# Leaf Season

# John Updike

OFF WE GO! Saturday morning, into our cars, children and dogs and all, driving north to Vermont in leaf season, to the Tremaynes’ house on the Columbus Day weekend. It’s become a custom, one of the things we all do, the four or five families, a process that can’t be stopped without running the risk of breaking a spell. Threading out of greater Boston on its crowded, potholed highways, then smoothly north on 93, and over on 89, across the Connecticut River, into Vermont. At once, there is a difference: things look cleaner, sparser than in New Hampshire. When we leave 89, the villages on the winding state roads, with their white churches and irregular, casually mowed greens and red-painted country stores advertising FUDGE FACTORY or PUMPKIN OUTLET, show a sharp-edged charm, a stagy, calendar-art prettiness that wears at the eyes, after a while, as relentlessly as industrial ugliness. And the leaves, whole valleys and mountains of them—the strident pinks and scarlets of the maples, the clangorous gold of the hickories, the accompanying brasses of birch and beech, on both sides of the road, rise after rise, a heavenly tumult tied to our dull earth only by broad bands of evergreen and outcroppings of granite. We arrive feeling battered by natural glory, by the rush of wind and of small gasoline explosions incessantly hurried one into the next. The dirt driveway—really just ruts that the old wagons and carts wore into the lawn and that modern times have given a dusting of gravel—comes in at right angles off an unmarked macadam road, which came off a numbered state route, which in turn came off a federal highway; so we feel, at last arriving, that we have removed the innermost tissue covering from an ornately wrapped present, or reduced a mathematical problem to its final remainder, or climbed a mountain, or cracked a safe.

The gravel grinds and pops beneath our tires. Marge Tremayne is standing on the porch. She looks pretty good. A little older, a shade overweight, but good.

She and Ralph bought the big wheat-yellow farmhouse with its barn and twenty acres one winter when he had made a killing in oil stocks, the year of the first gas lines, and when their three children were all excited about skiing. Ralph, too, was excited—he grew a Pancho Villa mustache in imitation of the ski instructors and, with his fat cigar in the center of his mouth and his rose-colored goggles and butter-yellow racing suit and clumpy orange step-in boots, was quite a sight on the slopes. Marge, in her tight stretch pants and silver parka and Kelly-green headband and with her hair flying behind, looked rather wonderful, too; her sense of style and her old dance training enabled her to mime the basic moves gracefully enough, and down she would slide, but she wasn’t a skier at heart. “I’m too much of a coward,” she would say. Or, in another mood, to another listener: “I’m too much of an earth mother.” She took to using the Vermont place in the summer (when Ralph had hoped to rent it) and raised vegetables by the bushel and went into canning in a big way, and into spinning wool and mushrooming, and she even began to show a talent for dowsing, serving her apprenticeship with some old mountain man from beyond Montpelier. Ralph was still working in town, and except for Augusts would drive up to his wife on weekends, five hours each way, carting children and their friends back and forth and keeping house in Brookline by himself. So this leaf-season weekend has become a visit to Marge, our chance to see what is going on with her.

Marge and the newly arrived Neusners are standing on the side porch when the Maloneys pull up. The Maloney children bound or self-consciously uncoil, depending upon their ages, out of automotive confinement. There is pleasant confusion and loudly proclaimed exhaustion, a swirling of people back and forth; the joy of an adventure survived animates the families as they piecemeal unload their baggage and collapse into Marge’s care. She has a weary, slangy, factual voice, slightly nasal as if she has caught a cold. “It’s girls’ and boys’ dormitories again this year. Men at the head of the stairs turn right, women left. Boys thirteen and older out in the barn, younger than that upstairs with the girls. The Tylers are already here; Linda’s taken some littles for a leaf walk and Andy’s helping Ralph load up the woodboxes. Ralph says each man’s supposed to split his weight in wood. Each woman is responsible for one lunch or dinner. Breakfasts, it’s a free-for-all as usual, and don’t put syrupy knives and forks straight into the dishwasher, anybody. That means *you*, Teddy Maloney.”

The nine-year-old boy, so suddenly singled out, laughs in nervous fright; he had been preoccupied with trying to coax the family dog, Ginger, a red-haired setter bitch, out of the car, in spite of the menacing curiosity of Wolf, the Tremaynes’ grizzled chow, and Toby Neusner, an undersized black retriever.

Bernadette Maloney, embracing Marge and kissing her cheek and thinking how broad her body feels, backs off and asks her, a touch too solemnly, “How are you doing?”

Marge gazes back as solemnly, her slate-blue eyes muddied by elements of yellow. “The summer’s been bliss,” she confides, and averts her gaze with a stoic small shrug. “I don’t know. I can’t handle people anymore.”

Her headband today is maroon. Her thick long dirty-blond hair over the years has become indistinguishably mixed with gray, this subtle dullness intensifying her odd Indian look, not that of blood Indians but of a paleface maiden captured and raised in their smoky tepees, in their casually cruel customs; her face up here has turned harder and more chiselled, her unpainted lips thinner, her eyes more opaque. She has not so much a tan as a glow, a healthy matte colorlessness rubbed deep into her skin. Her body has grown wider, but with her old sense of style she carries the new weight well, in her hip-hugging jeans and a man’s checked lumberjack shirt that hangs over her belt like a maternity blouse. Belly, gray hair, and all, she is still our beauty, and Ralph, when he appears—having evidently been hurried from his car straight into service, for his Brooks Brothers shirt is creased and dirtied by the logs he has been lugging and his city shoes are powdered with sawdust—is still a friendly ogre; he exudes fatherly fumes, he emits barks and guffaws of welcome. His eyes are reddened by cigar smoke, he stammers and spits in his greedy hurry to get his jokes out, he laughs aloud before the punch line is quite reached. He appears to have lost some weight. “My d-daughters’ awful cooking,” he explains. “Th-they’re trying to, *ha*, poison the old guy.”

