# Killing

# John Updike

LYNNE’S FATHER’S HAND felt warm and even strong, though he lay unconscious, dying. In this expensive pastel room of the nursing home, he was starving, he was dying of thirst, as surely as if he had been abandoned in a desert. His breath stank. The smell from the parched hole that had been his mouth was like nothing else bodily she had ever smelled—foul but in no way fertile, an acid ultimate of carnality. Yet the presence was still his; in his unconscious struggle for breath, his gray face flitted, soundlessly muttering, into expressions she knew—the helpless raised eyebrows that preceded an attempt at the dinner table to be droll, or a sudden stiffening of the upper lip that warned of one of his rare, pained, carefully phrased reprimands. A lawyer, lost to his family in the machinations of cities and corporations, he had been a distant father, reluctant to chastise, the dinnertime joke his most comfortable approach to affection. He had spent his free time out of the house, puttering at tasks he lacked a son to share. In New Hampshire, over many summers, he had built a quarter-mile of stone wall with his own hands; in Boston, there had been the brick terrace to level and weed; in the suburb of his retirement, compost heaps to tend and broken fences to repair and redesign. In the year past, his hand had lost its workman’s roughness. There was no task his failing brain could direct his hand to seize. Unthinkingly, Lynne had asked him, this past summer, to help one of the children to build a birdhouse; manfully, chuckling with energy, he had assembled the tools, the wood, the nails. His pipe clenched in his teeth as jauntily as ever, he had gone through the familiar motions while his grandson gazed in gathering disbelief at the hammered-together jumble of wood. The old man stood back at last, gazed with the child, saw clearly for a moment, and abandoned such jobs forever. Dry and uncallused, his hand rested warm in his daughter’s.

Sometimes it returned her squeeze, or the agitation that passed across his face caused his shallow pulse to race. “Just relax,” she would chant to him then, bending close, into his caustic breath. “Re-lax. It’s all right. I’m right here, Daddy. I won’t go away.”

Lynne was reminded, in these hours of holding and waiting, of a childhood episode scarcely remembered for thirty years. It had been so strange, so out of both their characters. She had been a cheerful child—what they called in those years “well adjusted.” At the age of thirteen or so, the first of three daughters to be entering womanhood, she was visited by insomnia, an inexplicable wakefulness that made sleep a magic kingdom impossible to reach and that turned the silhouetted furniture of her room into presences that might, if left unwatched, come horribly to life. Her mother dismissed the terror with the same lightness with which she had explained menstruation, as an untidiness connected with “the aging process”; it was her father, surprisingly, who took the development seriously. As Lynne remembered it, he would come home pale from one of his innumerable meetings—the cold of the Common on his face, the weight of City Hall on his shoulders—and, if he found her awake, would sit by her bed for hours, holding her hand and talking enough to be “company.” Perhaps what had seemed hours to her had been a few minutes, perhaps her recollection had expanded a few incidents into a lengthy episode. In her memory, his voice had been not merely paternal but amused, leisurely, enjoying itself, as if this visiting were less a duty than an occasion to be relished, in the manner of the country world where he had been a boy, where sitting and talking had been a principal recreation. He had not begrudged her his time, and she wanted not to begrudge him her company now. She would put him to sleep.

Yet she hated the nursing home, hated and fled it—its cloaked odors, its incessant television, its expensive false order and hypocrisy of false cheer, its stifling vulgarity. These common dying and their coarse nurses were the very people her father had raised her to avoid, to rise above. “Well, aren’t you the handsome boy!” the supervisor had exclaimed to him upon admittance, and tapped him on the arm like a brash girl friend.

His body, tempered by the chores he had always assigned himself, had stubbornly outlasted his judicious brain; then, suddenly, it began to surrender. A succession of little strokes had brought him, who a week earlier could shuffle down the hall between Lynne and a male nurse, to the point where he could not swallow. A decision arose. “The decision is yours,” the doctor said. His face was heavy, kindly, self-protective, formal. The decision was whether or not to move her father to a hospital, where he could be fed intravenously and his life could be prolonged. She had decided not. The fear that the ambulance ride would compromise her father’s dignity had been uppermost in her mind. But from the way the doctor seized her hand and pronounced with a solemn, artificial clarity, “You have made a wise decision,” Lynne realized that her decision had been to kill her father. He could not swallow. He could not drink. Abandoned, he must die.

