# Playing with Dynamite

# John Updike

One aspect of childhood which Fanshawe had not expected to return in old age was the mutability of things—the willingness of a chair, say, to become a leggy animal in the corner of his vision, or his sensation that the solid darkness of an unlit room was teeming with presences about to bite or grab him. Headlights floated on the skin of Fanshawe’s windshield like cherry blossoms on black water, whether signifying four motorcycles or two trucks he had no idea, and he drove braced, every second, to crash into an invisible obstacle.

It had taken him over fifty years to internalize the physical laws that overruled a ten-year-old’s sense of nightmare possibilities—to overcome irrational fear and to make himself at home in the linear starkness of a universe without a supernatural. As he felt the ineluctable logic of decay tightening its grip on his body, these laws seemed dispensable; he had used them, and now was bored with them. Perhaps an object *could* travel faster than the speed of light, and we each have an immortal soul. It didn’t, terribly, matter. The headlines in the paper, trumpeting news of campaigns and pestilences, seemed directed at somebody else, like the new movies and television specials and pennant races and beer commercials—somebody younger and more easily excited, somebody for whom the world still had weight. Living now in death’s immediate neighborhood, he was developing a soldier’s jaunty indifference; if the bathtub in the corner of his eye as he shaved were to take on the form of a polar bear and start mauling him, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. Even the end of the world, strange to say, wouldn’t be the end of the world.

His wife was younger than he, and spryer. Frequently, she impatiently passed him on the stairs. One Sunday afternoon, when they were going downstairs to greet some guests, he felt her at his side like a little gust of wind, and then saw her, amazingly much reduced in size, kneeling on the stairs, which were thickly carpeted, several steps below him. He called her name, and thought of reaching down to restrain her, but she, having groped for a baluster and missed, rapidly continued on her way, sledding on her shins all the way to the bottom, where she reclined at the feet of their astonished visitors, who, no strangers to the house, had knocked and entered. “She’s all right,” Fanshawe assured them, descending at his more stately pace, for he had seen, in watching her surprising descent, that she had met no bone-breaking snag in her progress.

And indeed she did rise up, as resiliently as a cartoon cat, pink with girlish embarrassment, though secretly pleased, he could tell, at having so spontaneously provided their little party with a lively initial topic of discussion. Their guests, who included a young doctor, set her up on the sofa with a bag of ice on the more bruised and abraded of her shins, and held a discussion which concluded that she had caught her heel in the hem of her dress, unusually long in that year’s new fashion. A little rip in the stitching of the hem seemed to confirm the analysis and to remove all mystery from the event.

Yet later, after she had limped into bed beside her husband, she asked, “Wasn’t I good, not to tell everybody how you pushed me?”

“I never touched you,” Fanshawe protested, but without much passion, because he was not entirely sure. He remembered only her appearance, oddly shrunk by perspective on the stairs in their downward linear recession, and the flash of his synapses that imaged his reaching out and restraining her, and his dreamlike inability to do so. She blamed him, he knew, for not having caught her, for not having done the impossible, and this was as good as his pushing her. She had become, in their recent years together, a late-blooming feminist, and he accepted his role in her mind as the murderous man with whom she happened to be stuck, in a world of murderous men. The forces that had once driven them together now seemed to her all the product of a male conspiracy. If he had not literally pushed her on the stairs, he had compelled her to live in a house with a grandiose stairway and had dictated, in collusion with male fashion-designers, the dangerous length of her skirt and height of her heels; and this was as good as a push. He tried to recall his emotions as he watched her body cascade out of his reach, and came up with a cool note of what might be called polite astonishment, along with a high hum of constant grief, like the cosmic background radiation. He recalled a view of a town’s rooftops covered in snow, beneath a dome of utterly emptied blue sky.

His wife relented, seeing him so docilely ready to internalize her proposition. “Sweetie, you didn’t push me,” she said. “But I did think you might have caught me.”

