

Killing John and Wally

SCENE: The setting is the living room of a house that is being packed up. The few pieces of furniture are shabby and old, the remains of a life with apparently little of either wealth or taste. There is an exit to the front, to the kitchen and a closet. There are curtains instead of a door to the closet.

As the play opens, LAURA is kneeling beside a cardboard box, wrapping odds and ends in newspaper. There is a knock at the door. She stands and goes to a window by the front entrance. She stands to one side, her back to the wall and peers out through a crack between the window frame and the blinds. Her shoulders sag. The knock comes again more insistently. She shrugs and opens the door. Enter MRS. BAXTER. She is a woman in her mid to late sixties.

Mrs. Baxter

Where were you? Didn't you hear me knock?

Laura

Hello, Mrs. Baxter.

Mrs. Baxter

I thought I'd have to go around back.

Laura

Sorry. (Pause.) I'm expecting someone to come about the furniture.

Mrs. Baxter

Is that this afternoon?

Laura

Yes.

Mrs. Baxter

You really should have gotten someone to come over from the church and look at it.

Laura

I have to sell the furniture, Mrs. Baxter. I can't afford to give it away.

Mrs. Baxter.

You won't get much.

Laura

Something's better than nothing.

Mrs. Baxter

Your poor mother would have hated this.

Laura

Can I do something for you?

Mrs. Baxter

Excuse me?

Laura

Did you need something I can help you with?

Mrs. Baxter.

No. Why would I need your help? I just thought you might like some company.

Laura

Susie's here. She's all the company I need.

Mrs. Baxter

That friend of yours? The one who was at the funeral?

Laura

I had several friends at the funeral, Mrs. Baxter and yes, Susie was one of them.

Mrs. Baxter

Well, isn't that nice she could come and help.

Laura

It is.

Mrs. Baxter

I'd ask you both to lunch, but I've got company coming.

Laura

That's all right. We're fine.

Mrs. Baxter

Where are all your mother's pictures?

Laura

They're packed away, Mrs. Baxter.

Mrs. Baxter

She had that nice one of the lighthouse.

Laura

It's packed away.

Mrs. Baxter

You ought not to sell her pictures.

Laura

It was cut from a calendar, Mrs. Baxter. Most of her pictures were cut from calendars. I doubt if anyone would be interested in buying them.

Mrs. Baxter

She liked that lighthouse.

Laura

Would you like to have that picture, Mrs. Baxter? To remember my mother by?

Mrs. Baxter

Oh no. It wouldn't go with my drapes, dear. It's not the sort of thing I like. (Pause.) Well, I'll get back then. I have company coming.

Laura

Thank you for coming by.

Mrs. Baxter

Marge Pinkstaff was asking after you. She wondered how you were doing. Do you remember Marge?

Laura

Yes. Tell her I'm doing fine.

Mrs. Baxter

Really? I told her I had no idea how you were doing.

Laura

I'm doing fine.

Mrs. Baxter

Your poor mother was so proud when you went off to college. We all were. You were such a bright little thing.

Laura

I really have a lot to do today, Mrs. Baxter.

Mrs. Baxter

Young people just don't use the talents God gives them. That's what I told Marge. Well, I have company coming. (Opens front door to leave.) If you need anything, just call.

Laura

I will.

(She shuts the door firmly on MRS. BAXTER. She leans her head against the door as if listening to the woman's footsteps fade.)

You miserable old bitch! You goddamned miserable old bitch!

(She peers out through the blinds again, watching the woman depart. SUSI enters carrying a packed box)

Susie

I don't know about the stuff out on the back porch, Laura. You may want to look it over to see if it's worth keeping. What's wrong? What are you looking at?

Laura

Mrs. Baxter was here. She's almost back across the street. In a minute she'll be peering out through a crack in the blinds.

Susie

So are you.

Laura

Yes, but I'm just peering to see if she's peering.

Susie

Oh. (Pause.) So, do you want to keep any of the stuff on the porch?

Laura

She thinks I should have donated all my mother's stuff to the church.

Susi

(Kneeling beside another box and sorting through.