Her voice took flight over the telephone, seeking escape from this responsibility. Why had the doctors given it to her? Couldn’t they do it themselves? What would her mother have done? Lynne called her sisters, one in Chicago, one in Texas. Of course, they agreed, she had made the right decision. The only decision. Their common inheritance, their mother’s common sense, spoke through them so firmly that she almost forgave her sisters the safe distance from which they spoke. Yet their assurances evaporated within an hour. She called her minister; he came and had tea and told her that her decision was right, even holy. He seemed hard-boiled and unctuous both. After he left, she sat and held in her palms, votively, a teacup that had been her mother’s. Her mother had died two years ago, leaving her daughters her china, her common sense, and a stately old man disintegrating from the head down. The cup, with its rim of gold and its band of cinnamon-red arabesques, had become sacred in this extremity; Lynne closed her eyes and waited for her mother to speak through the fragile cool shape in her hands. Sensing nothing but a widening abyss, she opened her eyes and telephoned her husband, who was estranged from her and living in Boston. He had lodged himself in the grid of Back Bay, a few blocks from where she had grown up.

“Of course, dear,” Martin said, his voice grave and paternal, as it had become. “You’ve made the only possible decision.”

“Oh, you can say that, you can all say that,” Lynne cried into the hard receiver, heavier than the cup had been. “But I’m the one who had to do it. I’m killing him, and I’m the one who has to go watch it happen. It’s in*cred*ible. His mouth *wants water*. He’s drying *up!*”

“Why visit him?” Martin asked. “Isn’t he unconscious?”

“He might wake up and be frightened,” she said, and the image sprang a sobbing so great she had to hang up.

Martin called back a judicious while later. Lynne was touched, thinking that he had telepathically given her time to cry herself out, go to the bathroom, and heat some coffee. But it seemed he had spent the time discussing her with his mistress. “Harriet says,” he said, authoritatively, “the other decision would be downright neurotic, to cart him to the hospital and torture him with a lot of tubes. Not to mention the money.”

“Tell Harriet I certainly don’t want to do anything that would seem neurotic to her. She can relax about the money, though; she is not one of his heirs.”

Martin sounded hurt. “She was very sympathetic with you. She started to cry herself.”

“Tell her thanks a lot for her sympathy. Why doesn’t she show it by letting you come back?”

“I don’t want to come back,” Martin said, in his new, grave, paternal voice.

“Oh, *shit* to you.” Hanging up, Lynne wondered at her sensation of joy, of release; then realized that, in her anger with this man and his presumptuous mistress, she had for the first time in days thought of something other than the nursing home, and her father’s dying, and her guilt.

She could not make herself stay. She would hold his hand for minutes that seemed hours, having announced her presence in his deaf ear, having settled herself to wait by his side. His face as it dried was sinking in upon itself, with that startled expression mummies have; the distance between his raised eyebrows and lowered eyelashes seemed enormous. His hand would twitch, or her hand, wandering, would come upon his pulse, and the sign of life would horrify her, like the sight of roaches scuttling in the sink when, in the middle of the night, the kitchen light is suddenly turned on. “Daddy, I must leave for a minute,” she would say, and flee.

Her step seemed miraculously elastic to herself as she strode down the hall. The heads of the dying bobbed about her amid white sheets. There was a little gauzy-haired, red-faced lady who, locked into a geriatric chair, kept crying “Help” and clapping her hands. She paused as Lynne passed, then resumed. “Help.” Clap clap. *“Help.”* The barred door. Air. Life. Barberry and pachysandra had been planted in square beds around the entrance. The parking lot was newly paved. This mundane earth and asphalt amazed Lynne. The sun burned like a silver sore place low in the gray November sky. She slid into her car; its engine came alive.