“It was all too quick,” he said, unconvinced by his own self-defense. With the reality of natural law had faded any conviction of his own virtue. Their guests that afternoon had included his wife’s daughter, by an old and almost mythical former marriage. He could scarcely distinguish his stepchildren from his children by his own former marriage, or tell kin from spouses. He was polite to all these tan, bouncy, smooth-skinned, sure-footed, well-dressed young adults—darlings of the advertisers, the “now generation”—who claimed to be related to him, and he was flattered by their mannerly attentions, but he secretly doubted the reality of the connection. His own mother, some years ago, had lain dead for two days at the bottom of the cellar stairs of a house where he had allowed her to live alone, feeble and senile. He was an unnatural son and father both, why not a murderous husband? He knew that the incident would live in his wife’s head as if he had in fact pushed her, and thus he might as well remember it also, for the sake of marital harmony.

At the Central Park Zoo, the yellow-white polar bears eerily float in the cold water behind the plate glass, water the blue-green color on a pack of Kool cigarettes (the last cigarettes Fanshawe had smoked, thinking the menthol possibly medicinal), and if a polar bear, dripping wet, were to surface up through his empty bathtub tomorrow morning while he shaved, the fatal swat of the big clawed paw would feel, he suspected, like a cloud of pollen.

Things used to be more substantial. In those middle years, as Fanshawe gropingly recalled them, you are hammering out your destiny on bodies still molten and glowing. One day he had taken his children ice-skating on a frozen river—its winding course miraculously become a road, hard as steel, hissing beneath their steel edges. As he stood talking to the mother of some other young children, his six-year-old son had fallen at his feet, without a cry or thump, simply melting out of the lower edge of Fanshawe’s vision, which was fastened on the reddened cheeks and shining dark eyes, the perfect teeth and fascinatingly shaped and mobile lips of Erica Andrews, his fellow-parent. A noise softly bubbled up through the cracks in their conversation; the little body on the ice was whimpering, and when Fanshawe impatiently directed his son to shut up and to get up, the muffled words “I can’t” rose as if from beneath the ice.

It developed that the boy’s leg was broken. Just standing there complaining about the cold, he had lost his balance with his skate caught in a crack, and twisted his shinbone to the point of fracture. How soft and slender our growing skeletons are! Fanshawe, once his wife and the other woman and their clustering children had made the problem clear to him, carried the boy in his arms up the steep and snowy riverbank. He felt magnificent, doing so. This was real life, he remembered feeling—the idyllic Sunday afternoon suddenly crossed by disaster’s shadow, the gentle and strenuous rescue, the ride to the hospital, the emergency-room formalities, the arrival of the jolly orthopedic surgeon in his parka and Ski-Doo boots, the laying on of the cast in warm plaster strips, the drying tears, the imminent healing. Children offer access to the tragic, to the great dark that stands outside our windows, and in the urgency of their needs bestow significance upon life; their fragile lives veer toward the dangerous margins of the narrow path we have learned to tread.

“It wouldn’t have happened, of course,” his first wife said, “if you had been paying attention to him instead of to Erica.”

“What does Erica have to do with it? She was the first one to realize that the poor kid wasn’t kidding.”

“Erica has everything to do with it, as you perfectly well know.”

“This is paranoid talk,” he said. “This is Nixon-era paranoid talk.”

“I’ve gotten used to your hurting me, but I’m not going to have you hurting our children.”

“Now we’re getting really crazy.”

“Don’t you think I know why you decided to take us all ice-skating, when poor Timmy and Rose didn’t even have skates that fit? It was so unlike you, you usually just want to laze around reading the *Times* and complaining about your hangover and watching *The Wide World of Golf*. It was because you knew the Andrewses were going. It was to see her. Her or somebody else. That whole sleazy party crowd, you don’t get enough of them Saturday nights any more. Why don’t you go live with them? Live with somebody else, anybody except me!

Go. Go!”

She didn’t mean it, but it was thrilling to see her so energized, such a fury, her eyes flashing, her hair crackling, her slicing gestures carving large doomed territories out of the air. At that age, Fanshawe saw now, we are creating selves, potent and plastic, making and unmaking homes, the world in our hands. We are playing with dynamite. All around them, as he and his first wife stood hip-deep in children, marriages blew up. Marriage counsellors, child psychiatrists, lawyers, real-estate agents prospered in the ruins. Now, in old age, it remained only to generate a little business for the mortician, and an hour’s pleasant work for the local clergyman. Just as insurance salesmen had at last stopped approaching him, and the movie-makers had written him out of audience demographics, so the armies of natural law, needed all over the globe to detonate dynamite where it counted, had left him to wander in a twilight of inconsequence.

