

Turning Turtle and Silent Blue

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By *Jeremy Rice*

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Thesis Advisor
Dr. Blake Hobby

Thesis Director
Dr. Richard Chess

Turning Turtle and Silent Blue

Stories by

Jeremy Rice

15 Allesam Road Apt. 2 Asheville NC 28804

(828) 454-3081

jkrice@unca.edu

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Contents:

Turning Turtle	2
Silent Blue.....	18

Turning Turtle

Elzora falls into her potato-colored matchbox house. For a twelve-hour shift at the 'Coon Eyes Cafe she slung scorched coffee into stained mugs, aggravated her hernia hefting bus-tubs and packed and unloaded dented silverware and ketchup-splattered platters in and out of the chugging, frothing dishwasher. So what does she come home to? More fucking dishes. The grubby swirled yellow of scrambled eggs still gunked to the black skillet on the stove. Macaroni dinner plates un-scraped and careening out of the rust-crusting sink. Milk of magnesia glasses planted in rings along the counter, gritty silt around their rims. And what else? Clumps of dirty, sweat-swept tee-shirts and bras piled or slumped over the arm of the couch, the half-propped ironing board, the broken TV on the floor and the refrigerator. Roaches, fat and brown, clogging the sticky orange roach hotels or trapped in the black coffee spills on the counter and kitchen table or racing free and slap-happy across the linoleum, their long antennae groping the floor for crumbs. And a stench—a godawful slimy beef and old onion stench—spewing from the garbage-blooming trash can, forming a rancid cloud that stagnates in the kitchen, wilts her tan-leafed ferns, peels the brittle yellow wallpaper.

All she wants to do is spin some Frank Sinatra on the turntable, chomp half a roll of Turns™, and take her last two Marlboro Reds™ into the bathtub to soak her fat, seething bunions. Walking into the bathroom, she's thinking of a customer at the restaurant that day. His Nascar™ tee shirt was streaked with oil stains and stretched to its limit by his bulging gut. He doused his plate of sausage links with maple syrup that congealed in his thick, jagged beard as he slurped it up. After finishing his meal he leaned back in his chair, smoked half a pack of Dorals™, and cleaned his ear with his pinky. When Elzora cleared the table, she found a graveyard of cigarette butts ground into the man's bowl of half-finished peach cobbler, black ash swirled into the pools of melted vanilla ice cream. She tries to shake that image out of her head as she tucks her own cigarette into the side of her mouth. That's when—*shit*—she notices the wide, wrinkled turtle squatting in the middle of the tub. Its stupid egghead lolls out of its shell to gape at her. "Don't you make eyes at me, boy!" She snatches the turtle out of the tub, tosses it to the tile with a clatter, steps into the tub, strips and drops her yellow panties over its shaking head.

Elzora fills the tub with hot rusty water, slides down—only her forehead, nose, cig tip and splayed knees stick out of the steam—and closes her eyes. Sinatra croons "My Kind of Girl" from the living room: *She walks like an angel walks... She talks like an angel talks... And her hair has a kind of a curl... To my mind she's my kind of girl.* She lets the underwater song swirl into her and the day melts away. The images of sausage links and cigarette butts blur into soft gray shapes in the back of her mind. She sees only Sinatra leaning against the bathroom doorway in a pinstriped derby and oil-black suit, the tie wrestled loose at his throat. He cups a glass of scotch in his left hand and sings into

the cigar in his right, the words rolling out in bursts of smoke: *Hmmmmm pretty little face that face just knocks me off my feet... pretty little feet she's really sweet enough to eat.*

He sets the scotch down on the edge of the tub and begins washing the sweat, grime and ache out of Elzora's body with long, gentle strokes of the washcloth. Then he drops water through his fingers over her chest, stomach, legs and face—slowly rinsing away the soap. Eyes still closed, she grinds her Marlboro™ out in the soap dish and steps out of the tub, shedding water on the dirty tile. Without bothering to towel off, she plops her wet butt on the toilet seat for a pee. Sinatra is slinging his derby into her naked lap, dropping his jacket onto the floor and pulling the bottom of his shirt out of his pants. He whispers in her ear: *Yes my poor heart's in a whirl... She's my kind she's a girl... And I'm glad.*

Something warm and dry tickles Elzora's foot; she screams. The turtle! It's standing on her foot, pawing at her ankle. She bolts off the toilet and kicks it hard—it smacks against the wall with a sick whack. Dazed, it rolls its wrinkled head up at her. She grabs an aerosol can of shaving cream from the cabinet above the sink, hurls it at the cowering turtle and follows with a handful of disposable razors, an electric nose hair clipper and a three-pack of Ivory soap. The turtle backs against the wall. "I'm going to knock you flatter than a gander's arch you damn egg-sucker!" she hollers and grips a plumber's helper in her right fist, whapping the rubber part down on the brown and yellow speckled shell. The turtle trips, falls on its stomach and scrunches its feet into its shell. Elzora stands over it and stares into the pattern on its shell. Two bright orange blotches look like squinted eyes, staring at her, hissing "Elzora, Elzora! Shits so much her asshole's sore-a!"

The voice and eyes are those of Mean Mackey McGoolie, third grade bully. Flaming red hair and big buck overbit teeth. His partner Tarvis Gregg had held her still at the edge of the playground as Mackey zinged wood chips into her face. Another time, Mackey had taken a handful of baked beans from the cafeteria, pulled back the elastic of Elzora's shorts and dropped the brown slop down her Minnie Mouse panties. He yelled for the class to come look—look how Elzora shit herself like a dirty little baby.

She reverses the plumber's helper, holds it just under the rubber plunging part and drives the wood rod down on the turtle's shell. "I am not a dirty little baby!" she shrieks, bringing the stick down again and again, harder and harder. The shell cracks like a dish of *creme brulee*, and she jabs and jabs at the softness underneath. She hammers the wood down and down until nothing remains on the tile but a smeared purplish mess of turtle jelly.

She tosses a hand-towel over the pulp, stomps to her bedroom, climbs under the sheet—still naked and wet, Sinatra still filling the air with his legato croon—and drops instantly to sleep.

In Elzora's dream Rosalie stands in the doorway, sandaled feet tapping the mud-blurred pineapple on the welcome mat. She looks just like she did that day. Eight years old, scrubbed chubby face, chocolate hair twisted into pigtails, little dimpled knees peeking under the hem of her blue-checked cotton dress. Just like that last day when Cole smirked goodbye, and Rosy waved from the backseat, tiny pink nose mashed against the glass. Elzora had to turn away. She didn't wave back, just turned and stared into the sun until the white blaze blotted out the tears and a black pulse rippled through her retina.

But here she is! Her little baby! Her precious!

"Mama!" Pudgy fingers waving up, dopey smile missing teeth.

"Little baby!" Elzora dips down and bundles Rosy in her arms. "Come on, let's go down to Mister Chip's store on the corner and I'll buy you a strawberry cone, huh?"

"I want inside!" Rosy tries to push through her knees, but Elzora catches her.