The neighborhood of the nursing home was unfamiliar. She bought dinner for herself and the children in the innocent carnival of a supermarket where she had never shopped before. She let herself be fed a sandwich and a Coke in a diner full of strange men. She inhaled the fragrances of a gasoline station where a chunky attendant in green coveralls filled her tank so matter-of-factly that it seemed impossible the life of another man, whose sperm had become her life, was draining away, by her decision, beneath this chalky cold sky in a city of utter strangers.

Dying, her father had become sexual. Her mother no longer intervening, his manhood was revealed. For a time, after she died, Lynne and Martin had thought to have him live with them. But, the first night of his trial visit, he had woken them, clearing his throat in the hall outside their bedroom. When Lynne had opened the door, he told her, his face pale with fury, the top and bottom of his pajamas mismatched, that no one had ever hurt him as she had this night. At first she didn’t understand. Then she blushed. “But, Daddy, he’s my husband. You’re my father. I’m not Mother, I’m Lynne.” She added, desperate to clarify, “Mother died, don’t you remember?”

The anger was slow to leave his face, though the point seemed taken. His eyes narrowed with a legal canniness. “Allegedly,” he said.

Martin had laughed at that, and the two of them led him back to his bed. But they were as little able to get back to sleep as if they had, indeed, been lovers and the man thrashing in the adjacent bedroom was the wronged husband. She perceived only later an irony of that night: the man who was with her didn’t want to be. Martin’s affair with Harriet had begun, and his willingness to try living with her father was his last husbandly kindness. She remembered later his great relief when she announced it wouldn’t work. While her father, back in his own house, grew more puzzled and rebellious, passing from a succession of housekeepers to a live-in couple to a burly male nurse, her husband confessed more and more, and asked to separate. Once the old man was safely placed in a nursing home, Martin left. Then, abandoned, Lynne perceived the gallantry of her father’s refusal to submit to dying. As his reason fell away, he who had been so mild and legal had become violent and lawless; his lifelong habit of commanding respect was now twisted into a tyrannical rage, a defiant incontinence, a hitting of nurses with his fists, a struggle against a locked geriatric chair until both toppled. In his pugnacity and ferocity Lynne saw the force, now naked, that had carved from the hard world a shelter for his four dependent females. With Martin’s leaving, she, too, was naked. Herself helpless, she at last loved her father in his helplessness. Her love made all the more shameful her inability to stay with him, to lull his panic at the passage facing him as he had once lulled her panic at entering womanhood.

For three days after her commended decision, Lynne came and went, marvelling at the fury of her father’s will to live. His face, parched and unfed, grew rigid. His mouth made an *O* like a baby’s at the breast. His breathing poured forth a stench like a stream of inexpressible scorn. His hand lived in hers. He could not die, she could not stay; as with the participants of a great and wicked love, there was none to forgive them save each other.

He died unobserved. Shortly a nurse noticed and drew the sheet up over his face and called his nearest relative. Lynne had been raking leaves from her frostbitten lawn, thinking she should be with him. The world, which had made a space of privacy and isolation around them, then gathered and descended in a fluttering of letters and visits, of regards and reminiscences; her father’s long, successful life was rebuilt in words before her. The funeral was a success, a rally of the surviving, a salute to the useful and presentable man who had passed away some time ago, while his body had still lived. Her sisters descended from airplanes and cried more than she could. Elderly faces that had floated above her childhood, her father’s old friends, materialized. Lynne was kissed, hugged, caressed, complimented. Yet she had been his executioner. There was no paradox, she saw. They were grateful. The world needed death. It needed death exactly as much as it needed life.

After the burial service, Martin came home with her and the children. “I’m surprised,” Lynne said to him as soon as they were alone, “Harriet wasn’t there.”

“Did you want her to be? We assumed you didn’t.”

“That was correct.”

“She would have liked to be, of course. She admired what you did.”