In early August, a pair of birds decided they had to build a nest on the Fanshawes’ porch. If he could trust his eyes and his mother’s battered old bird-book, they were house finches, or else bay-breasted warblers too far north. Something must have gone wrong with their biological clocks. It was too late in the season for nesting, but, even more willful than children, they persisted, while warbling back and forth furiously, in piling up twigs and wands of hay on the small shelves created by the capitals of his porch pillars. The twiggy accumulations blew off, or Mrs. Fanshawe briskly knocked them off with a broom. She tended to be less sentimental than he. It was her clean white porch, and her porch boards that would be spattered with bird shit. But the warblers kept coming back, as children keep demanding to go to an amusement park or to buy a certain kind of heavily advertised candy until finally, adult resistance worn down, they have their way. A pillar next to the house afforded shelter enough from the wind; the twigs and grass accumulated, and from its precarious pile the stone-colored head of the female bird haughtily stared down one afternoon when the Fanshawes returned from a day in town shopping. She had her nest. The warbling ceased. The male had vanished. Then, after two weeks, the female, it dawned on the Fanshawes, had also vanished. Vanished without a warble of goodbye. Something had not worked. All the time she had been in the nest, her stony profile had radiated anger.

Getting out the stepladder, Fanshawe fetched down an empty, eggless nest, its rim tidily circled round with guano, its rough materials worked in the center to a perfect expectant cavity. A nest in vain. Whatever had those birds been thinking of? His impulse was to save the nest—his mother had always been saving birds’ nests, setting them in bookshelves, or on top of the piano—but his wife held out an open garbage bag, as though the innocent wild artifact were teeming with germs. *Birds’ nests shouldn’t go in garbage bags*, he thought, but dropped it in. *We’re in this together*, he thought, as in the shade of the porch his wife stared up at him with her shining dark eyes, trying to control her impatience as he wrestled with his sentimental scruple.

At Fanshawe’s fifth (at a guess) birthday party, a piece of cake had mysteriously vanished from the plate in front of him and reappeared in his lap. He had never touched it; it was an authentic miracle, there in the candlelight and childish babble. He could still see it lying on his corduroy lap, the cake peeping out from its inverted dish. It had been a chocolate cake with caramel icing of a type only his mother had ever made for him, its sugary stiffness most delicious where the icing between the layers met the outside layer in a thick, sweet T. A few years later, lying in bed with a fever, he had seen a black stick, at a slight angle, hop along beyond the edge of the bed, as if in one of the abstract sections of *Fantasia*. In those years, the knit of the physical world was stretched thin, and held a number of holes. When he was in the fourth grade, his new glasses vanished from his pocket, in their brown round-ended metal case, and a week later, cutting across a weedy vacant lot thinking of them and of how hard his father would have to work to buy him another pair, he looked down, and there the case was, like a long egg in the tangled damp grass. Inside it, the glasses had become steamy, as if worn by an overexcited, myopic ghost. Perhaps this was less a miracle than the transposed birthday cake, but the fact that he had been thinking of them *at that very moment* made it the strangest of all. Could it be that our mind does, secretly, control the atoms? On the strength of that possibility, Fanshawe had never quite broken his childish habit of prayer. Yet, as a child, staring at a model airplane that had unaccountably come unglued during the night, or confronting the bulging shadows at the head of the stairs, he found it hard to think of God and Jesus; the supernatural seemed no more elevated in its aims than a Walt Disney animated feature.

That curious cartoon lightness and jumpiness had returned to the texture of his life. Fanshawe would find himself in a room with no knowledge of how he got there—as if the film had been broken and spliced. As he lay in bed, the house throbbed with footsteps, heard through the pillow; they fell silent when he lifted his head. Perhaps it had been his heartbeat, stealthy as a burglar.

