

THE FALLING LEAVES

This year it had come late—this season of northwest gusts and morning frost and pumpkin markets. The lingering Indian summer, so blissfully content, so languorously wan, had been abundantly long, mellow, and golden warm, its hazy balm not vanishing at all until forced out of town the day before last by a gasp of wheezing temperatures. Foggy air crystallized. City breaths materialize visible once again, now only a few days before the first of November. The clean sweep of autumn winds tidied the avenues, to give a sense of purposeful vigor to the renewed traffic, the buffed town cars of the city spurred into their newly-revitalized errands while gliding link to re-forged link among the polished social chainwork. Unhurriedly fluttering leaves had seemed tirelessly patient, waiting past the usual calendar as they ever-so-slowly acquiesced to change; but, as tracked by the daily evening's forecasts, they gradually crept in a flurry of vermilions and russets down the valleys from the chilling north. Christina had felt the change.

Days, indeed, shortened, under a pall of cloud. Jack and Christina—together or perhaps separately (who remembered?)—decreed a pilgrimage, an impromptu get-away trip out to leaf country up the valley, perhaps even into Vermont, a trip that thousands of curious Manhattan-dwellers intended. For Jack and Christina it was not exactly a perennial rite, but certainly a rather welcome chance to find those lost places and to re-discover a slower world and to marvel, freshly, at a splash of carnival of colour preceding grey of winter. The Hudson Valley and into the hills of New England lay arrayed like an exuberant scarecrow, waiting to be judged in a contest for eclectic and dazzling finery.

Jack had ambled away to the garage for the Volvo. When Christina, bundled, came out and locked behind her the heavy wrought-iron front door, herself braced and secure in layers of soft cotton flannel and cashmere—a comfy feeling of snug and cedar-fragranced and woodsy, she noticed a delicate skim of thin ice glazed along the gutter; and she could smell that most beautifully reminiscent and evocative of city smells: bittersweet woodsmoke on

the clear blue air. Some invisible chimneys down this block perfumed autumn's breath. Rare, but warm and earthy and enticing, this faint curl of sharp hearthsmoke over the rooftops grasped Christina, pulling her to think in two directions at once: back to memory and ahead to Thanksgiving and the holidays—apples and nuts, snowflakes, garnet wines, tinsel, candleglow, and the holidays' own smells of nutmeg spices and pine and vanilla. She breathed in deeply, savouringly, contemplating a crackling fireplace, a pear in caramelized sugar, a dusting of peaceful fresh snow on the windowsill, a warm drink. The stone-faced steely city, crag grey and scraped to chafing, was now instantly a beautiful vision, a rosy aurora shivering with anticipation.

As she picked a scrap of debris from the juniper bush in its urn by the door, searching along the sleeping street, Christina caught sight of Jack coming from the corner; she watching his heavy hiking boots stomping, a folded *Times* beneath one arm, his hands wrapped around a lidded container of hot coffee. She marveled at how he was still the boy, as ever, even after these eight years of marriage, a strapping boy with ear-warmers instead of a hat. What a marvel! What a living

memory, still in this moment! Possessive down to the last eyelash and freckle as she could be concerning his unfurled enthusiasms—so immoderately endearing—and as in those years passed still enamoured, she, curiously, shunning petulance, asked, "Where's the car?"

"I left it on Lexington at the corner," he answered, sipping at the deli-cup, "There was a space," his eyes twinkling awake from the coffee, and checking in quick up-and-down glance her buttons and gloves and knitted cap, "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Let's go," he said. He turned back toward the corner.

"And my coffee?" queried Christina, a half-quiet chuckle astir at her lips, yet while following slowly and deliberately.

"You can finish this one. We'll stop again outside the city," Jack returned. But he still held the paper cup, leading on toward the corner through the blue chill air and faint smell of the woodsmoke.

Enrobed in the automobile now passing through the upper end of the park Christina could see many steadfast green leaves still

hanging on, only small patches of colour hiding like hesitant birds at the tops of trees, swaying in the northerly wind. Turning onto the Hudson Parkway where there were flocked many zipping vehicles, destinations varied, they veered away from the taller blocks, the older stone-grey buildings, enormous and solid, where plodding in woolen socks with coffee mugs in hand, people along Riverside Drive were starting their bright day, an expectant city Saturday. On the river Christina watched a solitary green barge, pushing slowly and stoically against the shimmering greyness of the cold murky flow. Christina leaned back in the soft seat, feeling the weight of the car speeding forward, and stared at the heavy barge seemingly motionless and floating. She relished within her own feeling of movement, pressing forward into a new day, a break in the predictable routine, getting out and into the countryside. The car's heater warmed them like a toaster, while speeding off further northward. Other cars passed them, but neither Jack nor Christina seemed to take notice; they were snug in their own worlds, intent on their own movement, lulled by their own floating reverie at this moment of this day, paying more

attention nimbly to the peripheries of the roadway and silent interior landscapes. The small offices and warehouses, shopping strips and railway stations that were the tattered edges of the city now were intertwined with more clutter-free space, openings of sky above the roadway that stretched further on into tree-lined lots, and beyond the river the distant outline of the southeastern-edge tops of the iridescent Catskills.