"Ah, let's not, okay? It's such an awful mess in there. I've had a real rough go of it, baby. I've been wore out and put up wet. But you're here now and everything's going to be all right. It's going to be okay. Come now, let Mama buy you a strawberry cone. Or would you rather fudge swirl?"

"But Mama—I want to see Myrtle!"

"Myrtle? Who's Myrtle?"

"You know Myrtle Mama," she hiccups a giggle. "Myrtle the turtle!"

"Oh no, no!" But she can't grab her in time. Rosy has rushed by and is hopping through the house calling "Mertie, Mertie!" She beats Elvora to the bathroom door. Elvora finds her with legs and arms quaking, mouth gaping, eyes as big as half-dollars. The blood is everywhere. Dark pools settling into the warped valleys of the linoleum. Rusty smears dirtying the tub, the mirror, the toilet. Jagged shards of shell clinging to blobs of brain, furry like mold and plastered to the wall. "Baby, look." Elvora rests her hand on Rosy's shoulder. At the touch, the girl shrieks and vanishes.

Next day at 'Coon Eyes Cafe Elzora spots Myrtle the Turtle winking at her from behind the bus tray, its scaly arms slung over the plastic edge. It paws at her from behind the break room window, turtle breath fogging the glass. Snaps at her from the

dishwasher, sneers at her from the gravy pot, snakes out of her apron pocket, scattering forks and papered straws.

She splashes water from the bathroom sink over her face, squeezes her temples and whispers to herself, "Easy now, ain't nobody trying to hurt you. That turtle ain't real." But two hours later, when Myrtle pokes its head at her from behind the cash register, she slams her coffeepot down on the counter and screams, "I swear I can't take it! Leave me be!" The flannel-clad truck drivers look up from their plates of ham steak and stare at her. Myrtle dives under the counter.

Percy, the manager, corners her in the kitchen, his onion breath thick and fierce. "Damn it Woman—what the fuck is going on? You're acting batshit out there."

"Sorry Percy. Didn't sleep too well last night. I'm worn to a frazzle."

He chews his lip, lets her pass by his chest.

Later she lowers two bowls of gluey corn chowder onto the laminated tablecloth before a hare-lipped man and his escort, a gasoline-reeking, scorch-dyed blonde. Myrtle shoots out of the chowder, twitchy arms outstretched. Elzora swipes at the turtle and slams a cup of coffee into Harelip's lap. Freaks out, shrieks, slings a salt shaker. "No more I said! I'm going to jerk a knot in your ass you eggsucking varmint!"

Percy throws her against the kitchen wall. "This is a business, God damn it!" he snarls. "You got to leave your womanly problems at the door, you hear me? At the fucking door!"

Elzora stares; she feels as if she is hurtling through space, plunging toward the ground, toward a canyon filled with turtle corpses, all rolling their heads, jutting their tongues and bleating her name to the sky. She tries to conjure comforting images—her

Nanna's smile, her Rosy's pink fingers. All she can see is a thousand gaping black turtle mouths, their tiny razor-teeth gleaming behind bloody drool.

"You're through, got it? Take your shit and get. Good Christ, I'm trying to run a Goddamn business, and this is the shit I got to put up with. You know what I think *Elzora!* I think you need your head shrunk. You got shit to work out, Woman. That's what I think."

"Opinions are like assholes, Percy. Everybody's got them one, some are just louder and smellier than others."

He slaps her face, not too hard, almost like a father. And that's it—she's gone. Unemployed.

Elzora stoops on her stoop, snorting out anxious, acrid blasts of Marlboro™ smoke. She can't go inside; Myrtle the turtle owns the house now. In her mind she sees it spinning through the rooms, howling and hissing, shedding a sheen of slime over the kitchen tile. Kneading wads of fetid flesh into the carpet and couch cushions. Pissing steamy blood sap into her sewing basket. "Good thing Cole done left me," she says aloud. "If he saw me here acting like I ain't got enough sense to dump the piss out of my boot, he'd put me away for sure. He always did think I was afflicted."

She remembers the night of the storm. It had only been a couple weeks since she had brought Rosy home. To Elzora, the baby was just a warm, wrinkled bundle that howled like a hoot owl, made shit and spit and snot and could barely open its eyes. Just something strange that had grown inside her, swelled her belly and made it pop like a pus-filled infection. Since coming home from the hospital, she had been lying around the

house, listening to her records, sucking on cigs, holding an icy pack of frozen spinach against her feverish headache and screaming at Cole to see to the fucking baby. But that evening he had fallen asleep on the couch, the paper tented over his face, when a sudden bone-crack of thunder stabbed into Rosy's dreams and her little lungs rang with terror. Elzora, jumping as lightning hissed, scooped her out of the crib and cradled her to her breast. They covered together under the kitchen table. Elzora felt her baby's heart tremble into her own and she whisper-sung into Rosy's throat "The Song is You": *I hear music when I look at you... A beautiful theme of every dream I ever knew... Down deep in my heart I hear it play... I hear it start then melt away...*

A fist of thunder slammed against the house and Elzora jumped, busting her nose on the table leg. Red began to ooze. It seemed so funny at the time—the slick of blood in her palm. Like warm milk. She smeared it all over her face to make Rosy laugh. Laughing herself, she held her fist over Rosy's face like a sieve, dripping drops over her cheek and forehead. "Let's play a trick on Daddy, huh?"

She stood over the couch, eyes peeled wide, stretching Rosy out in front of her like an offering. She hollered Cole's name. Thunder shouldered against the wall. He bolted up and screamed. She laughed. He stood and punched her in the face. She crumpled against the floor, cushioning Rosy against her belly. "You never had a fucking sense of humor!" she spat.

She tastes metal in her mouth and tosses the spent cigarette into a puddle of murky yellow rainwater; it bloats and bobs to the surface. Closing her eyes, she sees Rosy's twisted face in front of hers. "Where's Myrtle, Mama?" she cries. "I want my Mertie—where's Mertie?" Elzora opens her eyes and slams her fist on her knee. "I'm

through!" she shouts. "I ain't sitting here like a slug on a stump no more. I'm going to see my baby. Can't nobody tell me I can't see my baby!"

That night Elzora—still terrified of the mutilated turtle inside—camps in the yard. It heals her to watch the new turtle—Myrtle Jr.—wobbling through the dry grass around where she is lying. A little while ago she ran from her stoop to the Schlitz Bros, pet shop behind the pharmacy and slipped through the glass door right before Amos Schlitz locked up for the day. "I need a turtle!" she hollered, out of breath. Amos sighed and led her to a row of glass aquariums. She chose a gentle-looking one that was wide and clay-colored with soft reddish streaks on its shell.

"Give me some sugar Fella," she calls to Myrtle Jr., who is crawling on her thigh. "Rosy is sure going to love you," She strokes its velvet head. "You're just a precious angel straight from heaven!"