How old are we? Scarcely into our forties. Lots of life left to live. The air here is delicious, crisper and drier than air around Boston. We start to breathe it now, and to take in where we are. The sounds are fewer, and those few are different—individual noises: a single car passing on the road, a lone crow scolding above the stubbled side field, a single window sash clicking back and forth in the gentle wind we hadn’t noticed when outside unpacking the cars. The smells of the house are country smells—linoleum, ashes, split wood, plaster, a primeval cellar damp that rises through the floorboards and follows us up the steep, wear-rounded stairs to the second floor, where we see the children and their sleeping bags settled in the tangle of middle rooms. The house, like most Vermont farmhouses, has suffered many revisions over the years; they thought nothing, in the old days, of lifting out a staircase and turning it around or of walling in a fireplace to vent a Franklin stove. With our suitcases as claim markers, we stake out bunks in the two large front bedrooms that the Tremaynes, when they were most excited about skiing, had set up as single-sex dormitories.

Deborah Neusner stands by the upstairs-hall window, gazing out at the empty road, at the field across the road, at the woods beyond the field, with all their leaves. Bernadette Maloney joins her, standing so close that the two women feel each other’s body warmth as well as the heat from the radiator beneath the window. “The Englehardts are coming, but late. Little Kenneth has a football game.”

“Not so little, then,” Deborah says dryly, not turning her thoughtful profile, with its long chin and high-bridged nose. When she does face Bernadette, her brown eyes, in the sharp Vermont light, shine on the edge of panic. The Englehardts mean different things to different people, but to all of us they—Lee so bald and earnest and droll, Ruth so skinny and frizzy and nimble and quick-tongued—make things all right, make the whole thing go. Until they arrive, there will be an uneasy question of why we are here, at the top of the map, in this chilly big wheat-yellow farmhouse surrounded by almost vulgarly gorgeous, red-and-gold nature.

The host is under the house! All afternoon, Ralph lies on the cold ground beneath the kitchen wing, wrapping yellow Fiberglas insulation around his pipes. Already there have been frosts, and last winter, when the Tremaynes were renting to skiers, the pipes froze and the people moved to a motel and later sued. He keeps the cigar in his mouth while stretched out grunting in the crawl space; Bill Maloney hopes aloud to Andy Tyler that there is no gas leak under the kitchen. Both men—Bill burly and placid, Andy skinny and slightly hyper—hang there as if to be helpful, now and then passing more insulation, or another roll of duct tape, in to their supine host. Josh Neusner is splitting his weight in wood, an unfamiliar and thus to him somewhat romantic task. The romance intensifies whenever the splitting maul bounces from an especially awkward piece of wood and digs deep into the earth inches from his feet. He is wearing thin black loafers, with tassels. Wood chips and twigs litter the barnyard around him, and white dried dung from the days when Marge tried raising chickens. The barn overhang is loosely battened; upstanding spears of light make sliding patterns as you move your head. It is like an Op Art sculpture in a gallery, but bigger, Josh thinks, and the effect has that coarse broad authority of the actual, of the unintended. This whole milieu and the business of woodchopping is so exotic to him that his awareness flickers like a bad lightbulb. Minutes of blankness—rural idiocy, Marx had called it—are abruptly illumined by the flash of danger when the maul again sinks its murderous edge close to the tips of his city shoes; then the pebbles, the grit, the twigs are superillumined, vivid as the granules of paint in a Dubuffet, and something of this startled radiance is transferred, if he lifts his head quickly enough, to the sky, the fields, the gaudy woods.

Linda Tyler returns from her leaf walk with the children she collected and makes them as a reward for being good some peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. Other children, late arrivals and adolescents too jaded for the walk, slouch in from the long living room, where a fire of green wood is smoking and where they have been dabbling with decks of greasy cards and old board games with pennies and buttons substituted over the years for the correct counters. Though they have been here on other Columbus Day weekends, they are shy of the kitchen. Other years, Mrs. Tremayne was cheerfully in charge, but this year she has withdrawn to her downstairs bedroom and shut the door; from behind it comes the whir and soft clatter of a spinning wheel. At the sound of food being prepared in the kitchen, the children gather like birds at a tray of seeds, and Linda hands out cookies, apples, pretzel sticks. She is petite, with pale freckled skin and kind green eyes, and wears baggy clothes that conceal her oddly good figure. As not only her husband here knows, her body on its modest scale has that voluptuous harmony, that curve of shoulder and swing of hip, which spells urgency to the male eye. She caters to the assembled children, warning them to leave room for the traditional big hot-dog-and-chili dinner tonight, after the Englehardts have arrived.

The children present for this weekend are: Milly, Skip, and Christine Tremayne; Matthew, Mark, Mary, Teddy, and Teresa Maloney; Fritz and Audrey Tyler; and Rebecca, Eve, and Seth and Zebulon (twins) Neusner. The Englehardts will bring Kenneth, Betsey, and their unplanned one-and-a-half-year-old, named in a jocular mood Dorothea—gift of God. The fanciful name would have been a curse had not the child lived up to it—an ethereal little girl with her mother’s agility and that milky, abstracted blue-eyed gaze of her father’s, set beneath not his bald dome but a head of angelic curls. The pets present are Toby Neusner, Ginger Maloney, Wolf Tremayne, and two cats, a sleepy, vain, long-haired white and a short-haired gray with extra toes who appears throughout the house at the strangest places, in locked rooms and bureau drawers, like an apparition. It is all too much, as the children get bigger. The oldest, Milly Tremayne and Fritz Tyler, are both seventeen, and embarrassed to be here. They were embarrassed last year as well, but not so keenly.

Ralph emerges at last from underneath the house and announces, spitting smoke and amiably sputtering, that it’s way past time for the softball game. “Wh-what are all you young br-bruisers lounging inside for on a gorgeous Saturday like this? Let’s c-compete!” He gets down in a football lineman’s crouch and, with the cigar stub in the center of his mouth like a rhinoceros horn, looks truly angry.

Softball is organized in the side field. Everyone plays, even Deborah Neusner and Bernadette Maloney, who had been murmuring upstairs for hours. What about? The absent, the present, the recent past, the near future—a liquid soft discourse that leaves, afterward, a scarcely perceptible residue of new information, which yet enhances their sense of who and where they are.

