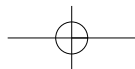
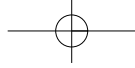
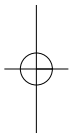
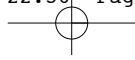


The Still Point





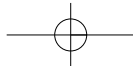


The Still Point

AMY SACKVILLE



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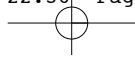
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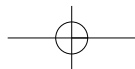
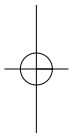
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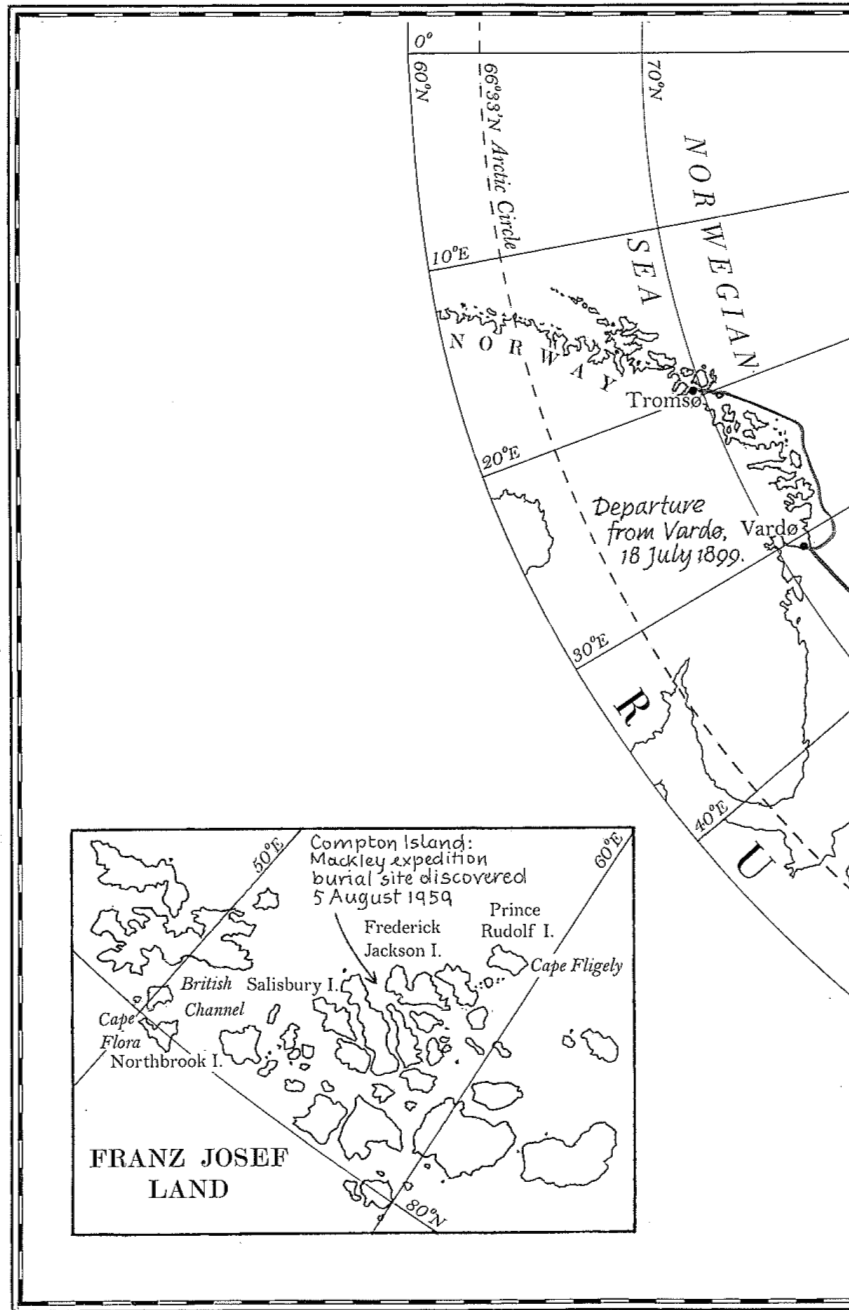
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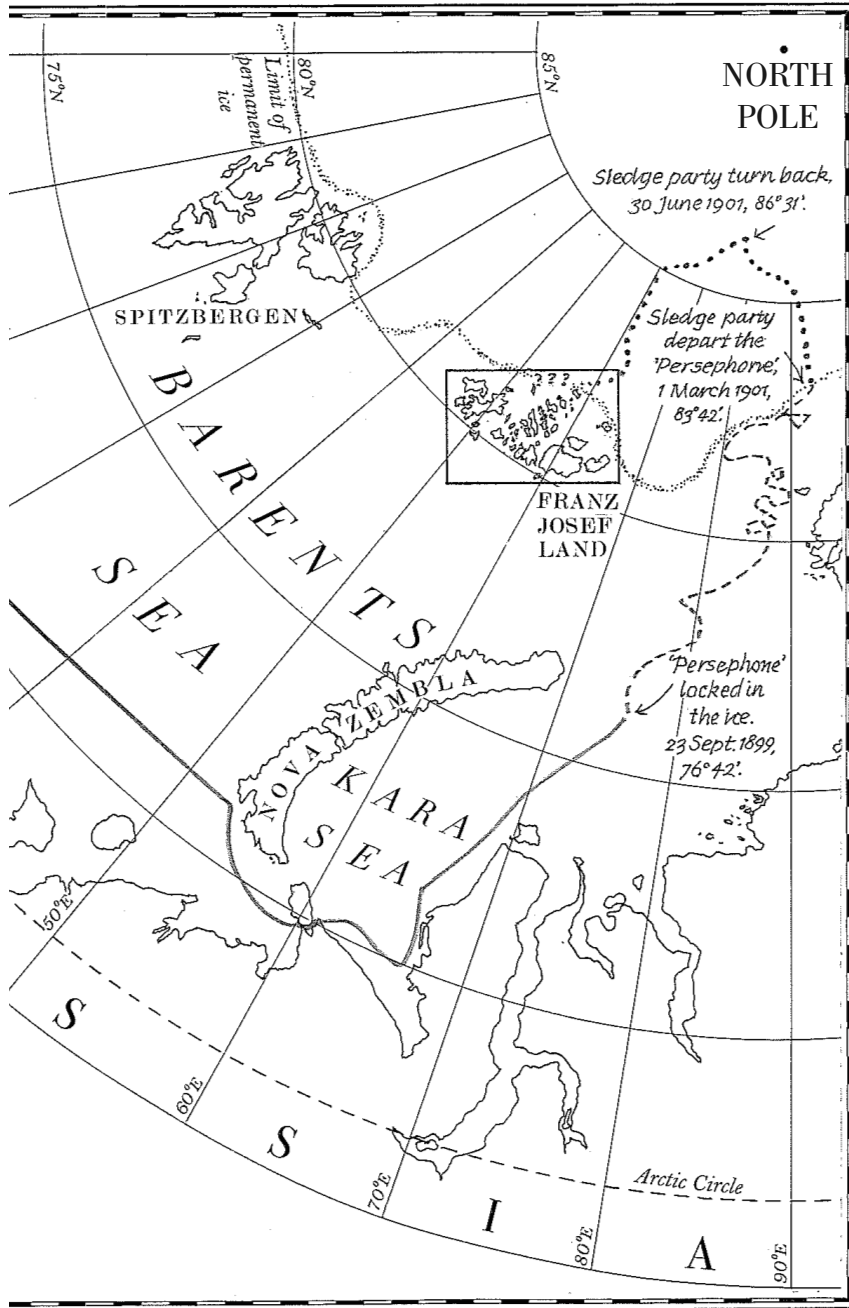