They doze together on the lawn, both deep in thought, as the sky gradually darkens. When the stars come out, Elzora relaxes her eyes; the twinkling lights take the shape of Frank Sinatra—lopsided hat pulled down his forehead, lopsided grin stretched around his cigar. He puffs a celestial smoke ring and winks at her before beaming his song down to earth: *"Dream when you're feeling blue... Dream, that's the thing to do... Just watch the smoke rings rise in the air... You 'll find your share of memories there...* Elzora hums along softly, feeling warm and drowsy. Her eyelids flutter; she imagines Sinatra sliding down the sky on a sparkly shooting star, landing on the grass with one boot on each side of her body, kneeling down, wrapping his strong arms around her, holding her tight and still, whispering: *So dream when the day is through... Dream and*

they might come true... Things are never as bad as they seem... So dream, dream, dream...

Suddenly a cold breeze whips through the yard and Elzora jerks her eyes open. Dark clouds roll through the sky, blotting out the stars, blacking out Sinatra's image. She hugs herself. In her head thoughts jostle around; she can't control them. All she can think of is Mackey McGoolie sneering at her, snot drooling from his nose. "El-whora! El-whora!" he shouts.

Elzora whimpers. She squeezes Myrtle Jr. close to her and crawls under a cluster of bushes beside the house. Curling into a ball, she clutches the turtle tight, shuts her eyes and tries to call back the distant echo of Sinatra's voice—*So dream, dream, dream, dream, dream, dream, dream, dream...* She falls asleep, cold and confused, head in the dirt, roots elbowing into her spine.

Her dream is familiar. She sits atop a starchy blue blanket on a stripe-thin bed in the middle of a square room. A row of fluorescent tubes hums on the ceiling. The thick glass windows are criss-crossed with metal wire. The blinding white walls have small mechanical objects set into them—a red lighted metal box, a series of buttons and a grated speaker. They are listening to her through the speaker; they are watching her through hidden cameras; the blinking light is trying to read her thoughts. *Well I ain 't going to peep a word and I ain't going to think a think. The lights are on, but ain Y nobody home, uh-uh. They can Y squeeze nothing out of me.*

The heavy door swings open and a man and a teen-aged girl walk in, the man smiling thinly, the girl looking away, popping gum. The man sits in a wooden chair in front of the bed; the girl leans against the wall.

"You got to get me out of this place, Cole! They're stealing my thoughts!"

Cole mumbles back at her.

"I said help me out of this place! I can't take it, I tell you, I can't!"

He mumbles.

"Can't even look me in the eye, huh? You're meaner than chickenshit, Cole. Who is that girl over there? You traded me in, did you? Look at your damn self. You're ugly as a mud fence. You done gotten old, Cole. Why ain't you talking to me? Cat got your tongue? Where's Rosy? I said where's my baby! I want to see my baby! Listen to me!"

For the first time, Cole stares into her eyes, stabbing at her his dirty little smirk.

"Unfit," he sneers. "You're unfit, Ellie. Unfit, unfit, unfit, unfit, unfit, unfit..."

Unfit, unfit, unfit... even as Elzora's eyes shake open the word continues to pop against her face like a fat black fly. She shivers and stands up woozily. Why is she in the backyard? She stumbles around, claws gnarls of yellow grass out of her hair and tries to breathe slowly. She can't make sense of the dream, her surroundings, anything—until she nearly trips over the turtle sleeping at her feet. It all comes hurtling back. "Well okay," she says, a shake in her voice, "Okay—today's a real big day." She picks a twig out of her collar, smooths her hands over her damp work shirt, straightens her jeans, pulls the coiled rubber hose out from under the porch and splashes cold water on her face. She scoops Myrtle Jr. into her arms. "Wakey wakey baby! We got a trip to make. It's far and

snakey, but the sweetest little angel in the world is waiting for us. We're going to surprise my baby at the schoolyard. I reckon we best be on our way."

So they start walking down the gravel road. Fog hangs between trees like cobwebs. Dewy leaves cling to Elzora's Keds™ as she stomps through them. They pass the rust-scorched trailer park, the old paper factory and the abandoned grocery store. She thinks of how she used to walk Rosy to school this way, holding her tiny warm hand, Rosy wearing her little pink mittens and furry overcoat in winter, her little blue dress and buckle sandals in the spring. Then she thinks of the time they walked to the park. It was a Sunday morning in April and Elzora packed honey sandwiches and homemade chocolate pie into a paper bag and brought a paperback to read in the sun. Rosy pumped on the swing while Elzora sat on a bench twenty feet away, gazing lazily at the words but mostly letting her mind wander like the clouds moseying through the scuffed blue sky, tapping cigarette ash into the cap from her Diet Coke™. Glancing up she noticed the far-away look on Rosy's little face as she tucked and stretched, tucked and stretched her legs, like a fish kicking through water. Now Elzora wonders again what thoughts were swimming behind the little child's half-closed eyes, and what thoughts might be swimming there now. Does she think about her mama? Does she wonder why her mama doesn't take her to the park anymore?

They creep through the cemetery, turn down the hill toward town and amble past the post office and courthouse. To keep her mind focused, Elzora hums to herself and talks to Myrtle Jr. "Yep, old Fella. Rosy's going to flip when she sees you. That girl's going to pee her britches." They trot down Main Street. Cars and trucks chug and rattle by. "Keep up the pace, Myrtle Jr., we're almost there." She can spot the kindergarten

from here—the long horizontal building, the squares of grass, the orange jungle gym. "It's early yet. We'll have to set and wait a spell."

Elzora crams her butt into a seat on the playground swing set. She shakes a cig out of the pack and lights it with a match, still talking to Myrtle Jr. out of the side of her mouth. "I tell you what we'll do, Fella. We'll go down to Mister Chip's store on the corner, the three of us, and get us some cones. Yeah, that's what we'll do. If I know one thing about my baby, it's that she loves her strawberry ice cream cone," Myrtle Jr. naps in her lap; Elzora trails away, swaying on the swing, sucking her cig down to the filter. She tosses away the butt and stares into the wood chips at her feet. "Yeah, that's what we'll do," she whispers, but she has forgotten what she was thinking about. She stirs the wood chips with her foot, and feels again the fear of the playground—Tarvis Gregg squeezing her wrists tightly together behind her back, Mean Mackey laughing, popping snot bubbles, and flinging fistfuls of chips at her face. The sharp edges stinging her cheek. A splinter snagging her lip. Black roaches crawling in her vision as the wood bounces hard off her closed eyes.

Elzora puts her hands over her face. She tries to gather her memories, her certainties, rake them like brittle leaves into a safe pile. But her mind feels like a windstorm, scattering the soaked and broken thoughts around and around and around. She's flailing, panicked, grasping wildly at the swirling images. Finally, she snatches a memory and pulls it close, tastes it, falls into it.