Fritz Tyler bowls Milly Tremayne over, rushing across from shortstop for a pop fly. “You bastard, didn’t you hear me calling you off?” she asks him, sprawling in the long dry grass, red-faced and tousled, her upraised legs in their tight jeans looking elegant and thin. Her hair is dark like Ralph’s but though not blond has the shape of Marge’s, abundant and wiry and loose in a tent shape, before Marge began to braid it and pin it up like a nineteenth-century farmer’s wife. Bill Maloney hits a home run, over the heads of Seth and Zebulon—they have been put in right field together, as if two little eight-year-old boys will make one good grownup fielder. Their black, loping dog, Toby, helps them hunt for the ball in the burdock over by the split-rail fence. The sky in the west, above mountains whose blush is turning blue, has begun to develop slant stripes tinged with pink, and the battered hay in the outfield is growing damp, each bent strand throwing a longer and longer shadow. Though the children are encouraged to continue the game until darkness, the grownups drift away, and in the long, narrow living room, with its plaster ceiling drooping in the center like the underside of an old bed, a fresh fire is built, of dry and seasoned logs from the woodbox beneath the stairs (the children had tried to burn freshly split wood, from beneath the barn overhang), and an impressive array of bottles is assembled on the sideboard. Bring your own, the rule is.

Marge, ostentatiously drinking unfermented cider, sits on the sofa, which is faded and plaid and has wide wooden arms, and knits a sweater of undyed wool she has carded and spun herself. Toward seven o’clock Linda and Bernadette go into the kitchen to feed the starving younger children. The older have scattered to their rooms upstairs, or out to the barn. By the time the Englehardts at last arrive, the adults not only are drunk but have gone through two boxes of crackers and a wedge of Vermont cheddar that was bought to last the weekend.

Cheers go up. Roly-poly, sleepy-looking Lee doffs his hunter’s cap and reveals the polished dome of his perfectly smooth skull. Tall, frizzy-haired Ruth stands there and surveys the scene through her huge glasses, taking it all in. The temples of her glasses have the shape of a lightning bolt, and the bridge rides so low on her nose as to reduce it to a tiny round tip, a baby’s nose. Kenneth and Betsey are lugging knapsacks and suitcases in from the car and up the stairs, including a plastic basket containing little Dorothea. “Who-who won the football game?” the host eagerly asks.

“We won,” Ruth tells him, in the complex, challenging tone of a joke on herself, “but Kenny didn’t play.” The weariness of the long drive is still in her voice. Ruth’s words are like glass sandwiches that reflect back an obvious meaning on the first level, a less obvious one on the second, and so on, as deep as you want to look. “The poor child sat on the bench,” she adds.

“Oh.” Ralph blinks, having evidently been tactless. His eyes slide over to Marge on the sofa, as if to seek support. Her eyes are lowered to the knitting. Wolf, who in his old age has been known to snap, sleeps at her feet. Upstairs, Kenneth and Betsey seek the company and comfort of the other children, as the Englehardts are meshed into the adult group beneath them and the hilarity, the shouting, swells by that increment.

It is hard, afterwards, to remember what was so funny. Their all being here in Vermont, in this old farmhouse with its smells from another century, is in itself funny, and the Saturday-night meal of something so hearty and Western as chili and hot dogs is funny, and the half-gallons of cheap wine that replace themselves at the table, like successive generations of bulbous green dwarfs, are part of the delicate, hallucinatory joke.

They organize two tables of bridge afterwards, and, drunk as they know themselves to be now, this is droll also. “Double,” Lee Englehardt keeps saying solemnly, his shining brow furrowed, the long wisps of hair above his ears grayer than last year in the light of the paper-shaded bridge lamp that, like most of the furnishings of the house, will not be missed if ski tenants destroy it. “Four diamonds,” Andy Tyler says, hoping that Deborah Neusner will have the sense to put him back into spades. The Neusners, who spent their time at college less frivolously than the others, rarely play cards of any kind, and Deborah was pressed into service only because Marge pleaded a headache and has gone back into her bedroom. Husbands and wives cannot be partners, and should not be at the same table. “Double,” Lee Englehardt says. *Take me out of diamonds*, Andy Tyler thinks intensely, so intensely the message feels engraved on the smoke above his head. “Pass,” Deborah Neusner says, weakly. “Four hearts,” says Bernadette Maloney, feeling sorry for Deborah, knowing that being so close to Lee upsets her; the two had an affair years ago, a fling that ended up in the air, so in a sense it was never over. That is one of the Englehardts’ charms, their ability to leave things up in the air, like jugglers in a freeze-frame. “Four spades,” Andy pronounces with great relief, praying that Deborah will now have the wit to pass again. “Five diamonds?” she hesitantly says.

Josh Neusner reads a very old *National Geographic* he found in the woodbox beneath the stairs. It is so old that the photos are mostly black-and-white, and the type is different, and the cultural biases are overt. These bare-breasted women and woolly chiefs with bones through their noses are clearly, cheerfully being condescended to, anthropologically. This would never do now; isn’t it one of the tenets of our times that all cultural formations, even cannibalism and foot-binding, make equally good sense? Josh’s neck and shoulders ache from splitting his weight in wood. He has taken a glass of dinner wine away from the table and rests it on the broad arm of the corduroy-covered armchair by the dying fire that Ralph built. Suddenly the wine seems an odious, fermented substance, and the hilarious chatter from the bridge tables inane, poisonous. Above his head, on the swaybacked ceiling, footsteps scurry and rustle like those of giant rats. The children; he wants to go upstairs to check on the girls and tuck in the twins, but during these leaf-season weekends the children are invited to make their own society, and exist like a pack of shadows in the corners of the grownup fun. Strange places, strange customs; cannibalism, he reads, is almost never a matter of hunger but of ingesting the enemy’s spiritual virtues. He wonders why liquor is called spirits. The cheap wine tastes dead. The thumping and scurrying overhead slowly weakens, loses its grip. He himself, when at midnight both tables loudly announce another rubber, goes upstairs and puts himself into one of the upper bunk beds in the men’s dormitory. The window in the upstairs hall where Deborah and Bernadette met and talked this afternoon now displays white, scratchy, many-tentacled frost ferns above the radiator.