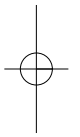
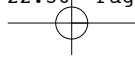


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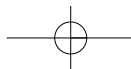
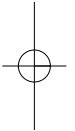
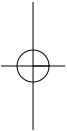


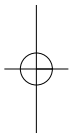
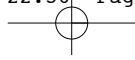


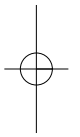
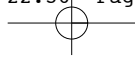


At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered.

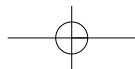
T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'

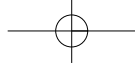
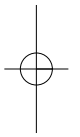
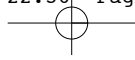






PART I







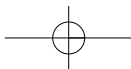
Wait:

...

There. A little ellipsis, the smallest pause, opening for him to slide into. Then withdrawal and a full stop.

Then they are unsticking from each other and, unstuck, are two separate bodies again in a too-hot room together. The bed creaks as he sits heavily on the side and gets up to wrench at the window, swollen in an old frame, letting in night noises without relieving the heat. A car passes unseen and she imagines the face within, pale in the dashboard glow, driving late and alone through the quiet town. Turning onto her back (creak), she lets a hand rest on the bone between her breasts; her skin is slick, still sticky, clamming to the sheet. Turning again to rest her head upon him, feeling the new but not fresh air across her thighs, this is the memory that her mind spirals into as she slips under:

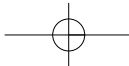
When I was a girl, we cut holes in the world. My sister took a pair of scissors and cut two lines in the air in parallel, horizontal, and then cut down between them to make invisible curtains which she took carefully between finger and thumb and, drawing them back, invited me to put my hand through the gap. The air beyond





was a different air, we'd have sworn it. Cleaner, I called it. Cool, unused. I'd wriggle my fingers, circle my wrist and then pull it out again. In time, my sister forgot the game but I tried that little magic again, alone, again and again, even after I was caught and scolded for playing with scissors. But I never cut a hole that was large enough to step through, for fear of being stranded in that other air.

I think now that perhaps I slipped through one of those holes without noticing, after all.





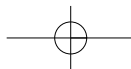
Dawn

Some hours pass without event. They shift a little. The nascent day will soon begin; have patience. We are watching them in the time most often lost to us, well into the night, but before the threat of dawn – that space in time when, if we wake, we are unsure if there are hours of sleep ahead or if we will be shaken seconds later by whatever it is that usually signals the day: music or the shrill beep of an alarm; a persistent bird at the window; a lover; dread.

You can draw a little nearer, if you're very quiet. Put your face close to his, close enough to feel the gentle rumble and stink of his breath; feel the damp warmth of hers on your own cheek. They fall asleep, as many couples do, first twined and then detached; as we rejoin them they have long since undergone this last conscious act, this delicate separation on the very brink of dreaming.

His posture is awkward, his arm at a sharp angle with his fist by his ear, so that there is a risk he will elbow her in the face as he has done sometimes in the past. His right knee, bent out to the side, is almost, almost touching her thigh. At this one point, between knee and thigh, this little heated space that's moist with their sweat, you couldn't fit your finger between them. They both sleep above the covers, he fully, she in part. There is, now the night has deepened, the softest of breezes from the open window which makes their sleep delicious, although they sense this only when they drift close to waking.

Look: he is skimming the surface now. His arm stretches a little, his elbow

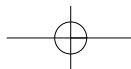




dangerously close to her cheekbone, but then he pulls it around as he turns away from her, drawing it over and down so it is snug against his belly. His breathing quiets, and with a long dreaming sigh, she curls a little closer in upon herself. Settled, they do not stir.

In a few hours they will rise and pass through this door to the adjoining bathroom, to rinse themselves of the night's residue. It is even hotter here, airless; there is no window and it is very dark without the benefit of street-light, which seeps through their bedroom blind. They are not the kind of couple to share their ablutions, one in the shower while the other brushes teeth, and so forth. They are both quite private people, and whilst they have struggled to open their hearts as wide as they can to each other, the secrets of their bodies have remained their own. She would hate for him to watch her shaving her underarms, for example, or picking at her toenails as she relieves herself, pulling them short where necessary. He, on the other hand, might well be embarrassed if she were to see him cleaning the dirt from between his toes in the same posture. But they will in all likelihood never know of these similar habits. He will never watch her and tut – his own nails are carefully kept, on toes and fingers alike – but she in turn will never see him and smile as he scrubs with the nailbrush, seven times on each hand. We might observe as they perform these rites, if we stood here before the sink and waited a little longer; but it is hot and stuffy, smells a little of damp, and besides there is something unnerving, is there not, about a mirror in darkness. And perhaps we would rather not strip them entirely of mystique, not yet. Let us return instead to their bedside.

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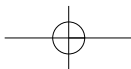


She too has turned, in our absence, emerging fully from the covers so that now they form the uneven outline of an urn: wide at the opening, their heads far apart, and narrowing to their bottoms, less than a foot between them; their bent knees make the swell of the bowl, tapering again to their feet. The zigzag of his body is sharper than hers, so that although he is much taller, if they were each to move their feet directly backwards their soles would touch. It is almost tempting to tickle them, both pairs so neatly stacked; she would pull hers away violently from our mischievous fingers, whereas he would barely stir, being more ticklish in the region of the torso.