Lynne saw that for him the funeral had been an opportunity for Harriet’s advancement. In his mind he had leaped beyond their separation, beyond the divorce, to some day when she, his first wife, would be gracious to his second, repaying this supposed admiration. How small, Lynne thought, he had grown: a promoter, a liaison man. “I did nothing,” she said.

“You did everything,” he responded, and this, too, was part of his game: to sell her herself as well as Harriet, to sell her on the idea that she was competent and independent; she could manage without him.

Could she? Not for the first time since the nurse had given her, over the telephone, the awaited gift of her father’s death did Lynne feel in her new freedom an abysmal purposelessness; she glimpsed the possibility that her father had needed her as none of the living did, that her next service to everyone, having killed him, was herself to die. Martin was lethal in his new manner, all efficient vitality, hugging the children ardently, talking to each with a self-conscious and compressed attentiveness unknown in the years when he had absent-mindedly shared their home. He even presumed to tap Lynne on the bottom as she stood at the stove, as if she were one more child to be touched. In the hour before dinner, he raced around the house changing lightbulbs, bleeding the furnace, replacing window shades that had fallen from the temperamental little sockets up high. His virtuoso show of dutifulness—his rapid survey of the photographs the boys had developed in their darkroom, the brisk lesson in factoring he administered to his younger daughter—to Lynne felt intended to put her to shame. His removal, rather than bringing her and the children closer together, had put distance between them. They blamed her for losing him. They blamed themselves. Night after night they sat wordless around the dinner table, chewing their failure. Now he was here, pulling the wine cork, celebrating her father’s death. “Lynne, dear”—a locution of Harriet’s he had acquired—“tell us all why you can’t seem to replace the burned-out lightbulbs. Is it the unscrewing or the screwing in that frightens you?” Lethal, but attractive; Harriet had made of him something smaller but more positive, less timorous and diffuse. Before, he had been in the house like the air they unthinkingly breathed; now he manifested himself among them as a power, his show of energy and duty vindictive—the display of a treasure they had wasted.

Lynne told him, “I’ve been so busy getting my father to die I didn’t notice which bulbs were on and which were off. I haven’t even read a newspaper for days.”

Martin ignored her defense. “Poor Grandpa,” he said, gazing about at the children as if one more parental duty fallen to him was to remind them to mourn.

Hate, pure tonic hatred of this man, filled her and seemed to lift her free; he sensed it, from his end of the table, through the candlelit mist of children, and smiled. He wanted her hate. But it flickered off, like a bad lightbulb. She was not free.

He helped her do the dishes. Living alone, Martin had learned some habits of housework: another new trick. As he moved around her, avoiding touching her, drying each dish with a comical bachelor care, she felt him grow weary; he, too, was mortal. In his weariness, he had slipped from Harriet’s orbit back into hers. “Want me to go?” he asked, shyly.

“Sure. Why not? You always do.”

“I thought, Grandpa dead and everything, you might get too depressed alone.”

“Don’t you want to go tell Harriet all about the marvellous funeral she missed?”

“No. She doesn’t expect it. She said to be nice to you.”

So his offer came from Harriet, not him. He was being given a night out, like the vulgarest of lower-class husbands. And Lynne was herself too weary to fight the gift, to scorn it.

“The children are all here,” she told him. “There’s no extra bed. You’ll have to sleep with me.”

“It won’t kill us,” he said.

“Who’s us?” Lynne asked.

Months had passed since she had felt his body next to hers in bed. He had grown thinner, harder, more precisely knit, as if exercised by the distance he strained to keep between them. Perhaps only at first had it been a strain for him. When with a caress she offered to make love, he said, “No. That would be too much.” In her fatigue, she was relieved. Sleep came to her swiftly, even though his presence barred her from the center of the bed, to which she had grown accustomed. In a dream, she was holding her father’s hand, and he horrified her by sitting up energetically and beginning to scold, in that sardonic way Lynne felt he had always reserved for her, the oldest; he showed her younger sisters only his softer side. She awoke and found her husband twisting next to her. It did not surprise her that he was there. Surprise came the other nights, when the bed was empty. Martin was up on one elbow, trying to plump his pillow. *“Why,”* he asked, as if they had been talking all along, “have you given the kids all the airfoam pillows and left yourself with these awful old feather things? It’s like trying to sleep with your head on a pancake.”