The bunk isn’t quite long enough for him to stretch out in. He thinks of Marge alone in her room below him, her sulky mystery, her beautiful dancer’s body. She was the queen of all this and now is trying to withdraw. He could sneak down the back stairs and they could spin together. Josh cannot sleep. The noise from below, the sound of rampant spirits, is too great. And when at last the bridge concludes and people begin to clatter up the stairs, he still cannot sleep. Andy underneath him, Lee and Bill across the room in the other double bunk, all fall asleep swiftly, and snore. Lee is the most spectacular—nasal arpeggios that encompass octaves, up and down the scale—but Bill plugs steadily away, his rhythmic wheeze like a rusty engine that will not die, and Andy demonstrates, a few feet below Josh’s face, the odd talent of coughing in his sleep, coughing prolongedly without waking himself. Josh feels trapped. A broadsword of light falls diagonally across the floor, and there are faint, halting footsteps. One of the Tremaynes’ cats has pushed open the door and is nosing about. Josh strains his eyes and sees it is the gray one with extra toes. He reaches out from the upper bunk with his foot and nudges the door shut again. The house’s huge content of protoplasm ebbs in little stages into quiet, into sleep: twenty-six other human beings—he counts them up, including the boys in the barn—soaking up restorative dreams, leaving him stranded, high and listening, his ears staring into the tense, circumambient wilderness. Never again. This is the last time he and his family are going to come for this weekend to Vermont. This is torture.

Bacon! The crisp, illicit, life-enhancing smell of it penetrates the room, his nostrils, his brain. Josh sees that the three other bunks are empty, the day is well advanced. He must have fallen asleep after all. He remembers, as the wee hours became larger and lighter, conducting mental negotiations, amid the brouhaha of the other men’s snoring, with the gray cat, who seemed to be here, and then there, in the room. Now the animal is nowhere to be seen, and Josh must have dropped off for an hour or two.

The house, like a ship under way, is shaking, trembling, with the passage of feet, with activity. A maul and wedge ring: Lee Englehardt is splitting his weight in wood. Car doors slam: the Maloneys, all seven of them, are going off to Mass. They’ll bring back Sunday papers and a whole list of staples—crackers, orange juice, cheddar cheese, tonic water—that Marge has pressed upon them. She seems in a better mood. She is wearing, instead of the sullen peasant skirt and sweater and shawl of last night, tight shiny red pants that make her legs look almost as thin and sexy as her daughter Milly’s. Her hair is done up in a fat blond-gray pigtail that bounces on her back as she friskily, bossily prepares breakfast, wave after wave, flipping six pieces of bacon at a time with a long aluminum spatula. “Three pieces per person, and that includes you, Fritz Tyler,” she says severely. “Those who like their scrambled eggs runny, come serve yourselves right now. Those who don’t, get at the end of the line. We don’t believe in Sugar Pops in this household, Seth Neusner. Up here in the mountains it’s all bran and granola and yucky fiber. Betsey, go out to the woodpile and tell your father the baby’s just spit up all over herself and your mother’s in the bathroom.”

Ralph comes sleepily into the kitchen, the first cigar of the day in his mouth, its lit end making a triangle with his two red eyes. He is barefoot—pathetic white feet, with ingrown yellow toenails and long toes crushed together—and is coming from the wrong direction, if we assume he slept in the master bedroom, at the front of the downstairs.

He hasn’t slept in the master bedroom. Beyond the kitchen lies a small room with a few cots in it, for an overflow ski crowd. Ralph slept in there. He did not sleep with Marge! The knowledge runs silently through the mingled families, chastening them. For this weekend Marge and Ralph are like the mother and father, even of the other adults. We want them to love each other. For if they do not love each other, how can they love and take care of us?

Marge seems intent on showing that she can do it all. She ruffles Ralph’s head as he sits groggily at the breakfast table. Grownups eat at the long dining-room table, where one of the bridge groups played last night, and children at the round butcher-block table in the center of the kitchen. “Achey, achey?” Marge asks, cooingly.

“T-too much grape juice, Mother,” Ralph says.

They are trying to make up. We all feel better, bolder. Josh Neusner describes his terrible night, quite comically as he relives his mental negotiations with the mysterious cat, but Lee Englehardt, having come in from wood-splitting to care for Dorothea, without smiling states, “Jews make poor campers.” We are shocked. It is the sort of thing that can be said only among intimate friends or confirmed enemies. And why would they be enemies?

Josh, remembering Lee’s aggressive unconscious arpeggios, and his position at the card table next to Deborah, chooses to accept the remark as a piece of ethnology, arrived at innocently: Lee is an insurance salesman whose father was a professor of history, and as if in compensation for a lesser career he collects such small pedantic conclusions as that Jews make poor campers. Lee’s charm really rests on his insecurity. Josh chooses to keep playing the clown. He covers his forehead with one hand and moans, “I can’t sleep without a woman. Men are *hid*eous.”

Deborah, a little later, when they meet on the stair landing, says, “Baby, I’m sorry you had such a poor night; you should have played bridge.”

“I wasn’t asked.”

“You didn’t want to be asked. I would have given you my seat. Andy Tyler kept wanting to kill me, I could tell.”

“The only person I like here is Linda,” Josh petulantly volunteers. “And Dorothea,” he adds, to soften it.

This reminds her: “Ruth didn’t sleep in the girls’ dormitory last night. Marge set her up in the living room with the baby after everybody else had gone to bed, in case Dorothea yelled. So the bunk above me is empty if you really want it. Linda and Bernadette wouldn’t care.”

“It would make me look like a sissy.” He goes on, “And then yesterday I kept nearly cutting off my foot splitting their idiotic wood.”

“Come on, honey, try to get into the spirit of things.”

“It’s all barbaric,” he says, so light-headed with lack of sleep that every perception has a translucent, revelatory quality. Suddenly, he is having a very good time. He goes down and has some more coffee and bacon and discusses Boston-area private schools with Linda and Lee, who are disenchanted with highly touted Brookline High.