Closer inspection of their eyelids will reveal that she is dreaming. Behind the skin you will just discern, in the violet dimness, the raised circles of her pupils scud and jitter as the eyes roll in their sockets. You would like to know the hidden colour of the irises. Very well, then: hers are brown, his are also brown, but darker. And if it were possible to ask what she is dreaming:

North, north, blue and white; silent, still. Beyond the world in a clean air. Unused, I am bare skin, against the snow. Laid out on bearskins, waiting. I am waiting. It is night now as it has been for a long time, a blue and white night. Always night here, or always day, and the long twilight between; time, limbs, stretching into the palest ache. There is no dirty city stain in the sky, which is depthless and goes on possibly for ever. Heavens above. It is not heaven, it is just air, deep, blue, indigo air, smattered silver. There is sometimes jade, rose and gold across it. Stretch the word out: cor-us-cating. The beat of my heart, high and skating. I wait. All my skin, immersed in air. Here there is no one to see and I am heedless.

She rolls just a little in her sleep. Her husband, who is now awake, thinks: I

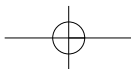




never knew a woman to fall asleep so easily, and to sleep so deep. Perhaps it is time to reveal his name: Simon.

Simon, too, has been far north in his sleep, and is still emerging from the frozen sea that he dreamed of, a sea churning with chunks of sea-ice. His north, too, is dark and silent, but it is jagged, bitter, hard. In Simon's dream he was sailing a gully that narrowed until his ship was gripped on both sides. It groaned; he woke, chilled, to air so hot that moving feels like swimming. And now he lies, stuck to the bed by his back in the brown night, beside his murmuring wife. He is listening to his wife's murmur, and thinking: Julia is talking in her sleep again. Unknown words. Julia, he knows, is the sort of person who dreams, and remembers her dreams, and sets store by them. Simon is one of those who profess not to dream, but in the fuddle of this disturbed night he will admit it, or lacks the will to deny it. How many hours have passed since he lay down beside and made love to his wife and listened as she slipped into sleep, and slept perhaps himself for a time; how many hours? Three and a half, approximately. Just over three more before he must rise. The red digits of the alarm clock state 03:42. The hands of his watch, laid out neatly beside it, also show forty-two minutes past the hour. It is dark and still and the too-few hours until dawn yawn before him.

There were corpses in the sea, afloat among the ice. The carcasses of whales which, when flensed – stripped of blubber and skin – are called *crangs*. It is a very loud word for something so vast and silent, for something so irrefutably dead. And rank, he's heard, or read. The hardiest of seamen quailed at the stench, their hot vomit hissing as it hit the water. In the dream the smell was formaldehyde, for he has never smelled flesh decaying.





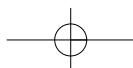
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In a waking doze, letting his hand rest on exposed skin, he thinks, Julia is very soft beside me. In her own Arctic, she is still dreaming, this:

Ice deep blue, smooth like skin, soft, like skin, rounding and dipping. I can see by the moon to the edge of land and beyond it, and no one comes. I stretch my arms to the edge and no one comes. No sunlight for months now but the moon is bright enough, the snow pale below it. No edges to the world or myself. No distance that I'd care to measure. All distance can be crossed. It is all one, everything is equidistant, equally far from me, as he is far from me. I am stranded here in this air, this ice, this indigo. But I do not weep. I am peaceful. My tears would freeze. Gold and rose across the sky. He does not come.

While Julia lies outstretched across the still point of the turning world, sleepless Simon, by what may be a rare coincidence, is thinking of that same pole that we dance around. Men of action have suffered to attain it. Julia's Great-great-uncle Edward, struggling through the snow towards it. It is something sacrosanct, a constant to believe in. Simon imagines himself standing upon it, exalted as Edward might have been. Proud, at peace, knowing he has reached the pinnacle and the centre, thrusting the flag in. Thrusting a flag into ice? Expecting it to stay there?