She is at her grandparents' house, yes, at her Nanna and Poppy's in the country. She comes here for a week every summer. She's in the attic, her special private place, among the faded boxes and the sweet aged smell of the cedar floorboards. In the distance

she can hear Poppy's lawn mower; from the house below Nanna creaks and hums in the kitchen. Elzora can picture her dipping a large wooden spoon into the pot of spaghetti sauce, blowing on the sauce and putting a test finger to her cracked lips. Along with the aromas of oregano and browning beef, the music of an old Sinatra record wafts up from the parlor. *Boys and girls like you and me walk beneath the skies... They love just as we love, with the same dream in their eyes.* She loves the dry, dusty smell of the attic, the crisp yellow-brown pages of ancient *Vanity Fair*TM magazines and *Sears Roebuck*TM catalogues, the glass dolls and brass lamps, the whispery feeling of walking into the past. She kneels into a box of wool sweaters and calico dresses and pulls out a hat. It's a brown leather cowboy hat—Poppy's—with a string dangling down below the rim. She rubs her face in the hat and sneezes on the smell of dust and something spicy and implacable—something old and masculine. She pulls the hat over her curls; it comes to just above her eyes. She walks on her toes over to the oval, full-body brass mirror resting against the wall. The gauzy glass makes her reflection seem far away and she can barely recognize herself. Her body feels sluggish, detached. The dimming light leans through the dust-webbed window and staggers across the room, falling short of the corners. Sinatra breezes through the cracks in the floorboards and rustles around her ankles. She breathes in and out, slowly twisting the hat around on her head. In dusty moments like these she has difficulty holding on to certain facts—her name is Elzora, she is thirteen, she goes to Benjamin Franklin Junior High, she's visiting her grandparents in the country. She feels like she has lived forever, hanging in this moment, and all she is certain of is Sinatra, breathing his song on the back of her neck, twisting around her, soft and dry, a ribbon of

old silk. *Ididn 't have my favorite dream... The one in which I hold you tight... I had to call you up this morning... Cause I didn't sleep a wink last night...*

A ringing bell shrills and Elzora jerks up. Small children gush from the school doors. Helium laughter, paper airplanes, untied sneakers, rat tails, tee shirts of blue, green, pink, yellow, orange, red, purple. What is she doing here? Oh yes—she must be picking Rosy up from school. Where is her mind? She walks to the edge of the playground and scans the mass of young bodies. Rosy is nowhere to be seen. The kids keep pushing and skipping by. A nauseous feeling grows inside Elzora, a feeling that she has forgotten something important. The last spattering of kids trickles out of the building. A short, spiky-haired boy with large plastic glasses comes up to her and smiles.

"Hey there lady," the boy says. "What are you doing at my school?" Elzora stares into her reflection in the boy's glasses—leathery yellow skin, mousy gray-brown hair carrying bits of leaves and pine needles, saggy eye sockets, droopy flaps of flesh on her neck. She shakes her head. "I., I..." but the boy is long gone.

She turns and spots the turtle. It's crouched under the swing set, hiding its head in its shell.

A little bell jingles on the glass door as Elzora and Myrtle Jr. walk into the ice cream shop. The place is bright and clean; the windows and counter sparkle. A large red *Coke*[™] sign hangs on the wall. Elzora sinks into a thick-cushioned stool and plops Myrtle Jr. down on the counter in front of her. Mister Chip strolls to them, leans his palms against the counter and scowls. He's an ancient, wrinkled man with cotton-white hair, papery skin and a spotless white apron. "Well Fella, what do you say?" she asks Myrtle

Jr. "I bet you're hungry enough to eat the south end of a northbound skunk." The turtle slinks a little further into its shell. "It's just shy," she explains. "Get him a scoop of fudge swirl in a little bowl, if you would. And I'll take a root beer float." Mister Chip looks at her strangely, but turns to fetch the order.

Elzora hears a noise outside and she looks that way. For a moment she sees her little Rosy—blue-checked dress, flushed cheeks, dark pigtails swishing against her shoulders—staring right at her from outside, her nose mashed against the shop's glass, tiny fingers waving up and down. Elzora turns away and looks up above her head, into the light hanging from the ceiling. She stares into the brightness until all the sharp images in her mind soften into meaningless gray shapes. Mister Chip sets down the bowl of ice cream and the frosty mug of creamy root beer. Elzora hunches her back, bending down to sip root beer through the straw. She strokes Myrtle Jr.'s head, which is moving tentatively toward the Styrofoam dish. "There's a good turtle," she says softly. "You got it Fella." She leans close to its head and croons in soft, reptilian croaks: *Dancin' in the dark 'til the tune ends... We 're dancin' in the dark and it soon ends... We 're waltzin' in the wonder of why we 're here... Time hurries by, we 're here, and we 're gone...*

Silent Blue

Steve watches himself on screen—eight years younger, the NCAA championship game, he the starting three guard, in wolfpack red, hot blood red, so young, a mop of brown hair mushroomed by a white headband. The game is alive. The crowd breathes its roar in and out, in and out. The players move together, stretch and constrict, flex and tremble like muscles. Steve is the heart controlling the flow. The game pulses out of him, bends back toward the steady beat of his dribble, the sudden gush of his drive. He watches himself slap the ball away, web it through his legs, around his waist, make it dance like a marionette. Watches himself razor down the backdoor cut, flick lay-ups like beads of water, launch passes like a bowstring, wrestle away rebounds like a graceful Goliath. Alone in his home office, he stares at the TV/VCR combo perched on his desk, socked feet tapping the carpet to the rhythm of the game, the dance he choreographed. It's late. Papers—newspapers, half-crumpled typed drafts with red-penned edits, notebook pages ripped and ink-battered—litter the floor. Threatening to topple off the desk and faded couch cushions are stacks of *Carolina Sports*, the monthly magazine for

which he writes features and editorials and has an editing hand in most everything published. He can feel his sleeping wife underneath him downstairs sunk into the bed like a hunk of ice, silent and rigid, facing the wall. Here's the part of the game where he breaks the spell, smacks stupidly the point guard's wrist, an angry, awkward move that earns him his fourth foul, a seat on the pine. Steve leaves the tape playing and wanders downstairs.

He pauses in the living room doorway, gazing over that night's damage. Two empty bottles of *Pinot Grigio* pungent on the glass coffee table, parents to three surrounding wine flutes, sticky with fingerprints; the glossy black piano bench incongruous in the middle of the floor, its clawed feet digging, agitating the amber and mauve Oriental; a pile of Cassie's clothes, her blue-gray light wool dress and a white gossamer blouse, hanging limp over the arm of the couch, her black bra fallen to the carpet; a crumpled hand-towel obscuring the mess on the frayed gold edge of the rug.

In the kitchen there is an unopened bag of coffee beans—Mandheling Sumatra. Steve unclasps the top and shoves his nose into the small black beans, inhaling the husky earthy smell. It is Cassie's favorite coffee; he bought it for her that day at the organic market. He thinks about brewing a pot, measuring the perfect pile of beans to grind and perk and pour into the wide-mouthed Blue Camellia mugs. Thinks about waking Cassie with whispers and warm wafts of coffee steam. They could talk. They need to talk through things. There are things he needs to say. He thinks about the time years ago when he woke her because he couldn't sleep. That day he attended a tennis match that stretched through five intense breathless sets and left him feeling as if he had slipped temporarily into a hyper-sensory dead space. Replaying the backspin of the ball off the grass court

over and over in his mind, he couldn't shut down. Finally he nudged Cassie awake and told her his problem. "Well what would you like to do?" she asked. "Make cookies." At three AM, he in his sweatpants and Cassie in her panties, they baked oatmeal raisin cookies and tongued the batter from the tines like giddy little children. Then they tongued each other, and, on the oak-slatted kitchen floor, Cassie's sleep-drunk body arched toward him and... He puts the coffee back on the shelf and instead mixes an iced glass of brandy and milk.