The Maloneys return laden with the Sunday New York *Times*, the Boston *Globe*, and the Burlington *Free Press*. The children fight over the funnies, the men over the sports and financial pages. The day proceeds with that unreality peculiar to Sunday; one hour seems as long as two, and the next goes by in ten minutes. A great deal of the conversation concerns where various other people are. Marge is in the car, with her son, Skip, and her dog, Wolf, performing some errands having to do with quantities of natural fleece—uncarded, greasy-wet with lanolin—to be found at a farm fifteen miles away. It turns out that Andy Tyler has gone along for the ride. Bernadette Maloney is in Marge’s garden salvaging tomatoes and zucchini from last night’s frost; Mark and Mary and Teddy are helping her, by holding the paper bags with bored expressions and then by throwing the rotten vegetables at one another. Linda Tyler, having been told that her husband has disappeared with Marge, announces that she will go on a mushrooming walk in the woods; her daughter, Audrey, and Betsey Englehardt and the two Neusner girls come with her, like a procession of little witches in training. Christine Tremayne—who has inherited Marge’s dull complexion and Ralph’s stocky build, unfortunately—is showing Teresa Maloney the barn, and the Neusner twins tag along. The interior is awesome; some high small windows and the gaps between the slats admit shafts of light as if in a cathedral. They have all seen slides of cathedrals at school. The light reveals an atmosphere glittering with dust, dust from the hay still stacked in staircases of bales at one end, a dust that thickens the air, that makes light visible while lessening it. The children feel deep in the sea of time. Elements of old farm machinery rust in corners here and there, with pieces of lumber, ten-gallon milk cans, strawberry boxes, and glass eggs. They find an old rope-quoit set, and the four of them play until a dispute between Seth and Zebulon makes it no fun.

Milly Tremayne and Fritz Tyler—who knows where they have gone to? Mary Maloney, having left the garden party in tearful disgust when Mark caught her right on the mouth with a rotten zucchini, has come into the house; the television set gets only one channel, and that one full of ghosts from the hills and valleys between here and the station, but she is happily watching some man with big eyebrows and a Southern accent give a sermon, and a lot of fat ladies in glitzy dresses sing hymns, until her father comes and tells her she should be outdoors in the sunshine.

What sunshine? A cloud has just passed across the sun, not a little cloud but a large dark one, with a wide leaden center and agitated, straggling edges—a cloud it seems the surrounding mountains have given birth to.

Bill Maloney and Lee Englehardt find a shovel and refresh the holes that take the posts for the volleyball net. Nature fills in the holes from one leaf season to the next. Then they find and unwind the two-by-fours and the net and the guy ropes and pegs where they have reposed all wound and tangled up in the barn since last October. As they move slowly, in the quickly moving cloud shadows, through the tedious ritual of setting up the net, Lee asks Bill, “How was Mass?”

Bill, who has a moonface and delicate pink Irish skin, looks at Lee cockeyed and says, “Like it always is. That’s the beauty of it, Mr. Eng.”

Lee makes a rueful nod, concluding to himself that this is the essence of male companionship: cards close to the chest.

Inside the kitchen, Bernadette and Deborah are making lunch—a cauldron of clam chowder Bernadette has lugged up from Boston; and a tuna salad Deborah is whipping up out of four cans plus chopped celery, scallions, mayonnaise, lemon juice, and a head of lettuce; and a tinned ham for those who, like most of the children, hate fish. As the two women slide and bump past each other between Marge’s old-fashioned black soapstone sink and the wooden countertops on either side, they quietly talk about the situation between Marge and Ralph, which seems far gone, and that between Andy and Linda, which seems to be heading for trouble.

Ruth Englehardt comes into the kitchen with her curly-headed toddler propped on her hip and a cigarette tilting at an opposite angle out of her mouth. “So the Queen of Sheba has eloped with the handyman,” she says, “the Queen of Sheba” referring to Marge and “the handyman” to Andy, not just because of his name but because of his tendency, well known to all the women, to reach out under the table and touch. “If you two were about to discuss Lee and me, I’ll leave,” she adds; then she begins to cough, and one eye cries from the smoke. She sets down the heavy child and watches her stagger across the worn linoleum to one of the low old mahogany counters, where Dorothea quicker than thought reaches up and flips a sharp knife down past her own ear. Ruth deftly retrieves the knife and her daughter; the little girl, as she feels herself being lifted, reflexively spreads her legs to sit astride her mother’s hip. The three women talk, touching their friends with their tongues not to harm them but to give themselves pleasure; little new can be offered, mere pinches or slivers added to the salad, tiny, almost meaningless remarks or glimpses that yet do enhance the flavor. The conversation, too, serves a purpose of location, of locating the others on a continuum of happiness or its opposite, of satisfying the speakers that the others are within hailing distance in this our dark passage through life, with its mating and birthing, its getting and spending, its gathering and scattering. Some, indeed, are even closer than hailing distance, for from underneath the floor there comes a sudden grumbling and scraping: their host wrapping more insulation.

Lunch is served, then volleyball. Let’s not do the volleyball. Let’s just say that once there were five on a side and now the children have grown so that three eight-person teams must be fielded, and some of the boys lunge and swagger and swat as lustily as their fathers. More lustily, since these powers are new to them. Matthew Maloney knocks Audrey Tyler flat on her back, and Fritz Tyler comes down from a spike right on Deborah Neusner’s toe, so that she thinks it might be broken. She thinks she heard it snap, at the still center of the swelling red cloud of pain. She hops off the court. “This hasn’t been their weekend,” Ruth Englehardt says *sotto voce* to Marge, who has returned from her drive to buy the wool.

“I just can’t get excited about any of it,” Marge confides to Ruth, under the net, while Bill Maloney, with much drolly elaborate ceremony, is winding up to serve. For all of his elaboration, the ball flies too high and sails out. The other side hoots. The sight of such a throng, in suburban shorts and halters and stencilled sweatshirts, is so unusual here in Vermont this time of year that cars and pickup trucks slow down on the little quiet unnumbered road. One truck (passing, everybody later agrees, for about the fourth time) fails to brake when the ball, hit wild by Eve Neusner, bounces under his chassis and, with a sound as sickening as that of a box turtle being crushed beneath the wheels, bursts. Then the truck brakes. Ralph slightly knows the driver, and a pleasant and apologetic palaver takes place by the fence, though the red-bearded, red-hatted face of the truck driver doesn’t look apologetic. Mark Maloney has brought his soccer ball, and that is substituted, though it is enough heavier that a number of the females complain of stinging hands and sprained wrists.