“Can’t you go to sleep?”

“Of course not.”

“Have I been asleep?”

“As usual.”

“What do you think’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. Guilt, I suppose. I feel guilty about Harriet. Sleeping with you.”

“Don’t tell me about it. This was your idea, not mine.”

“Also, I feel rotten about Grandpa. He was so *good*. He knew something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. The way he said ‘allegedly’ that time. And that day we took him to the nursing home—the way he accepted me as the boss. So brave and quiet, like a child going off to camp. This big Boston lawyer, who had always looked at me as sort of a chump, really. I had become the boss. Remember how he kept advising me to watch out for the other cars? He had become—what’s the word?—deferential.”

“I know. It was pathetic.”

“He didn’t want me to hit another car, though. He wanted good care of himself taken.”

“I know. I loved his will to live. It put me to shame. It puts us all to shame.”

“Why?”

His blunt question startled her: the new Martin. The old one and she had understood each other without trying. She understood him now: he was saying, *Put yourself to shame, put yourself to death, but don’t include me: I’m alive. At last*. She tried to explain, “I feel very disconnected these days.”

“Well, I guess you are.”

“Not just from you. Disconnected from everybody. The sermon today, I couldn’t cry. It had nothing to do with Daddy, with anybody real. I couldn’t keep my eyes off you and the boys. The way the backs of your heads were all the same.”

He twisted noisily, and looped his arm around her waist. Her heart flipped, waiting for his hand to enclose her breast, his old way. It didn’t happen. It was as if his arm had been sliced off at the wrist. He said, in a soft, well-meant voice, “I’m sorry. Of course I feel guiltiest about you. Lying here is very conflicting. I felt conflicted all week, you calling me every hour on the hour to say your dear father hadn’t kicked the bucket yet.”

“Don’t exaggerate. And don’t say ‘dear.’ ”

“You called a lot, I thought. And it went on and on, he just wouldn’t die. What a tough old farmer he turned out to be.”

“Yes.”

“You were in agony. And there I sat in Back Bay, no use at all. I hated myself. I still do.”

His confession, Lynne saw, was an opportunity another woman—Harriet, certainly—would seize. His taut body wanted to make love. But, as had happened so many nights when they were married, by the same mechanism whereby the television news had lulled her, commercials and disasters and weather and sports tumbling on with the world’s rotation, so her awareness of Martin’s wishing to make love—of male energy alive in the world and sustaining it—put her to sleep, as her father’s once sitting by her bedside had.

When Lynne awoke again, he was still fighting with the pillow. By the quality of the moonlight, time had passed, but whether two minutes or an hour she couldn’t tell. She knew she had failed once more, but the quality of this, too, was different. It was not so grievous, because everything was steeped and flattened in the moonlight of grief. She asked, “How can you be still awake?”

“This is a very unsuccessful experiment,” he said, with satisfaction, of their sleeping together. “You do something to the bed that makes me nervous. You always did. With Harriet I have no problem. I sleep like a baby.”

“Don’t tell me about it.”

“I’m just reporting it as a curious physiological fact.”

“Just relax. Re-lax.”

“I can’t. Evidently you can. Your poor father’s being dead must be a great relief.”

“Not especially. Lie on your back.”

He obeyed. She put her hand on his penis. It was warm and silky-small and like nothing else, softer than a breast, more fragile than a thumb, yet heavy. Together, after a minute, they realized it was not rising, and would not rise. For Martin, it was a triumph, a proof. “Come on,” he taunted. “Do your worst.”

For Lynne it had been, in his word, an experiment. Among her regrets was one that, having held her dying father’s hand so continuously, she had not been holding it at the moment in which he passed from life to death; she had wanted, childishly, to know what it would have felt like. It would have felt like this. “Go to sleep,” someone was pleading, far away. “Let’s go to sleep.”