# A Constellation of Events

# John Updike

THE EVENTS felt spaced in a vast deep sky, its third dimension dizzying. Looking back, Betty could scarcely believe that the days had come so close together. But, no, there, flat on the calendar, they were, one after another—four bright February days.

Sunday, after church, Rob had taken her and the children cross-country skiing. They made a party of it. He called up Evan, because they had discussed the possibility at the office Friday, while the storm was raging around their green-glass office building in Hartford, and she, because Evan, a bachelor, was Lydia Smith’s lover, called up the Smiths and invited them, too; it was the sort of festive, mischievous gesture Rob found excessive. But Lydia answered the phone and was delighted. As her voice twittered in Betty’s ear, Betty stuck out her tongue at Rob’s frown.

They all met at the Pattersons’ field in their different-colored cars and soon made a line of dark silhouettes across the white pasture. Evan and Lydia glided obliviously into the lead; Rob and Billy, the son now almost the size of the father, and Fritzie Smith, who in imitation of her mother was quite the girl athlete, occupied the middle distance, the little Smith boy struggling to keep up with this group; and Betty and her baby—poor bitterly whining, miserably ill-equipped Jennifer—came last, along with Rafe Smith, who didn’t ski as much as Lydia and whose bindings kept letting go. He was thinner than Rob, more of a clown, fuller of doubt, hatchet-faced and green-eyed: a sad, encouraging sort of man. He kept telling Jennifer, “Ups-a-daisy, Jenny, keep in the others’ tracks, now you’ve got the rhythm, oops,” as the child’s skis scrambled and she toppled down again. Meanwhile, one of Rafe’s feet would have come out of his binding and Betty would have to wait, the others dwindling in the distance into dots.

The fields were immense in their brilliance. Her eyes winced, taking them in. The tracks of their party, and the tracks of the Sno-Cats that had frolicked here in the wake of the storm, scarcely touched the marvellous blankness—slopes up and down, a lone oak on a knoll, rail fences like pencilled hatchings, weathered No Trespassing signs not meant for them. Rob had done business with one of the Patterson sons and would bluff a challenge through; the fields seemed held beneath a transparent dome of Rob’s protection. A creek, thawed into audible life, ran where two slopes met. Betty was afraid to follow the tracks of the others here; it involved stepping, in skis, from snowbank to snowbank across a width of icy, confident, secretive water. She panicked and took the wooden bridge fifty yards out of their way. Rafe lifted Jennifer up and stepped across, his binding snapping on the other side but no harm done. The child laughed for the first time that afternoon.

The sun came off the snow hot; Betty thought her face would get its first touch of tan today, and then it would not be many weeks before cows grazed here again, bringing turds to the mayflowers. Pushing up the slope on the other side of the creek, toward the woods, she slipped backwards and fell sideways. The snow was moist, warm. “Shit,” she said, and was pleasurably aware of the massy uplifted curve of her hip in jeans as she looked down over it at Rafe behind her, his green eyes sun-narrowed, alert.

“Want to get up?” he asked, and held out a hand, a damp black mitten. As she reached for it, he pulled off the mitten, offering her a bare hand, bony and pink and startling, so suddenly exposed to the air. “Ups-a-daisy,” he said, and the effort of pulling her erect threw him off balance, and a binding popped loose again. Both she and Jenny laughed this time.

At the entrance of the path through the woods, Rob waited with evident patience. Before he could complain, she did: “Jennifer is going crazy on these awful borrowed skis. *Why* can’t she have decent equipment like other children?”

“I’ll stay with her,” her husband said, both firm and evasive in his way, avoiding the question with an appearance of meeting it, and appearing selfless in order to shame her. But she felt the smile on her face persist as undeniably, as unerasably, as the sun on the field. Rob’s face clouded, gathering itself to speak; Rafe interrupted, apologizing, blaming their slowness upon himself and his defective bindings. For a moment that somehow made her shiver inside—perhaps no more than the flush of exertion meeting the chill blue shade of the woods, here at the edge—the two men stood together, intent upon the mechanism, her presence forgotten. Rob found the mis-adjustment, and Rafe’s skis came off no more.