How odd—and silly, Christina thought—how quaint. As the car sped onward and she had let her eyes wander only for a straying moment up toward the sun visor, and it suddenly struck her as somehow unusually depressing that whomever in their gray eminence of paternalism designed motorcars should put a vanity mirror only above one side's seat: the passenger, the woman's side. For even all the past years that since whenever women had been drivers—securing the home-front during the war, chauffeuring children to modern schools, these raising a teen-aged family alone, these working independently—it seemed that in the thoughts of men if a couple were involved then naturally, automatically, a man would drive and

the woman would defer, like baggage. What a ridiculous nineteenth century pseudo-thought. The thought that being only a woman would automatically mean needing protection or coddling was certainly old-fashioned and out of fashion. It was presumptuous. Christina cleared her throat, swallowing hard on this sour nugget. It dried up, as if leeching, the sweet sap of the passing trees, all swaying and supple, all sturdy and strong, spreading to touch, indistinguishable female from male. She wanted something wet, soothing, like a cup of tea. She turned, almost appraising and apprehensive, to look in his direction at the comfortably serene beige softness of his side of the car; and Jack stared numbly straight ahead at the roadway, unblinkingly.

They stopped, after some debate about the merits of several, at a country diner—actually a small barn-like building dressed to resemble some rustic log hunting lodge, sitting peacefully near a small grove of sugar maple and birches. A wooden Indian figure guarded the door. Here they filled themselves up on pancakes with maple syrup, hot coffee and eggs; once again could amuse their tolerant citified selves while guessing incoherently and lazily about the goings

of the other customers—those unheedful strangers passing along the byways. They took time, relaxed, and watched out the front windows at the honey-coloured sunshine streaming through the translucent leaves shining like a stained glass chapel in the changing light. Their waitress, somewhat harried, was busy with her other activities, and so let the lingering couple loiter. At last, they paid her at the register and stepped out onto the porch, feeling as heavy and stuffed as lazy housecats content with cream. Across the leaf-strewn road, fronting an old shed by a gigantic maple tree glowing like sunlight itself, was a rambling market stand, wooden and weathered, where Jack and Christina wandered pointing at cornshocks, pumpkins, and smelling and fingering the apples, red and green, some gold, mottled, fragrant and fresh. Christina could breathe in deeply this quaint homey essence, smiling to herself and running fingers through her sun-ripened hair, hope that it might pick up the tender scent of apples for Jack. Carved jack-o-lanterns peek from the corners of the stalls. As Christina looks about, poking into bins of multi-hued Indian corn and gourds, into wooden baskets of pears and imported persimmons, she

breathed so deeply, intently, so as to relish every crisp nuance of this picture perfect little oasis. Even the year's waning, the seasonal browning that signaled an encroaching necromantic winter could not mar the surface of her delight in touching these fruitful treasures, the very air that tingled around them. She, with some unexplainably potent magnetic pull, looks toward Jack, off in the corner kicking at the bundles of firelogs. They had let weeks, maybe months, slip by without simply having an entire day together. The sprinting year's clock had raced by them, and time moved on almost in a blur of other appointments, hidden by each day's other events. She puzzled. Had they made a time for a leaf-watchers holiday last year?—or was it the year before? Now Christina determined to bring back to the coldly polished city some thing reminiscent of this day, some small talisman, some delicate pinecone or fiery maple branch. She smiles at Jack from across the grey dust-motes of the sun-dappled shed, wanting achingly for him to feel fervently the flame warmth from that smile. They bought jugs of cider, smiling at how it smelled tart but sweet.

Once again nestled into the warm car they settled into that quiet labyrinth of private thoughts, while following the shaded backroads aimlessly, deeper into the woodlands blanketed in their own natural quiet, heavily quiet but for the wandering sound of an occasional V of geese far overhead and the tires against the paving. Around a steep curve some leaves might drift down, moth-like yellow, damp enough to plaster themselves to the roadway like crinkled souvenirs glued into a scrapbook. Only randomly now and again did the road widen out to include some hamlet, tucked aside, some few dark Victorian houses and a meager convenience market under the watchful austere white stare of a tall glowing spire-topped church. Further from the city, further from morning, the meadows and dairy barns and woodland hills meandered away toward a distant amber expanse, bordered by a stone wall, and dotted thickly with sunflare-coloured trceries of abundant leafy swirling branches, crackling tangerine-y as bonfires. In a far off patch the sky was losing its crystal blue to a drift of thin dove-hued cloud streaks, hovering with coldness, tattered and wispy like a too thin scarf. Christina watched them through the tinted

windowglass. Jack kept his eyes on the road ahead, darting quick glances to the sides, to spots of shouting colour or oddly shaped trees. Christina studied the clouds as they slowly spread, packing heavily into a mass behind the trees, temperature dropping.

