? I'd just as soon stay like I was, but that wasn't helping any. Sooner or later tonight I'd have to go back to my place. I might go in the other direction first, go past Cole's trailer and on to the river. I'd take off my clothes and jump in, swim upstream, against the current, let the current carry me back. I felt the floaters settle like sand in a pool; they would go away pretty soon. All I had to do was get out of Elinor's chair, do something, keep on moving.

Elinor took my hands in hers. This woman half again my age, I didn't want her to let go of my hands. That's when I got down on my knee and thanked her for believing I could change. That's how the wind was blowing for me.

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**Charles Rose** is a recipient of an Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellowship for 2004-05, in literature/fiction. NewSouth Books has 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.