The truth, he knows, is endurance and farce. Once within range, the crazed compass uselessly struggling for a different north (a point several hundred confusing kilometres south by now), the exhausted and intrepid explorer must pace the area around and over so that, upon returning, he might say, 'I must have crossed it.' There is nothing but one's own doggedness to





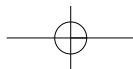
believe in – nothing but dogs to eat, either, or so it was in the days when Julia's beloved ancestor trod those hopeless paths. There is no knowing which foot-step is the true one, the moment when the whole earth turns below. You cannot pause upon it. You move, oblivious, over the still point.

The poets can't be blamed for this. The world is built around it. The grid is traced from this fixed point. So-called; a necessary, a useful fiction, but – and this, since he is unwilling to turn his thoughts inwards, is what is keeping Simon awake – it is not fixed, it isn't still at all. This is what incenses him: the still point wobbles. Yes, wobbles, an absurd and undignified word for the truth. The Earth is not constant on her axis. There is no great rod in space, holding her steady through the middle. She rolls, just a little, as the years roll on.

These thoughts continue to arch and slide in and out of coherence until, exhausted by his anger at the earth's inconstancy, Simon at last sleeps. According to the digital clock it is 04:29, and you can be assured that the time displayed at this particular bedside, on Simon's side of the bed, is accurate. The hands of his wristwatch concur.

A little later, in the creeping brightness, the heat of tomorrow already hovering in the clear air, Julia wakes. Abruptly, she flings off the covers (which at some point in the intervening hours she has pulled over herself) and swings out of bed. Toes deep in thick white fur, a little unwelcome luxury for her hot feet. Stepping with automatic care over the rug's massive head, her soles touch wood and she pads out of the room.

That is the word she thinks of as she walks, of the hard cushioned pads of her feet. She pads upstairs to the second floor, keeping close to the wall to avoid squeaks, makes her way along the corridor and turns up another crooked



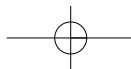


flight without once missing her footing, knowing her way through the dark at the centre of the house. She carefully pushes open the narrow door at the top.

This long attic room, which runs the length of the front, is stacked literally to the rafters with books, papers, letters, chests, boots and sealskins, skis and ski poles, instruments of navigation – all the saved scraps of Edward’s legacy. In the corners, dust has been dredging for decades. Near the door, a heap of black canvas suitcases sits incongruous, only just beginning to fluff. Odd items of furniture, last pieces of once-grand suites, fade and tatter here; a chaise longue lolls invitingly, despite the wear at its edges. Someone has spent months procrastinating upon it: close by, a drift of magazines litters the floor – winter-warming casserole recipes, spring fashions, this year’s best beach reads – three seasons’ worth of newspaper supplements. A small knee-hole desk has been set against a wall, a pile of black leather notebooks, seemingly little used, arranged neatly upon its green leather top, which is otherwise cluttered with framed photographs, pots, pens, paperweights and other oddments.

There is also, you will no doubt have noticed, a polar bear towering over you, her head grazing the beams. She roars protective over the cub crouched beside her. There is, in fact, a whole menagerie, all trophies from a hundred years ago, all, of course, long since stuffed. Simon would frown – the preferred term is ‘mounted’. Technically they belong to Julia, but it is he who tends the animals. He has become adept in the care of fur, feathers and hide, although his own mounts are smaller, stickily furred and dusted, and kept elsewhere, carefully pinned wide in drawers.

Why has she come here at this dark lilac hour, Julia alone with the animals, the inherited relics and dead things from a century before? Certainly it is not

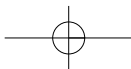




her habit to rise so early, but she is not much a creature of habit. She woke and crept here under half-conscious compulsion; perhaps she is seeking the stillness of her sleep, seeking Arctic blue in a summer dawn. The gazelle at the window watches her doe-eyed and hopeful – she hasn't gone so far as to imagine what it hopes for. She strokes its pelt and guiltily brushes the fine hairs from her palm. Maria is her private name for it, which she does not share with Simon for fear of being sneered at (and her fear might be well founded, but she does not see how lovingly her husband writes their Latin names on labels).