So we have done the volleyball after all. The sun, momentarily appearing between the ridge of a mountain and the edge of another great cloud, throws the shadows of the poles right to the edge of the road. The smallest children—Teddy and Teri Maloney, Seth and Zebulon Neusner, even little Dorothea Englehardt, the knees of whose bib overalls are filthy and whose lips drool from sucking on a milkweed pod—scrimmage in the trampled grass and try to heave the heavy soccer ball, cunningly stitched together of pentagons, over the sagging net. The clouds have thickened and darkened so as to form a continuous ragged canopy. A cool wind blows as if through a hole in a tent.

The exercise has left the adults feeling contentious, vigorous, and thirsty. They rush to the bottles. They go upstairs one by one to take showers in the only bathroom on the second floor. Josh Neusner by now is feeling quite delirious with fatigue and is experiencing small, flashlike epiphanies of love for each of his friends as they move in and out of the living room, up the stairs, out of doors, and back in. They all look very tall to him, even the children, from where he lies on the plaid couch, fighting off the sleep that refused to come last night. He shuts his eyes a moment and when he opens them, Bill Maloney, his oldest son, Matthew, Lee Englehardt, and Josh’s own wife, Deborah, are over by the far wall, where the wallpaper has been scorched and curled by the pipes of an old woodstove that was taken away when Ralph installed the new heating system whose pipes he has been so desperately, patiently insulating. The four people over there are engaged in a contest of endurance—seeing how long each can sit against the wall, posed as if on a chair that is not there, before the muscle pain in their thighs forces them to surrender and stand. Bill Maloney times each contestant with a watch; his own son seems to be winning, until Lee Englehardt, exposing that something fanatic and needy he keeps hidden behind his mild eyes, continues to hold the pose—straight back flat on the wall, thighs at a ninety-degree angle—for the number of seconds needed to win. Bill counts off the seconds. Lee’s bald head fills with blood like the bulb of a thermometer. Deborah is visibly impressed, even moved, by Lee’s macho effort. Her long jaw has dropped as if she might swoon. In women, Josh thinks, admiration and pity are faces of one emotion.

Other games are introduced, other feats are performed. Andy Tyler, it turns out, slim and flexible as he is, can hold a broom in both hands and jump over it without letting go. He can then, the broom now held behind him, reverse the trick, hopping up like a handkerchief pulled through a ring. Others try, and kick the broom to the floor with a smack, or else themselves fall to the floor like misfired cannon balls. Ralph Tremayne demonstrates his ability to set a coin on his uplifted elbow and with the same hand grab it in midair. He can even do it with a small stack of quarters. Now coins are flying all over the room, and scatter into the corners. Ralph, encouraged, revives an old drill from his college football years; you squat, he eagerly explains, and fall backwards, and push off with your hands at your shoulders so that you land back on your feet. Every time he tries it, Marge’s collection of stippled milk glass on the mantel trembles, and Ralph, after a tantalizing, teetering moment of near-success, drops with a plaster-cracking thud onto his back. Others also fail. Josh, amid much noisy skepticism, gets up off the sofa and succeeds at his first try. He startles himself, too. He used to be good at gym, a talent he had thought unusable in real life. In the aftermath of his exertion the roomful of people lurches slightly, like the first hesitant movement of a carrousel when all the rides are sold.

Linda Tyler introduces a contest whereby a box of matches is set on the floor a forearm’s length from the kneeling person’s knees. She demonstrates. Then, her hands clasped behind her, she explains that she will attempt to knock the matchbox over with her nose. She does this easily. But when Bill Maloney tries, he falls forward onto his thin-skinned moonface. Even Lee’s stubborn determination fails; his nose, grimace though he will, comes up a millimeter short. Bernadette, however, performs the trick without effort, and Deborah also. There is something affecting in the position of abasement the women assume on the floor, their hair falling forward, their hands behind them like a manacled slave’s, their hips broad and round in the crouching position, their feet—bare or in little ballerina slippers—soles up beneath their hips. It’s all in the hips, Linda explains, patting her nicely convex own: weight distribution. Almost no man can knock the matchbox over, and almost every woman can. Even Ruth, long and lanky as she is, condescending to try it, illustrates this sexist truth: though there is a precarious moment of balance striven for, the matchbox falls. Everybody cheers, and Dorothea, put to sleep in Marge’s bedroom, cries at the sudden loud noise.

And then there is leg wrestling, man against man and man against woman, if the woman is wearing slacks. How strangely sweet and clarifying it is to be lying hip to hip, face to feet, with someone of the opposite sex while the circle of excited faces above counts, “One! Two! Three!” On the count of three, the inside legs, lifted on each count, are joined and a brief struggle ensues, brief as the mating of animals, and ends with a moment’s exhausted repose side by side. And then there are ways in which a woman can lift a man, by standing back to back and hooking arms at the elbows, and ways in which two people, holding tight to each other’s ankles, can somersault the length of a carpet. There seems no end to what bodies can do, but at last Bill Maloney complains that if he has another drink he will fall down and why the hell isn’t there any food?

The Englehardts remember the beef casserole they were going to heat. Milly Tremayne, fortunately, with the help of Fritz Tyler, Becky Neusner, Betsey Englehardt, and Mark Maloney, has got the meal started in the oven and fed the younger, ravenous children on baloney sandwiches, chili, and tuna salad left over from other meals. The television set has been rescued from the living room and plugged in upstairs, its rabbit ears augmented with Reynolds Wrap that the Neusner twins, who are clever about such things, took from a kitchen drawer. The children also have fed the three dogs and two cats, even though, unbeknownst to all except the animals (who didn’t tell), Marge had fed them earlier. She disappeared into her bedroom when little Dorothea began to cry and never, come to think of it, returned. Worn out with their drinking and wrestling, the grownups in sudden spurts of familial conscience now scold the children for being so addicted to television (some dreadful car-chase thing, totally unsuitable) and pack them into their bunk beds and cots and sleeping bags.