The game is humming to its ecstatic climax. The crowd buzzes. Steve, back in for the final moments, jerks and floats. In the office he feels the leather slap of the ball on his palm, feels the slick lubrication of his body, the easy spring, the sharp elbow shiver, the thwump, the oomph, the swish. Five seconds left. Arizona leads State 77-75. State throwing in at mid-court. Time for one shot. Point guard Tiny Sloane to pass. Tiny cradles the ball to his face like communion before popping up fiercely, screaming like a beast and slinging the ball through the adrenaline-thickened air. Steve crouches in his spot in the opposite corner of the court, waiting, gazelle-still, and then lurches forward, jukes, bounces off one screen, streaks through another, breaks clear and darts down the baseline, flings up his hands, catches the ball, squares his body, drags his toes behind the three-point line, rockets straight up, launches the ball from his outstretched fingers—

—He pitches forward and pauses the VCR just as the ball slashes through the recoiling fingers of the net. He moves so close to the screen that his breath fogs his grainy image. Young slick face flaming pink, blue eyes wide and blazing, mouth stretched mid-roar, shooting hand clenched in a pumping fist, sneakers still hanging in the air. His eyes find Cassie above him in the crowd. She leaps in unison with him, both arms raised, face

flushed, mouth and eyes shocked ovals. Steve wishes that he could plunge through time. Wishes he could again taste the ripe-melon sweetness of that night. He sees himself walking with Cassie down the hotel hallway, the electricity in their eyes reflecting the knowledge that their relationship had ascended to a new plane. They made out in the elevator then sneaked into the Jacuzzi after hours, trying to keep bottles from clunking together. They giggled, rubbed flesh underwater and drank champagne from each other's lips. And, later, on the sheeny sheets, their brains sloshing in *Veuve Clicquot*, their bare bodies twisted together, her pale face turned to fire as she pressed her soft body against his hard one... Steve turns away from the TV.

A few months ago—or has it been a year?—they had a rough week. She stayed in bed with the stomach flu, a sick yellow stagnancy in the air, the sweaty smell of broth and fever. He remained hunched over his keyboard three late nights in a row—red-eyed, stomach gritty from the pots of coffee, head ringing with pain—trying to meet deadlines, watching tapes of already-played football games. The young fiery sculpted muscle moved like water over the grass, the bodies slicing, pirouetting and hammering, mocking Steve's aching knees and exhausted soul. So when Saturday broke, everything had been written, and Cassie held down two pieces of peanut butter toast, he said "Fuck everything—let's take a day." They threw a change of clothes into the backseat of the Volvo, zippered down the highway, shouted along to Talking Heads, Patti Smith and the Pretenders on the radio and made it to the beach in three hours.

Autumn was knee-deep and the beach was deserted, but it wasn't that cold—nearly seventy with a breeze nudging off the water. They walked hand and hand along the

edge of the tide, just getting their flip-flops wet in the foamy ocean fingers. The setting sun was stretched over the city line, and the colors rolled into each other, red into orange into swirls of violet. They didn't speak but he felt close to her, the two of them gazing sideways into the immense gray water, holding hands, relaxed. The breeze rustling around his ankles, the warmth along Cassie's fingers and the deep red slats of sun penetrating the sky made him want sex. He wanted to tug Cassie down into the shallow lapping water, feel the loose wet sand give a little under their weight, yank her soaked panties just down to her knees and go down on her, find with his tongue, lips, and nose her heat, a glowing ember in the cold water. He wanted to make her scream with yearning like the seagulls knifing through the air above them. The beach was empty. They could have done it there on that spot. They could have fucked like animals. But he didn't want to ask, didn't want to make her weird, have her face freeze up, have her refuse. Didn't want to touch, have her withdraw—that horrible withdraw.

There was a time when it would not have even been a question. They would have been down there crashing together in the sopping sand. Like those days when Cassie would strut into the room where he was watching basketball, drop to all fours on the carpet in front of the television screen, hike up her dress and wiggle her split ass in his face. She would be soaking wet and burning and they would scald together like red hot metal fusing, panting and scraping into the carpet. But she had turned cold. Lately when they fucked she didn't even want it; she felt repulsed, invaded, infected. His thoughts drifted to the cute twenty-something that worked at the bagel place. Her chubby-cheeked smile and low-cut blouse. Her fat young breasts rising like dough, stretching and waving at him as he pointed out his bagel selections. Stooping down to the bottom bin to pluck

out the rosemary garlic and asiago parmesan bagels. Watching the bagels, she couldn't see him staring down her blouse. She bent so easily—like rubber, like a child. He could see the inner curves of her creamy breasts. They trembled with her breath. She snapped up like a rubber band, crinkled the plump paper bag and gave him another angel-innocent smile. Her cheeks were flushed just pink. She brushed a honey strand of hair behind her ear, smiling brightly, as if she couldn't see through his eyes to the desperate dirty thoughts churning inside him. Then she saw. He leapt over the counter and pressed her down on the glass. Yanked up her skirt and fucked her from behind. Slammed her against the counter over and over, shaking muffins and sticky buns onto the floor. He pulled her hair, plumbed her hole, smeared sticky bun over her naked back, stuffed her doughy breasts into his fists...

Cassie stopped walking, squeezed his hand and smiled at him strangely.

"Hey, where are you?"

"I'm sorry. I was lost in thought."

She smiled a cute smile, said something, laughed and buried her face into the crook of his arm. Instantly, he was dizzy with love for her. The wind had carried away whatever she had said. He wanted to ask her what it was, but he didn't want to break the moment. So he just smiled dizzily down at her and they continued walking, a new spring to their swinging arms.

When the beach cooled and darkened they drove downtown, walked around and ducked into a seafood restaurant. This time of year the place was slow and the waiter patient, and they took their time with fresh clams and butter sauce, thick lobster bisque, pan-seared sea scallops and an energetic bottle of *Blanc de Noir*. After dinner they

strolled down a side street and found a little bar with a neon saxophone hanging crookedly in the window. The snazzy jazz trio was playing Chet Baker. Cassie bought a vacation pack of *Dj'arum Blacks*TM Steve sipped an icy *Stella Artois*TM and they swayed together by the barstool, watching the college types shake it on the dance floor.

They stayed at a smallish beach house with an outdoor shower and John Grisham paperbacks piled on the work desk. With stiff suggestiveness in the salty air, Cassie suddenly fell quiet and remote. Steve felt his happy mood unravel. "Would you like to make love?" he asked, jogging his fingers up her spine. And of course she said, "Of course," but her eyes and voice were hollow.