Like the bedroom, the attic faces the almost-rising sun, and a curious brightness fills the air, gilding Julia's naked skin and the glass eyes that gaze upon it. Opening a gabled window, she leans out into the approach of dawn. The heaviness of the day before has been refreshed by a moist coolness, a green-hazed promise of brilliance which will burn off in the morning sun. She closes her eyes and relishes it, elixir on her eyelids: Julia enchanted. If we were to transfer ourselves to the window opposite, so that we could look upon her and into the room beyond – but wait. We have been gazumped, for here, hidden, someone is watching. A woman in a towelling dressing gown, risen for the day, is curling her hair lock by patient lock, and all the while she is watching. From here, we cannot see the polar bear and her doleful cub, the albatross which soars on his wires above, the ill-stuffed silver leopard with his too-long face. The woman watching does not look beyond Julia anyway, she is too much absorbed in admiring bitterly the shining hair, loose about fine-boned shoulders; her breasts, squashed by her clasped arms, for warmth and comfort, not modesty. Bitterly? Too late – with a cloud of hairspray and a puff of perfume, the watcher is gone.

Julia remains, oblivious, apparently entranced, until her closed eyes flood

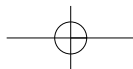




apricot and she opens them to see the sun breach the rooftops opposite; she inhales, deeply, the grapefruit freshness of the sky before turning and padding out of the room. Only the anxious little white bear glances after her – a glance, if it can be so called, which is for ever fixed in glazed arrest upon the door.

She lies down as lightly as possible on top of the covers so as not to disturb Simon, but he is nonetheless disturbed. She falls immediately asleep and is woken twenty minutes later by the radio alarm, which is very loud and which he does not reach to turn off. Simon, whose night has churned past too quickly, is taking a small revenge for having the last twenty minutes of it snatched from him. He lies for a while tracing the horrible familiar fussy curls in the ceiling's plaster, knowing he has to get up; the skin around his eyes feels swollen by tiredness. In truth, as we know, he lost less than an hour to his own peculiar preoccupations. But he is a fastidious sleeper, and is not, to repeat, much in favour of dreaming; he is not looking forward to the day and would rather not face it exhausted, and they retired later than usual last night after an evening not in keeping with routine; and, to top it all, the act of love. When he turns his head he is surprised to see his wife curled towards him, smiling, not angered by his thoughtlessness (his thought-out thoughtlessness; he is never unknowingly thoughtless). A smile not quite so radiant as the morning, perhaps, but possibly pleased to see him.

'I like this tune,' she says, as if to annoy him, to make the point that his plan has backfired and nothing can spoil her perfect day, her perfect summer day doing nothing apparently, while he has to be at work in – damn – an hour and twenty-five minutes, he's lost five minutes just lying here, will he have time to shower and have breakfast as well? He is about to say, 'Do you even know what it is?' when she asks:





‘Did you sleep okay? Shall I make you breakfast while you have a shower?’
and he is suddenly rather ashamed, and decides instead to tell her:

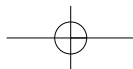
‘It’s Rachmaninov.’

‘Oh, is it?’ (she yawns, dozy, contented, not bored, not yet bored by the day) ‘I like it.’

‘I have it downstairs, on CD. Hm. I must say I’ve never thought of it as music to herald the dawn,’ he opines. And seeing her face fall just a little, and hating himself just a little for it, he adds, ‘I like it too, though. Gets the blood going, I suppose. Eggs would be nice – if you’re getting up.’

Julia smiles again; Simon graciously allows a last tragic chord to fade to the point when it is almost certainly silent and switches off the radio just before the presenter starts speaking. Julia gets off the bed in that peculiar way she has, looking until the last second as if she intends to simply roll off the edge to the floor. She puts on a jade-green silky gown, a gift from him and far more glamorous than that of her neighbour, that towelling misery she failed to witness. She hums to herself, ‘How do you like your eggs in the morning?’, but she knows his answer already, and although it is not that which the song prescribes, although he fails to join the duet, ‘I like mine with a kiss...’, she applies it anyway – to his further surprise – on his forehead on her way out of the room. He likes his eggs in the morning poached until the white has just set.

So begins the day. There is no reason that this particular Thursday should be anything other than ordinary; but already, as they surface into it, it is proving unusual. What has happened to so transform Simon and Julia’s morning? This affection on her part, this talk of concertos? This request for cooked breakfast





when, but moments before, he was huffily contemplating a hasty bowl of bran, standing at the kitchen counter, every scratchy woodchip spoonful somehow blamed on her? Any number of things have added up to this anomaly: a dinner; a little death; infidelity. These lazy high-summer days are long, and anything might quietly happen before night falls.