Dinner, served at ten o’clock, feels anticlimactic; angels of awkward silence keep passing overhead, and Linda Tyler, quite prettily, keeps yawning, showing the velvety red lining of her mouth, her tense tongue, the horseshoe arc of her lower teeth. Deborah Neusner is sure she has broken her toe; she reinjured it when the corduroy armchair tipped over while she was trying to do a headstand on it. Ruth Englehardt says, “There’s a hospital in Barre,” which might mean that they should drive her to it, or that it is too far to drive anyone to, or that Deborah is being ridiculous to think she has a broken toe. Ruth has not been blind to the frequency with which, in the night’s tumbling, Deborah and Lee bumped or rubbed against each other. Bernadette Maloney says she just can’t keep her eyes open another minute; it must be the Vermont air.

Only one table for bridge can be mustered. Bill and Lee are keen to play, and it seems Ruth might be willing but that something during the evening has offended her—perhaps being the last woman invited to knock the matchbox over, perhaps Marge’s somehow taking over little Dorothea, perhaps feeling that as the mother of a child much younger than anyone else’s she is not as free as they, as frivolous—and she says no, she thinks she’ll put a load of dishes into the washer and then go to bed. Bernadette and Linda help her. Even Andy Tyler makes a move for the kitchen, his slim hands lifted as if to pat something agreeably yielding, but the other men coarsely, in voices that grind together like gears and gravel, insist he play bridge with them. Ralph, who at the dinner table, without warning, while plucking at his mustache, seemed to turn green and wiggly like the elephant king in *Babar*, has disappeared into the dismal room, beyond the kitchen, where he slept last night. Ruth’s helpers at the dishwasher have taken from her the cue that the time has come in the weekend to say no, and they, at first coquettishly and then quite firmly, resist the men’s importunities to make the fourth. This leaves Deborah, who has been sitting on the living-room floor sorrowfully inspecting her bare foot. Her feet and legs have a certain chunkiness, a bit like that of children; the mismatch of her doughy, low-waisted figure with the fineness of her face—the tapering long chin, the moist brown eyes, the pensive dents at the corners of her mouth, a hint of haughtiness in the high bridge of her nose—forms the secret of her charm, her vulnerability. She says that with the pain in her toe she wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway, so why not? The men cheer. She turns and explains to someone behind her, rolling her eyes so the whites seem to leap from a Biblical tableau, “Sweetie, these men are crazy to have me play bridge with them!”

But Josh is no longer standing there, solicitously. He has crept upstairs. Fleeing the scene of last night’s horror, so bone-weary he seems to be floating, he crosses the hall in his pajamas and looks into the girls’ dormitory, where Deborah had said there was an extra bunk. All four beds are empty; he tries to imagine which one his wife sleeps in and, silent and light as last night’s cat, climbs into the bunk above it. A low-watt lightbulb under a brown shade patterned in pinholes is burning across the room; he pulls the covers over his head and wishes himself invisible and very small. There is a soft sound around him, distinct from the conversation and scraping of chairs downstairs. A sound with its own life, with subtle pauses and renewals and changes of mind. Of course. Rain. Those huge clouds this afternoon.

He is not conscious of falling asleep. He is awakened by some small noise, a delicate alteration, in the room. He opens one eye, frightened that if he opens two he will be ousted from this haven. Linda Tyler has entered, in a white nightgown. Her shadowy nipples tap the cloth from within. Her entire slender body appears angelic, lifted at all its points by a lightness that leaves her preoccupied face behind, sullen and even ugly, unaware of being watched. This impassive sad face looms close to his eye, and vanishes. She has put herself into the bunk beneath him. The lamp with its bright pinholes has been switched off. Josh can just barely make out across the room, by the hall light that slides itself like a huge yellow letter under the door, that Bernadette Maloney, with her splash of black hair, is asleep in the lower bunk and some other woman, unseeable, in the top. The rain continues its purring, its caressing of the roof shingles, its leisurely debate with itself, drowning out the gentle breathing of the women. This is lovely. This is bliss.

When Monday morning arrives, everyone is irritable, though the rain has stopped. Only Josh, it would seem, slept well. Evidently, Marge emerged from her bedroom when Ruth, after kibitzing at bridge for an hour, went in, to transfer Dorothea to the living room, and Marge suggested to Deborah that she switch beds with her, so the other women wouldn’t be disturbed when the bridge at last was over. Also, there was something mysterious about her not being there in case Ralph “got ideas.” So Marge herself must have been the unseeable woman in the other top bunk. The bridge had lasted until three. Deborah has taken so much aspirin her stomach burns and she got hardly an hour’s worth of sleep, in Marge’s bed, but this morning she does doubt that the toe is actually broken. If it was broken, she couldn’t take a step; she demonstrates, on the kitchen floor, some limping strides, and Josh thinks of how lightly Linda moved into his vision last night, her breasts uplifted behind their veil, and how he slept all night with her beneath him, awakening once or twice with an erection but listening to the rain intermingled with the women’s gentle breathing and sinking with his steely burden deep into sweet sleep again.

He volunteers, so full of energy, to go out and split some more wood. Ralph, who looks only half sick today, but with a curious pinkness around his eyes as if he were wearing his old rosy ski goggles, says one of the boys broke off the maul, up at the neck, by swinging and missing the wedge. The boy, unnamed, is Matthew Maloney, and Mark and Mary were leaders in this morning’s plot to make French toast for the children’s breakfast, which has left everything in the kitchen sticky with syrup. So the Maloneys as a family are in bad odor, and Bill and Bernadette go out on the porch to fight about something—his staying up till three, perhaps, or her failure to supervise the making of the French toast.