In the woods, Rob and Jennifer fell behind, and Rafe slithered ahead, hurrying to catch up to his children and, beyond them, to his wife and Evan. Betty tried to stay with her husband and child, but they were too maddening—one whining, the other frowning, and neither grateful for her company. She let herself ski ahead, and became alone in the woods, aware of distant voices, the whisper of her skis, the soft companionable heave of her own breathing. Pine trunks shifted about, one behind another and then another, aligned and not aligned, shadowy harmonies. Here and there the trees grew down into the path; a twig touched her eye, so lightly she was surprised to find pain lingering, and herself crying. She came to an open place where paths diverged. Here Rafe was waiting for her; thin, leaning on his poles, he seemed a shadow among others. “Which way do you think they went?” He sounded breathless and acted lost. His wife and her lover had escaped him.

“Left is the way to get back to the car,” she said.

“I can’t tell which are their tracks,” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” Betty said.

“Don’t be.” He relaxed on his poles, and made no sign of moving. “Where is Rob?” he asked.

“Coming. He took over dear Jennifer for me. I’ll wait, you go on.”

“I’ll wait with you. It’s too scary in here. Do you want that book?” The sentences followed one another evenly, as if consequentially.

The book was about Jane Austen, by an English professor Betty had studied under years ago, before Radcliffe called itself Harvard. She had noticed it lying on the front seat of the Smiths’ car while they were all fussing with their skis, and had exclaimed with recognition, of a sort. In a strange suspended summer of her life, the summer when Billy was born, she had read through all six of the Austen novels, sitting on a sun-porch waiting and waiting and then suddenly nursing. “If you’re done with it.”

“I am. It’s tame, but dear, as you would say. Could I bring it by tomorrow morning?”

He had recently left a law firm in Hartford and opened an office here in town. He had few clients but seemed amused, being idle. There was something fragile and incapable about him. “Yes,” she said, adding, “Jennifer comes back from school at noon.”

And then Jennifer and Rob caught up to them, both needing to be placated, and she forgot this shadowy man’s promise, as if her mind had been possessed by the emptiness where the snowy paths diverged.

Monday was bright, and the peal at the door accented the musical dripping of the icicles ringing the house around with falling pearls. Rafe was hunched comically under the dripping from the front eaves, the book held dry against his parka. He offered just to hand it to her, but she invited him in for coffee, he seemed so sad, still lost. They sat with the coffee on the sofa, and soon his arms were around her and his lips, tasting of coffee, warm on her mouth and his hands cold on her skin beneath her sweater, and she could not move her mind from hovering, from floating in a golden consciousness of the sun on the floorboards, great slanting splashes of it, rhomboids broken by the feathery silhouettes of her houseplants on the windowsills. From her angle as he stretched her out on the sofa, the shadows of the drips leaped upward in the patches of sun, appearing to defy gravity as her head whirled. She sat up, pushed him off without rebuke, unpinned and repinned her hair. “What are we doing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Rafe said, and indeed he didn’t seem to. His assault on her had felt clumsy, scared, insincere; he seemed grateful to be stopped. His face was pink, as his hand had been. In the light of the windows behind the sofa his eyes were very green. An asparagus fern hanging there cast a net of shadow that his features moved in and out of as he apologized, talked, joked. “Baby fat!” he had exclaimed of her belly, having tugged her sweater up, bending suddenly to kiss the crease there, his face thin as a blade, and hot. He was frightened, Betty realized, which banished her own fear.

Gently she maneuvered him away from her body, out of the door. It was not so hard; she remembered how to fend off boys from the college days that his book had brought back to her. In his gratitude he wouldn’t stop smiling. She shut the front door. His body as he crossed the melting street fairly danced with relief. And for her, again alone in the empty house, it was as if along with her fear much of her soul had been banished; feeling neither remorse nor expectation, she floated above the patches of sun being stitched by falling drops, among the curved shining of glass and porcelain and aluminum kitchen equipment, in the house’s strange warmth—strange as any event seems when only we are there to witness it. Betty lifted her sweater to look at her pale belly. Baby fat. Middle age had softened her middle. But, then, Lydia was an athlete, tomboyish and lean, swift on skis, with that something Roman and androgynous and enigmatic about her looks. It was what Rafe was used to; the contrast had startled him.

She picked up the book from the sofa. He was one of those men who could read a book gently, so it didn’t look read. She surprised herself, in her great swimming calmness, by being unable to read a word.