They undressed. She shivered under his caress. He closed his eyes and covered her mouth with his. Her lips were slugs. He knifed into her, made a rhythm, opened his eyes. Her eyes were closed. Fingernails stabbed the sheet. Icy moonlight spilled through the curtain-parted windows over her naked body. Her breasts rolled to either side as he flopped on top of her, nipples staring down and away. The moonlight tinted her skin a strange blue. He thought: *She's a corpse, I'm fucking a corpse.* He heard the tide crashing outside and imagined the waves breaking against his back. Cold water drenching his body, matting his hair, running down his spine and dripping into his anus. He hammered and hammered to the roar of the ocean in his ears. She gritted. He hated her. Hated her livid, rigid body. Wanted to destroy her. Wrap his fingers around her throat and strangle the blue cringe out of tier-dead fucking face. He thought of the dark beach and the cold wet sand and the endless hissing black water. Going limp, he cursed himself. He rolled off and stared. Her eyes shook open and her face slackened into nothing. Her eyes—just her eyes—rolled down to his crotch and her silent lips tightened like pulled thread.

In the shower the bagel girl—wearing nothing but transparent freezer bags wrapped tight around her pink ass, pink breasts and hard pink nipples—sucked him off in the warm spray, and he yanked himself until he came into her pink face. He toweled, dressed, went inside—finding Cassie curled asleep with the sheet tight around her—and watched ESPN on mute until his rage and loathing melted into exhaustion.

In the morning they spoke little over coffee, drove to a bright little diner where they sipped orange pekoe tea, shared pecan pancakes with whipped cream and powdered sugar and agreed that it had been a wonderful trip. What a great idea! How refreshing! How fun! Then they drove home.

First to fifteen by ones. Win by two. Make it take it. *Check.* Steve plays pickup basketball with an office intern named Marc twice a week on a concrete court squeezed between two buildings. Marc came to the office straight from Greensboro College where he averaged around fifteen points a game as a three-year starter. Steve sees his younger self in certain moves Marc makes on the court. The deft shoulder-shake. The pure popup. The boy is quicker, stronger, more explosive. But he doesn't have Steve's shot. Hell no.

Distracted, he fell behind seven to one. He was rolling a question around his mouth like a wad of meat. He resented having to ask. Wished that things would just happen when he wanted them to. It seemed like it used to work like that. People used to know what he wanted. They used to care.

Marc twisted through the air, bare chest rippling with strength, as he hovered above the rim. Steve imagined Hannah licking the sweat around his gleaming navel. She

was waiting for him back at his computer, sleeping behind the darkened screen. Her body like a woman, face like a child. She danced as if lying in a river current, the rushing water snatching away strips of lacy clothes until her olive-tan breasts bobbed free. Her shaven pelvis rocked forward, bending for the sun. Pink lips delicately parting, watering. She masturbated like an artist, swirling fingers in her paint then dabbing and stroking the canvas of her body—soft here, deep there—her moaning face Caravaggian in expression. He loved most watching her suck dick. The teasing stroke coaxing the cock to life, asking for a dance. Fingers lightly pinching the base. Breath just brushing the head. Idling around the key. The lazy behind-the-back dribble. The soft stutter-step. Not going anywhere. Just getting your attention. Her game reminded him of the boys who taught him to play ball when he was eight years old. Ten and twelve year-old black boys who owned the dirt playground. They threaded the worn rubber ball through their legs like a silk scarf, moved like dancers, galloped like horses, rippled like water, leapt as if carried by the air, then stood still and made moves with their eyes. The young bodies were musical in the dusty twilight. The defender's flat palm quivering over the handler's hip. Body crouched, on toes, eyes salivating, shifting like a shadow, scheming—aggressive here, slack there—gluing tight, loosening back—arms up, arms wide—pushing a little, giving a little, eyes never leaving the ball. Hannah guided the dick inside, quickly pulled away, caressed the balls gently. Barely touching—a knuckle and thumb tip. Then a squeeze and a plunge—so deep inside!—and a relax and a freeze. A gentle kiss. Tonguing the balls. Then: pumping, pumping, slurping, sucking, a little tongue, a little teeth and—stop! The coy glimmer of her eyes. Complete control. A good sport—she

dived back in and sucked clumsily, took the shot with a smile. On her face, her tits, down her throat. Licked her lips.

Marc head-faked and slid easily by him for game point. "What's the matter old man—rusty bones?" "One more game." Steve dug in, checked the ball and swatted it away as Marc tried another cheap drive. Turned, half-drove, doubled back and nailed a long jumper. Without dribbling, he popped up from the top of the key. The ball plopped through the net like a stone through a wet paper bag. He backed Marc slowly into the paint, chewing on his lip. He should have been in the NBA. He had the skills, the shot, the intelligence, the passion, the size. Scouts predicted he would be drafted mid-first round, easy. Fresh off the championship run, the all-star performance, he was a white-hot prospect, his name on the lips of sportscasters across the country. Then came the tryouts, the pickup games, the practices and the charity game. ACC all-stars versus SEC all-stars. Meaningless. A throw-away for the kids. Windmill dunks and post-game autographs. In the first quarter he tripped over a teammate's sneaker and crumpled to the court, ripped his anterior cruciate ligament and shattered in one odious instant all the glory promised him. Now all he could do was play teacher to this boy-faced intern. He sprang up and rattled in a hook shot, wincing at the shock of pain in his knee.

He hated having to ask. After asking Cassie to finger herself for him, he raged with humiliation under her furrowed brow, her disdainful "Sure, okay, I guess." She had gracelessly yanked her pink blouse over her head, unrolled her fish belly body and peeled off her jeans like a dead strip of sunburned skin. Laughing like a jerk, she looked away. Prodded herself under a tangle of pubic hair, her face intent and tight, as if she were taking a test. Her knees flapped as she clawed at herself, pretending to get off. He felt like

screaming. Could barely come, slapping against her flaccid body. He had to conjure Hannah, picture her rolling her tongue into a U and swabbing the underside of a stiff pink cock, before he could wheeze into his wife and go empty.

His lead had evaporated. They were knotted up at eleven. Marc danced along the perimeter, eyes darting, dribbling the ball inches from the concrete. He slashed inside but Steve read it, intercepted his jump, palmed the ball out of his hands, chased it down and laid it in. Breathing deep, he slowly melted Marc down into the paint. He whirled, fell away and shot. The ball kissed the board and spun in. Thirteen-eleven. He missed his next shot badly. Marc soared to the hoop, sensed Steve's fatigue and drove hard again to tie. Steve focused. He defended like saran wrap, his hand hovering over Marc's hip, just like he learned on the playground. The two pairs of feet danced back and forth. Staring into Marc's navel, Steve felt again that he was defending himself. He had slipped back in time and was trying to contain his young, throbbing, starving-wolf body. Marc thundered by him. Steve shouted, spun and shot after him—too late! He leapt and hacked at the ball, hitting Marc's wrist. The ball squirted away. He pounced on it, turned and whipped it into the basket. Trotting back to the top of the key, he felt dirty and urgent. Marc's eyes seared into his. *Foul*. He glared back. *All ball*. He knew Marc wouldn't call it. He hated himself. Game point. Need need need this. He dribbled the ball up top. Marc played back, giving him a three-foot cushion. "You can have that shot, old man. But you come in here, and I'm going to fuck you up." Steve took the shot. His knee howled. He knew he had won as soon as the ball left his fingertips.