She has been gossiping, actually, over coffee in the living room with Andy Tyler. As the weekend wears on the sex distinctions wear down, as limestone statues turn androgynous in the weather. Bill’s drinking, Bernadette confided to Andy, really has passed well beyond the social stage, and she is afraid it’s beginning to hurt him at work. As for herself, as soon as Teresa hits kindergarten, she’s going back to nursing and complete her R.N.; once you have your cap, you’re ready for anything. A woman has to think that way these days, no matter what the Church says—these ridiculous old men, who have never known love or had families, telling us how to behave. Seeing her wince as she moved her head for emphasis, Andy offered to massage her neck, and she let him, not stretching out on the sofa—that would have been too much, at least at this stage—but perching on the edge of the corduroy armchair so he could get at her shoulder muscles with his thumbs. She groaned, “That feels so good. It’s sleeping with a strange pillow does me in every time. My doctor says I have a very delicate cervical area. Up top, of course.”

Perhaps this massage is what she and Bill were fighting about. It hasn’t been a very good weekend for Bernadette, what with Deborah and Ruth between them getting such a lock on Lee. The Maloneys, at any rate, are the first to pack up and leave, though it takes them all morning. They have all sorts of yard work at home to do, and they want to beat that terrible rush, it happens every Columbus Day, on 89 and 93, especially at the Hooksett tollbooth. The Neusners wave goodbye from the porch and wonder if they, too, shouldn’t be thinking about going. They are tender with each other, each having endured a night without sleep, and each having fallen more deeply in love with a person outside the marriage—with Lee, with Linda. Also, the twins have a Cub Scout party in Newton they had hoped to get to. The father of one of the pack leaders knows a linebacker for the Patriots and he’s supposed to come and give the kids an inspirational message.

As for Marge and Ralph, they seem pleased to have gotten through the weekend with no more showing than did. They beg the Englehardts and Tylers not to go. The six of them, the hard core, sit around in the living room lunching on leftovers and finishing a bottle of red wine found at the back of the refrigerator. There are few leftovers, and the supply of wood also appears to have been exhausted, for what is in the fireplace smokes and fails to catch, in spite of repeated kindlings by muttering, grunting Ralph. Even the cigar in the center of his face has gone out. Every motion he makes, up or down, seems to give him pain: old football injuries. “Y-you young fellas, w-w-wait till you get to be my age,” he says to Andy and Lee, though he is only a year or two older.

They are sleepily at ease, these six, the two other couples gone. They sit sprawled in a kind of spiritual deshabille, open to inspection, their dismissive remarks about the Maloneys and Neusners desultory and not unfond, their inventory of one another’s failings and wounds mostly silent, an unspoken ticking-off. “I asked Bill how Mass had been,” Lee complains, “and he nearly bit my head off.” Andy contributes, “Bernadette gave me quite an earful, how she hates the Church. I think she’s fixing to bust out of the whole shmeer.” “And oh my goodness, I don’t mean to be the complaining type,” Ruth says, “but wasn’t our little Debbie absolutely insufferable, a cat in with the catnip with all that bridge?” “They’re very quick learners,” Lee says, leaving who “they” are up in the air, and trusting Andy to keep silent about how little time he, Lee, spent in the boys’ dormitory last night. His mild big blue eyes are still a baby’s beneath his bald dome; Ruth’s frizzy crown of honey-blond hair seems avid, as do her sharp nose and flexible quick mouth and the pockets of emaciated shadow beneath her cheekbones. She and Andy do most of the talking, Lee and Marge most of the appreciative laughing. Marge’s good humor is striking; as the pressure of being a hostess lifts, she expands, and in her loose-hanging man’s shirt distinctly shows middle-aged spread, the fleshly generosity of a beauty who has fulfilled her duties and knows herself to be, whatever shape the future will bring, basically beautiful. Her headband today is turquoise. Ralph squints at her and appears both puzzled and wise, a bloodshot old owl who can still swoop down from a branch and carry off in his claws a piping, furry treasure.

After an hour and a half of this, this complacent torpor, Linda can’t stand it. She jumps up and announces she is going on another leaf walk. Do any of the littles want to go with her? Surprisingly, a few do, again all girls—Christine, Audrey, and Betsey. Also, Wolf comes; he misses Ginger and Toby. They file diagonally across the trampled softball field, leaving the barn behind them on the right, into the long strip of woods along the creek, which has grown up thick since the remote days when all this difficult land was cleared for farming. Bits of old stone wall and tumbled-in cellar holes hide in the woods. The sound of the cars on the road can barely be heard.

Linda gestures up and around her. “The bright colors we’ve all come all the way up here to admire are, above all, the turning leaves of the maple tree, especially the sugar maple, from which we get—?”

“Maple syrup,” says Christine Tremayne, who knows she is homely, but will make up for it in life by being dutiful.

“But all the trees contribute, from the stately beech, which you can recognize by its smooth gray bark, and the birch family, of which you especially know the white, or paper, birch, from which the Indians used to make—?”

“Canoes,” says Betsey Englehardt. She misses the Neusner twins, even though Zebulon did take the rope quoits and throw them down the well so nobody could play the game anymore. When she cried about it, her father explained to her at length why Jewish children are spoiled.

“The last trees to let go of their leaves are the oaks,” Linda tells the children. She picks up an oak leaf and holds it out to impress upon them its lobed, deeply indented shape. “Even in the winter snows, the oak will cling to its old brown leaves. The *first* tree to let go tends to be another giant of the forest—the ash. Its leaves, the only opposite feather-compound leaves in the American forest, turn an unusual purplish-blue color, unlike anything else, and then suddenly, one day, are gone. Girls, look up and around you. Those who went walking with me Saturday, do you notice any difference?”

“More sky,” says Audrey, her own daughter, who knows what answer she wants.

“That’s right,” Linda says, intensely grateful. “And yet, standing here, who can see a leaf fall?”

No one speaks. A minute passes. No leaf falls.

“Oh, if we stood here long enough,” Linda concedes, “or if there were a wind, or a hard rain like we had last night; but normally it happens unobserved, the moment when the root of the stem, where the bud once was, decides the time has come to let go. But it happens.” She looks upward and lifts her arms. The widened light falls upon her face and palms, and the little girls grow still, feeling threatened by something within the woman that she is pulling from the air, from the reds and golds trembling around them. “Nobody sees it happen, but it does. For suddenly, it seems, the woods are bare.”