Tuesday, as they had planned weeks ago, Rob took her to Philadelphia. She had been born there, and he had business there. Taking her along was his tribute, he had made it too plain, to her condition as a bored housewife. Yet she loved it, loved him, once the bumping, humming terror of the plane ride was past. The city in the winter sunlight looked glassier and cleaner than she remembered it, her rough and enormous dear drab City of Brotherly Love. Rob was here because his insurance company was helping finance a shopping mall in southern New Jersey; he disappeared into the strangely Egyptian old façade of the Penn Mutual Building—now doubly false, for it had been reconstructed as a historical front on a new skyscraper, a tall box of tinted glass. She wandered window-shopping along Walnut Street until her feet hurt, then took a cab from Rittenhouse Square to the Museum of Art. There was less snow in Philadelphia than in Connecticut; some of the grass beside the Parkway already looked green.

At the head of the stairs inside the museum, Saint-Gaudens’s great verdigrised Diana—in Betty’s girlhood imagination the statue had been somehow confused with the good witch of fairy stories (only naked, having shed the ball gown and petticoats good witches usually wear, the better to swing her long legs)—still posed, at her shadowy height, on one tiptoe foot. But elsewhere within the museum, there were many changes, much additional brightness. The three versions of *Nude Descending a Staircase* and the sadly cracked *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* no longer puzzled and offended her. The daring passes into the classic in our very lifetimes, while we age and die. Rob met her, just when he had promised, at three-thirty, amid the Impressionist paintings; her sudden love of him, here in this room of raw color and light, felt like a melting. She leaned on him, he moved away from her touch, and in her unaccustomed city heels Betty sidestepped to keep her balance.

They had tea in the cafeteria, out of place in their two dark suits among the students and beards and the studied rags that remained of the last decade’s revolution. Here, too, the radical had become the comfortable. “How do you like being back?” Rob asked her.

“It’s changed, I’ve changed. I like it where I am now. You were dear to bring me, though.” She touched his hand, and he did not pull it away on the smooth tabletop, whose white reminded her of snow.

Happiness must have been on her face, glowing like a sunburn, for he looked at her and seemed for an instant to see her. The instant troubled him. Though too heavy to be handsome, he had beautiful eyes, tawny and indifferent like a lion’s; they slitted and he frowned in the unaccustomed exercise of framing a compliment. “It’s such a pity,” he said, “you’re my wife.”

She laughed, astonished. “Is it? Why?”

“You’d make such a lovely mistress.”

“You think? How do you know? Have you ever had a mistress?” She was so confident of the answer she went on before he could say no. “Then how do you know I’d make a lovely one? Maybe I’d make an awful one. Shrieking, possessive. Better just accept me as a wife,” she advised complacently. The table was white and cluttered with dirty tea things between them; she could hardly wait until they were home, in bed. His lovemaking was like him, firm and tireless, and it always worked. She admired that. Once, she had adored it, until her adoration had seemed to depress him. And something in her now, at this glittering table, depressed him—perhaps the mistress he had glimpsed in her, the mistress that he of all the men in the world was barred from, could never have. She stroked his hand as if in acknowledgment of a shared sorrow. But happiness kept mounting in her, giddy and meaningless, inexplicable, unstoppable, though she saw that on its wings she was leaving Rob behind. And he had never seemed solider or kinder, or she more fittingly, as they rose and paid and left the museum together, his wife.

On the flight back, to calm her terror, she pulled the book from her handbag and read, *As Lionel Trilling was to say in 1957 (before women had risen in their might), “The extraordinary thing about Emma is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life”; “A consciousness is always at work in her, a sense of what she ought to be and do.”*

Rob looked over her shoulder and asked, “Isn’t that Rafe’s book?”

“One just like it,” she answered promptly, deceit proving not such a difficult trick after all. “You must have seen it on the front seat of his car Sunday. So did I, and I found a copy at Wanamaker’s this morning.”

“It looks read.”

“I was reading it. Waiting for you.”

His silence she took to be a satisfied one. He rattled his newspaper, then asked, “Isn’t it awfully dry?”

She feigned preoccupation. A precarious rumble changed pitch under her. “Mm. Dry but dear.”

“He’s a sad guy, isn’t he?” Rob abruptly said. “Rafe.”

“What’s sad about him?”

“You know. Being cuckolded.”

“Maybe Lydia loves him all the better for it,” Betty said.

“Impossible,” her husband decreed, and hid himself in the *Inquirer* as the 727, rumbling and shuddering, prepared to crash. She clutched at Rob’s arm with that irrational fervor he disliked; deliberately he kept his eyes on the newspaper, shutting her out. Yet in grudging answer to her prayers he brought the plane down safely, with a corner of his inflexible mind.