In the sedate neighborhood where he now lived, everyone was old, more or less. For years he had watched the neighbor to his right, a widower, slowly deteriorate, his stride becoming a shuffle, his house and yard gradually growing shabbier and shaggier, inch by inch, season by season, in increments as small as those, visible only to stop-action camerawork, whereby a flower blooms. The two men would converse across the fence from time to time; Fanshawe once or twice offered to do some pruning for his neighbor. “No thanks,” would be the answer. “I’ll get to it, when I’m feeling a little more lively.” We look ahead and see random rises and falls; the linear diminishment so plain to others is invisible to us.

One Saturday morning, a fire engine appeared along his neighbor’s curb, though there was no sign of smoke. The fireman, who had moved up the front walk with some haste, stayed inside so long that Fanshawe grew tired of spying. An hour later, with the fire engine still parked there, its great throbbing motor wastefully running, a small foreign convertible appeared, and a fashionably dressed young woman—all things are relative, perhaps she was forty—uncoiled rapidly out of the low-slung interior, flashing her long, smooth shins in their glossy pantyhose, and clicked up the flagstone walk. This was his neighbor’s daughter, who explained to Fanshawe later, at the party after the funeral, that her father had been found by the cleaning lady, sitting up in his favorite chair, shaved and dressed in a coat and tie as if expecting a caller. So that was death, Fanshawe realized—a jerky comedy of unusual comings and goings on a Saturday morning, followed in a few days by a funeral and a yellow For Sale sign on the house next door.

“Thank you for being such a good neighbor to my father,” the daughter said. “He often mentioned it.”

“But I wasn’t,” Fanshawe protested. “I never did a thing for him. I just let him”—he suppressed the word “deteriorate”—“go his way.”

Why had the dead man benignly lied? Why had the cleaning lady called the fire department and not the police? And why had the fireman never shut off his engine, discharging carbon monoxide and consuming fossil fuel at taxpayer expense? Fanshawe didn’t ask; there were too many mysteries to pursue.

He often felt now, going through the motions of earthly existence—shaving, dressing, responding to questions, measuring up to small emergencies—that he was enacting a part in a play at the end of its run, while mentally rehearsing his lines in the next play to be put on. It was repertory theatre, evidently. When he remembered how death had once loomed at him, so vivid and large it had a distinct smell, like the scent of chalk dust up close to the schoolroom blackboard, he marvelled, rather patronizingly, at his timorous earlier self. When had he ceased to fear death—or, so to speak, ceased to *grasp* it? The moment was as clear in his mind as a black-and-white-striped gate at a border crossing: the moment when he first slept with Erica Andrews.

How inky-black her eyes seemed, amid the snowy whiteness of the sheets! There was snow outside, too, hushing the world in sunstruck brilliance. Meltwater tapped in the aluminum gutters. There had been a feeling of coolness, of freshly laundered sheets, of contacts never before achieved, by fingertips icy with nervousness. He had peeled off her black lace bra—her back arched up from the mattress to give him access to the catches—almost reluctantly, knowing there would be a white flash that would obliterate everything that had existed of his life before. She had smiled encouragingly, timorously. They were in it together. Her teeth were, after all, less than perfect, with protuberant canines that made the bicuspids next to them seem shadowy. The pupils of her shining eyes were contracted to the size of pencil-leads by the relentless light; he had never seen anything so clearly as he saw her now—the fine mechanism of her, the specialized flesh of her lips, the tripwires of her hair. He got out of the bed to lower the shade, the sight of her was such a dazzlement.

A dull-reddish bird, a female cardinal, was hopping about on the delicately tracked-up snow beneath the bird feeder a story below, pecking at scattered seed. A whole blameless town of roofs and smoking chimneys and snow-drenched trees stretched beyond, under an overturned bowl of blue light that made Fanshawe’s vision wince. He drew the curtain on it and in merciful twilight returned to where Erica lay still as a stick. He heard his blood striding in his skull, he felt so full of life. Sex or death, you pick your poison. That had been forever ago. She was still younger and spryer than he, but all things were relative. He did not envy those forever-ago people, for whom the world had such a weight of consequence. Like the Titans, they seemed beautiful but sad in their brief heyday, transition figures between chaos and an airier pantheon.