They both agreed to everything. Cassie even let him tape it. Now Steve ejects the basketball game from the VCR and slides in the fresh unlabeled tape. Cassie materializes on screen, standing in the center of the rug, cupping a wine flute to her chin like a blood-red buttercup. She drains the glass and hands it toward the camera. The frame shakes for a moment then re-focuses. She shimmies out of her blouse, pulls her dress over her head and is left in panties and bra. Briefly she leaves the screen to drape the clothes over the arm of the couch. Now Marc enters the scene, pale and gangly, in only his boxers. Running his fingers through his shaggy brown hair, he drags the piano bench behind him and leaves it angled to the camera. Cassie faces the camera and thumbs her bra straps. "Do you want me to?" Her voice on the tape is high and watery. The frame nods. She unhooks her bra, presses the cups to her chest for a moment, and tosses it away. Her breasts swing free. She smiles thinly at the camera and kneels in front of Marc who perches splay-kneed on the piano bench, erection stabbing through his fly.

Something filthy rages behind Steve's eyes. Feeling dizzy, he stumbles to the window and presses his hot forehead against the cool glass. He craves the night air outside, wants to be outside running. But he feels too weak to even raise the glass and let some air into the stuffy room. He listens to the wet-mud sound coming from the TV, watches in the window's opaque reflection his wife guiding the cock in and out, in and out of her wet rounded mouth. Slut! Slut! Slut! A rod-hard erection strains against his jeans; a rusty headache creaks through his brain. He thinks of the soft grass of the lawn below, wishes he could rub his face in it, jack off into the dirt, dig into the ground and sleep in the cool soil with worms and moles. Turns to the TV. Marc reaches down and squeezes Cassie's shoulder. Now he cups her breast.

After Marc had thrown on his jeans and golf shirt and scooted away, Steve retreated to the shower and stared into the steaming high-pressure spray. He came down to Cassie with an embrace. "I'm sorry—I shouldn't have," he said. "We'll figure it out," she said. Her arms were wet noodles around his neck. He felt the dam break, the anger flood into his chest, threatening to burst his temples. He yanked on his tennis shoes and stormed out of the house. Ran. Ran circles around the city. Ran his thoughts into froth. Ran until his blood ached, muscles throbbed, knee shimmered with pain. When he came back in, he found Cassie already asleep, curled silently against the wall, a knot of sheet in her fist.

He rewinds the tape, watches again. She does suck dick with a certain grace, doesn't she? What is it? Maturity? She's hearty. She treats the dick like beef stew, spooning deep, savoring the flavor. Hannah is nothing but a girly tease; Cassie is a nurturer, giving nourishment, shelter. Steve whimpers. Back at the window, he sucks through the glass at the air outside, rubs circles with his tongue. What can he do? Coffee! They should talk! He will wake her up and they can talk! They need to talk! Something needs to be said. Something important. Something something.

Marc utters a fluttery sigh, and Cassie tilts her head back with a sisterly smile. Pearly yellow cum forms a six-inch spiderweb between her lips and his quivering dick. Turning to the camera with wild, drunken eyes, she makes a show of swallowing. "Who's next?" she purrs. Her eyes follow the camera lens as it drops to Steve's lap. To his flabby, despondent penis.

He rewinds the tape, plays it again. "Did you like it?" he asks the empty room. He picks up from the floor a loose sheet of paper and crumples it into a ball. Dizzily he

begins to juke around the office. Gives the computer chair a head fake, spins around imaginary defenders, dances behind invisible picks. Marc moans. Steve is on the court with him, leaning a shoulder into his sweaty chest. Pivoting, snapping, shooting. He launches the wadded paper at his empty brandy glass. Miss. Cassie makes small wet humming noises. Balling another sheet of paper, he closes his eyes and bounces on his toes. It's the championship game. Rivulets of sweat streaming between his eyes, the din of the crowd in his ears, heartbeat pounding in his face, he stands like a statue at the free-throw line. He dribbles ritually: thud, slap, thud slap. Springs up like a fountain, heaves the ball. Miss. Another wad of paper. He's in high school, running lay-up lanes. The perfect free slice of court, the jump, the intake of breath, the sweet kiss off the glass, the loving swish of nylon. He leaps—miss. Cassie shifts on the floor, presses a flat palm against Marc's chest. Steve is on the dirt court, guarding the bigger, stronger kid. Stares into his naked cocoa stomach. Have to do this. Got to stop him. This is everything. He held his own, man. He could shoot. By God, for a scrawny white boy, he could fucking shoot. Eyes closed, a brush-fire in his head, he rolls around the office, fake-dribbles, bears into trash-talking defenders, dances, circles his spot, that spot, the corner of the court. That spot, baby, he owns that spot. Hip shake, slide, he's there baby! He's up. It's beautiful! The shot rains into the glass—so nice! Marc comes again. Cassie is a zombie. When he was young he practiced that shot a thousand times a day. Couldn't miss. So natural, like breathing. Could hit it with his eyes closed—try him. The injury busted his body's equilibrium. The motion was no longer pure; it had a kink, a twinge, a bruise. Maybe it busted his soul. He could never get his shot back. Still—he hits it sometimes.

On a good day, he hits it, and he knows he's going to hit it. And it feels good, baby, it feels fucking good.

He rewinds the tape.

Sucking Marc's dick, Cassie thinks of the first dick she didn't want to suck but sucked. Rusty Bulger. She was fourteen. Big plastic hoop earrings, Jordache™ jeans, eye make-up and teased-up hair. Sitting in the front seat of his brother Bobby's olive Malibu™, listening to Bob Seger. No—Springsteen. "Baby I was Born to Run." Rusty—sixteen, a bush of orange facial hair—showing her how to smoke. Camel's™. They puffed in unison and she thought of her mom, Brenda. Wondered if her mom would smell the smoke in her hair and freak out. She stared into Brenda's leathery face in the exhaled net of yellow-gray smoke, and suddenly Rusty caressed her shoulder and nodded down to his lap where he had unzipped his jeans. His dick punching out of his fly, thick and throbbing. He asked, "Do you know what to do?" She didn't know really, but she said yes. No big deal. Easier than having to deal with his angry, hurt face. She threw her half-smoked cigarette out the cracked window and leaned into his lap. How his veins were popping out! She thought she could see the blood ripping through them. Thought his dick looked like a small animal in pain, and she felt bad for him even. Then—so salty! She hadn't thought it would feel rubbery in her mouth. Hadn't figured on the small gasps coming from Rusty's throat. Had never heard Rusty or anybody making noises like that. She wondered again if he was in pain, if she was hurting him, and she raised up. But he flattened his palm on her head and shoved her back down. She hated Rusty Bulger, hated Seger and Springsteen, hated Camels™ and she wouldn't be caught dead in Bobby

Bulger's Malibu™ ever again! She was uncomfortable, the metal seatbelt clasp digging into her hip, but she kept sucking. Imagined Brenda outside the car, face smashed against the driver-side window, angry snorts fogging the glass. Suddenly she thought it was hilarious. All of it—the salty dick poking the side of her mouth, the animal noises wheezing from Rusty's throat, Brenda stewing at home, staring holes into the kitchen clock. She was playing a joke on her mom, playing a joke on Rusty. She would have laughed if she hadn't had a dick in her mouth. Then—the sudden slap of cum. Tasting it in her sinuses. She leaned forward, opened the driver's door, and spat where Brenda's feet would have been.