In her dream she was teaching again, and among her students Rafe seemed lost. She had a question for him, and couldn’t seem to get his attention, though he was not exactly misbehaving; his back was half turned as he talked to some arrogant skinny girl in the class.… It was so exasperating she awoke, feeling empty and slightly scared. Rob was out of the bed. She heard the door slam as he went to work. The children were downstairs quarrelling, a merciless sound as of something boiling over. Wednesday. When she stood, a residue of last night’s lovemaking slid down the inside of her thigh.

The children off to school, she moved through the emptiness of the house exploring the realization that she was in love. Like the floorboards, the doorframes, the wallpaper, the fact seemed not so much arresting as necessary, not ornamental but functional in some way she must concentrate on perceiving. The snow on the roof had all melted; the dripping from the eaves had ceased, and a dry sunlight rested silently on the warm house, the bare street, the speckled rooftops of the town beyond the sunstruck, dirty windows. Valentines the children had brought home from school littered the kitchen counter. The calendar showed the shortest month, a rectangular candy box dotted with red holidays. Rafe’s office number was newly listed in the telephone book. She dialled it, less to reach him than to test the extent of the day’s emptiness. Alarmingly, the ringing stopped; he answered. “Rafe?” Her voice surprised her by coming out cracked.

“Hi, Betty,” he said. “How was Philly?”

“How did you know I went?”

“Everybody knows. You have no secrets from us.” He stopped joking, sensing that he was frightening her. “Lydia told me.” Evan had told her; Rob had told him at work. There was a see-through world of love; her bright house felt transparent. “Was it nice?” Rafe was asking.

“Lovely.” She felt she was defending herself. “The city seemed … tamer, somehow.”

“What did you do?”

“Walked around feeling nostalgic. Went to the museum up on its hill. Rob met me there and we had tea.”

“It does sound dear.” His voice, by itself, was richer and more relaxed than his physical presence, with its helpless, humiliated clown’s air. Her silence obliged him to say more. “Have you had time to look into the book?”

“I love it,” she said. “It’s so scholarly and calm. I’m reading it very slowly; I want it to last forever.”

“Forever seems long.”

“You want to see me?” Her voice, involuntarily, had thickened.

His answer was as simple and sharp as his green glance when she had exclaimed, “Shit.” “Sure,” he said.

“Where? This house feels so conspicuous.”

“Come on down here. People go in and out of the building all day long. There’s a hairdresser next to me.”

“Don’t you have any clients?”

“Not till this afternoon.”

“Do I dare?”

“I don’t know. Do you?” More gently, he added, “You don’t have to *do* anything. You just want to *see* me, right? Unfinished business, more or less.”

“Yes.”

Downtown, an eerie silence pressed through the movement of cars and people. Betty realized she was missing a winter sound from childhood: the song of car chains. Snow tires had suppressed it. Time suppressed everything, if you waited. Rafe’s building was a grim brick business “block” built a century ago, when this suburb of Hartford had appeared to have an independent future. An ambitious blazon of granite topped the façade, which might some day be considered historical. The stairs were linoleum and smelled like a rainy-day cloakroom. A whiff of singeing and shampoo came from the door next to his. He was waiting for her in his waiting room, and locked the door. On his sofa, a chill, narrow, and sticky couch of Naugahyde, beneath a wall of leatherbound laws, Rafe proved impotent. The sight of her naked seemed to stun him. Through his daze of embarrassment, he never stopped smiling. And she at him. He was beautiful, so lean and loosely knit, but needed to be nursed into knowing it. “What do you think the matter is?” he asked her.

“You’re frightened,” she told him. “I don’t blame you. I’m a lot to take on.”

He nodded, his eyes less green here in this locked, windowless anteroom. “We’re going to be a lot of trouble, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

“I guess my body is telling us there’s still time to back out. Want to?”

On top of one set of bound statutes, their uniform spines forming horizontal streaks like train windows streaming by, lay a different sort of book, a little paperback. In the dim room, where their nakedness was the brightest thing, she made out the title: *Emma*. She answered, “No.”

And, though there was much in the aftermath to regret, and a harm that would never cease, Betty remembered these days—the open fields, the dripping eaves, the paintings, the law books—as bright, as a single iridescent unit, not scattered as is a constellation but continuous, a rainbow, a U-turn.