"You're quiet," she said.

Jack's eyes did not waver from the road, measuring its curve up ahead; and Jack allowed the strained release of a stubby unpronounced grunt, but did not say anything more. Then Christina, nettled, stealing a tentative peek, sighed, her breath escaping as slow steady deflation. So it would be a climb, a steep hard climb out of a dusty dry crevice. So be it. She looked across to Jack, who gripped the steering wheel now with tight hard hands. "I should not—will not—back away," she thought, then tentatively suggested aloud, "You've been quiet a lot lately." Jack's solitary comment, once again, was an indefinite but concise small "--umm".

"I know how busy things can get," Christina pressed on. "We come—we go. We haven't sat down and really talked in—I don't know how long. It's so easy to get tied up in other things; then not

notice how we've passed by without really seeing each other was there. All those plans with the committee for the benefit have kept me so in and out—up and down—not to even mention that Susan Apston is impossible. Well, of course, of course, I know you're very busy, busier, too...," it was a pause without seeming end, "And you've fallen asleep with the television on so many times, or stayed up so late on the computer."

"Has it been that much?" He rather meant it as a rhetorical question, a stopper on this conversation. He would have preferred the quiet hum of the car, its soft leathery upholstery a cushion to any sound, any tremor.

"Yes," she answered, "rather a lot. I'm beginning to feel like I'm all by myself in the house. Today is the first time we've spent really alone—I mean—together since...since, I guess, Labor Day."

"We stowed up the house on the Island," Jack countered.

"I did. You were only there for two hours."

Jack stared ahead. He muttered, "I guess I should have come out earlier."

"I really don't see. Is there something at work? Something you should perhaps talk about? A problem?"

"No."

Christina smoothed her hand over the leather of the seat. "The point is," she emphasized, "we should spend more time together."

Jack spun his eyes to her now suddenly, sharply to the side, to cross her, "As—as snapping now?"

Christina did not answer. With a jerking hand she smoothed back a curl of hair, and stared once more out the window. A shower of purple leaves sped past them, fluttering behind in the wake and stuck on the roadway. They passed ochre fields, fenceposts, hedgerows and orchards; but an uncharted mistier silence now clung to travel with them.

After many more miles, they were merely wandering, zigzagging, in silence, amidst the afternoon's tint-shifting shades of changing landscape so far from home. In time, that seemed somehow as long as endless winter, Jack, with his surveying eyes to the undulating pass of countryside, checking its contours, eventually swung the car off the

country road and into an even narrower more remote track. There was no gate to stop them. The narrow lane, trees entwined overhead, dipped into a shallowly sloping depression where fanning out from its aperture at the chopped thicket edge across this slight platter of valley the view of hills rose again splashed with autumnal *furioso* in the distance. Jostling beyond a bit more of the bumpy incline Jack braked to a complete stop, unclenched his hands from the steering wheel, and began to stretch easingly. Unfolded from his rigid posture, he felt a release from the stiffness that had clung at him. Without a word now, but gratefully, Christina cracked open her door to a rushing of cold clean air which carried the smell somewhat of dampness and ice and mold. She unwrapped herself from her tepid spot of seat, and stepped off to look—as sometimes one must—beyond the thick cluster of cascading tree limbs for a comfortable spot to be alone for a moment in nature. So, after a moment, Jack decided to do the same, on his own side. Returning, thinking with relief he had spent quite some time exploring the crowded woodland undergrowth, releasing some chilling water on a patch of its dry grass, and looking away

windward now at the dark edge of the sky; Christina still remained beyond the wall of trees. Not wanting to sit rigidly again right away, Jack paced between the ruts in the stubbly rock-strewn path. He jammed his hands into his pockets when his fingers grew cold. He began to think he should perhaps look for Christina, as long minutes passed. At last from her obscured departure into the opposite dense tract she appeared further away down the slope, waving both arms, however not coming back toward the car. Somewhat reluctantly he trudged in her direction, as ahead she moved down the path where it began to curve behind the far edge of tangled trees until, when he had caught up to her, she threw out a pointing hand to sweepingly indicate a dazzling corpulent view of maple-coloured meadow that led to a pond spread before them, dark cobalt blue in its center and burnished bronze weeds, dark and brittle, lining its ragged edges.