Marc: throaty gasps just like Rusty Bulger. She tries to imagine Rusty as a grown man but can only see him in the front seat of the Malibu™. After coming he closed his eyes and clasped his hands behind his head and smiled smiled smiled. She thinks of Brenda living now in Wichita. Probably in bed by now. No—probably watching the local news, her slender fingers wrapped around a mug of Earl Grey, making little clucks at the TV screen. If only she knew! Laughter gathers in her chest, but she swallows it. She has a dick in her mouth! She's drunk. She has so much power right now. What if she clamped her teeth down, just a little? Marc moans. How did she get here, to this moment? What is Steve thinking? Does he really want this? Is she doing the right thing? The marriage has been nothing, nothing. Just days with an illusion of purpose. She doesn't really know that person sitting over there. Her husband—how silly! Nobody really knows anybody, do they? No. It's impossible. Nobody knows anybody, nobody knows themselves, none of it fucking matters, and sucking a dick is just sucking a dick. Her face is hot. Her knees hurt.

She needs to pee. Her throat stings with wine. Marc's dick is hard as a root. He seems to be having a good time.

Suddenly in her head: her old dog Jib galloping toward her. In the park as a child, with Brenda and her sister Jenny. Fluffy golden retriever Jib in his red bandana and sloppy tongue hanging like a strip of ham out the side of his mouth. Throwing an old, peeled tennis ball. Jib was good at fetching, not at dropping. He could not bear to loosen his jaw and lose the ball. They gave up fetch, as always, and just ran around the sun-drenched grass. Running into Jib, trying to tackle Jib. Jib dancing, loving it. She was tired and had grass stains on her knees. Told Jenny she was going to get some water. Trotted out of their sight to the old water fountain behind the swimming pool changing room. What happened there? The gnarly gray oaks bounced cool shadows off the brick. Leaning into the stream of water... oh God! The memory hits her: fingers gripping tightly around her neck. Cold greasy fingers tight around her neck. She froze, fountain water still gushing over her lips, but stopped swallowing. The water ran down her chin and dropped onto her throat. The man, still gripping her neck, leaned forward so his face was right next to hers and smiled an awful smile. Breath smelling like old meat. Teeth sharp, yellow, chalky. Didn't say anything, just smiled and gripped her neck and breathed his stale meat breath into her face. Then he let go and was gone. She wiped the water off her face with the back of her hand, walked back to the field, kept playing with Jenny and Jib, and didn't say a word. Marc: thrusting a little into her lips, breathing choppy. She shivers, feeling the greasy fingers cold on her neck. She never told anybody did she? Not even Steve. Maybe she should tell him about the park. Maybe if she does he will know her a little better. No—he will just feel hurt. He'll ask, "Why are you bringing this up now?"

Are you trying to make me feel bad?" Now: Marc melts in her mouth like hot wax. She tastes cum in her sinuses. All cum tastes the same. Now what? Now what?

Later: So tired, so rucking tired, inexpressibly tired. Aching with tired. Marc must be gone; didn't even notice him leaving. Steve is outside running. He's angry. Why? Poor thing, he's so confused. He looks like a child, with his hurt and anger. He needs someone to whisper *Shhhh* in his ear. Will he come back tonight? Words are useless. Why can't there be a purer form of communication? Words never work, never say what they mean, only fuck things up and hurt people's feelings. He needs his feelings un hurt. They always hurt. She doesn't have the words to heal. Where is he? Running running running. She should wait for him—at least that—but she's so so tired. Too much wine. She needs to lie down. Just for a few.

She wakes up and lies still in the dark. She feels a strange calm. Something has been clarified tonight, something achieved. Right? Something. Steve's pillow smells like Steve. He's upstairs tapping his foot. Small rhythmic thuds on the ceiling. He must be watching his game. How does it make him feel—his game? When was it that they went to the beach? A year ago? Two? They were happy then—right? Strolling on the beach, the sunset was something else. Balls of deep color splashed onto the sky and spreading outward, like a watercolor brush dipped into a glass of clean water. Colors running together in a puddle over the city. And later they went to that jazz bar with a bunch of loud, drunk students. She was tired and couldn't breathe through all the sweat and smoke in the air. But there was one moment, one of those moments where she fell infinitely into

Steve. They stepped into the street to buy a pack of cigarettes from the convenience store next door. Paused for a moment outside the door, listening to the strains of a trumpet solo. They held hands. Steve clinched his bottle of Heineken™ at the neck between two fingers and casually propped it against his hip. She loved the way he held the bottle, and the way he was smiling at her, and the way he ignored the college sluts inside, their tits and asses screaming out of clingy black dresses. She leaned into his chest, buried her face there. He smelled like Steve. The pillow smells like Steve. She wants to drown in that smell. She needs to see him! They need to talk! Maybe if she can just tell him about the man at the park. Tell him about the cold fingers. Make him understand. Maybe then the right words will come, like the first tentative drops plopping against the scorched earth, before the drenching storm. The storm will bowl them over, soak them clean. Maybe, maybe.

Her right hand: on the office doorknob; left hand: trying to balance two mugs of Sumatra without sloshing. When she pulls open the door the mugs fall, clunk against the carpet. What's wrong with Steve? On the couch, looking up. No: eyes closed. Face twisted. Breathing strange. Hurt? What has he done? Face red. Wheezing. Sweat on the rim of his eye socket. Or tears? Coffee pooling around her ankles. Hot, cooling, milky. Paper strewn around the office. Wads. Stained with coffee. Steve's eyes popping open. Gasping. Head trembling. Looking down. His pants—crumpled around his ankles. The TV: her. No! Mouth red and round. Small humming sounds. Small throaty gasps. Coffee sticky on her toes. Cold. Cold. Cold greasy fingers wrapping around her neck, tightening tightening. Something slithering in her stomach. Strange dick; strange face. Field bathed

in sunlight. Jib—apple-red bandana—tennis ball packed in the side of his mouth. Fingers tightening. Cold. All life has been freezing into this cold sick moment. Slowly searching circling narrowing seeking tightening tightening tightening into this final cold sick moment. To petrify and stick forever like a fly trapped in a waxy glob of syrup. Frozen. Watching herself on screen.