"Just look—would you look at that?" she beamed. "I should have brought the camera. Oh." She broadcast a pleased smile after her discovery.

"Very nice," Jack quavered, taking rather bewildered notice himself of the clarity in this stunning view of an extravagant perfect landscape of autumnal nuances. "Aren't you cold?"

"Only a little...Look," Christina jounced her own excitement, pointing to where a rustic pier, a fishing dock really, old and bleached, snaked across into the pond reaches. "Let's, just for a minute. And there's a rowboat." Christina rushed forward, leapt onto the dock, not holding back for a moment. She strode out along the old rippled planks, hardly looking down until she reached the bend where the rowboat was moored. "I want to row out for a bit," she shouted, "...to see the view from out there."

Jack walked through the knee-clutching grass and weeds to where the dock began, but there he stopped without stepping onto it. Already Christina was lowering herself down into the creaking skiff that bobbed dizzily under her weight, throwing aside some brittle tarp, and lifting a faded oar, once painted red but now pale and greyish. "Are you coming?" she shouted again. Jack—silently, mute as a tethered scarecrow—only shook his head in the stiff breeze. Christina

unhitched the lank thread of rope, without even a curious look to the piece of old rust-enshrouded anchor chain dangling over the side; and with the tip of the oar pushed away. Serenely enough, bobbing like a blown leaf, the boat drifted out. "Sure you're not coming?" Christina shouted once more. She dipped the oar into the opaque cobalt water, slicing it with hardly a sound. Pushed several yards, when the faded little boat had reached its limit, it came to an abrupt stop with a trembling shudder. One moment before Christina had begun to notice a seeping puddle under the plank seat; and thrown by a jolt of surprise at the impact of unforeseen halt when the old chain tugged the bow around with a dry snapping crack, biting into the strakes, and this contraption listed toward the pull, Christina—balance akimbo—had tipped against the fragile side and grabbed its splinters with both her hands. She clutched the rough wood, sharp scraping shards across tender skin, as if she focused on nothing else. A bouncing wave of spuming dark water swamped her ankles, as Christina kicking like a motor of panic felt the crumbled boat's floor fall from beneath her in less than an instant. Grasping pond water gulped her in, under for a

suspended eternity of intense crushing blueness, thick above her plunged head and hands, tasting of rot and muddiness, then her slapped eyes and water-infused nose at the surface gasping for clean thin air. Christina, doused with a spinning unexpected stab of shock, could not even think at first to scream out. The glassy hard wet slammed against her, into her clothes, piercing underneath the layers, scraping her with iciness like the sharp edge of a blade. Flailing against the thick insistent water she scrafed once more. Time, inside her clogged head along with the icy coagulation, slowed then, like slow-film-replays endlessly repeating. All was silence. All she once heard, the hoarse caw, "haw, haw, haw", suspended like repeated dark shots piercing an eternity of moments, was a black crow, chuckling and hidden among the border of massed twisting trees, distantly calling, a fusillade of caws, then not. As if from some cold leaden trance she called out achingly for help. The sound hovered above her. Excruciatingly slowly she could turn her head, squinting along the top of the water at the far slippery shore, pulling back and away from her. Again she cried out. Jack stood small, smaller, on the

receding horizon, at the landward head of the dock. Christina, with numbing hands and feet, her boots filled with water, her drenched heavy clothes flaying her like sharpened chains, could so distantly but almost precisely make out a frozen image that he had not moved, had not stirred from his far ground. He stood without moving, not even a muscle of his face, his arms across his chest, staring into the distant sky. Christina raised one cramped meaningless arm. She tried to propel, but her legs were cold weights. Now again she screams. This sharp sound too did nothing but hover above her, shivering, before dropping into the water. A sting in her head brought a more salt-soaked water to her eyes; and she swallowed more mold-encrusted gushing mouthfuls, which ran piercing upward into her raw nose, causing her to sputter, breath in icy bubbles. Jack did not move, not even so much as a sway in the wind, even now. Her thoughts froze into icy blank blue-tinged blocks, silent, as solidly heavy as sitting alone in the stifling box of the closed silent car. She could hardly any longer see him, Jack—Jack, ever the strapping boy—silent, immobile. Her head drug against the water. Her clogged eyes streaked,

searched, along the rising surface. Air? Where? Panic, the incoherent grey intruder, again alighted with its dark wings enfolded on her like the lone crow she could hear, faint, “haw, haw”, piercing, calling. What? What? Thick water clawed at her, shredding her last bits of temperate flesh. The top of the water, beneath the reflective blue froth, was black.

--J. F. Lowe