Would they come pack it up? Would they give you a receipt to show God?

Laura

What kind of God needs a receipt? What are you doing?

Susie

What have I been doing all day. I'm sorting through your crap.

Laura

My *mother's* crap if you please. *My* crap is of a better quality.

(She joins SUSIE and looks in the box. She takes out a small plastic statue of a horse.)

Look at this thing. She had it from before I was born. She thought plastic was just the greatest thing because it would never wear out.

(Poking through the box.)

She had an elephant too. I wonder where the goddamned elephant went to?

(Stopping herself.)

Look at me! See what happens to me? I see some little piece of shit, and I'm off again. I can't go on doing this. The rent's due again on Friday, and I can't keep paying rent on a dead woman's house.

Susie

You aren't going to. That's why we're here. We're going to pack this place up and you'll never have to come back here again.

Laura

I won't?

Susie

You'll be free, and old Mrs. Baxter can rot.

Laura

Maybe my mother left her instructions to go on making me feel guilty in case I couldn't function without a certain level of guilt in my life. Do you think?

Susie

(Gesturing at the box.)

Friday? Rent? Pack!

Laura

All right.

(Starting to work as Susie gets another empty box.)

Susie

What time did the junk dealer say he was coming?

Laura

Ragman.

Susie

What?

Laura

He's a *ragman*, Susie. He was very definite about that on the phone. He made a real fuss over it. That's what he likes to call himself.

Susie

A ragman? How quaint.

Laura

How very nineteenth century! Jesus, I'm giving my mother's stuff to a ragman.

Susie

You're not giving anybody anything. You're selling it to him so he'll haul it all away.

Laura

I hope he takes it. I'm afraid he's going to take one look at it and back out the door.

Susie

Are you kidding? Whatever he calls himself, this is a junk man we're talking about. He's gonna wet his pants when he sees all this. What's in that box by the kitchen door?

Laura

God knows.

(She goes and picks up the box, Susie has indicated.)

Oh! Nothing. Just her albums.

Susie

Picture albums? Let me see.

Laura

No.

Susie

(Snatching at the box.)

Come on. Let me look at them. Where are you?

Laura

Oh pick an album. Any album. I'm bound to show up.

Susie

(Opening one and looking through it.)

Is this you in the cowgirl suit? You were cute!

Laura

I was fat. Put it away. Maybe I'll give them to the ragman too.

Susie

Here's some of you and John. Are these from your wedding?

Laura

I know I'm giving those to the ragman.

Susie

These are just memories, Laura. There's nothing wrong with memories.

Laura

Nothing a lobotomy couldn't fix. Let me see that. We're laughing for Christ's sake! I wonder if he's sober? I wonder if I'm sober?

Susie

Jeez. You look. . .

Laura

How? How do I look?

Susie

Happy.

Laura

I was. That's just it, isn't it? I was happy. I should have stayed in that picture. I should have never climbed out of it. Either that or I should have killed the son of a bitch right then when I had the chance before things got bad. (Pause.) Widows get a lot of sympathy.

Susi

Even if they kill their husbands? You'd have to make it look like an accident.

Laura

Widows in general get a lot more respect, you know. You tell someone you're a widow, and automatically, you get more respect.

Susie

You tell people you're a widow?

Laura

No. But I think about telling them I am. Sometimes. (She picks up the album again.) I should have killed him. I should have taken out a lot of insurance on him and then killed him. (Pause.) Accidentally.

Susie

I've been thinking about killing Wally.

Laura

You have?

Susie

Every time he picks up the kids. It didn't used to be so bad, but--did I tell you he's found God? He's found God and is spreading the "good news" here on earth. He belongs to the *Reformed Charismatic Church of the Last Born*. He wants me to pray with him before he takes them for the weekend.

Laura

Church of the Last Born? What the hell does that mean?

Susie

All those born in the last days before the second coming. The millennium has come and gone, you see, and he's preparing for the Apocalypse.

Laura

Well, I knew I hadn't seen him around much lately.

Susie

He's like John Carradine in the "Grapes of Wrath." Only he's found faith instead of losing it. His eyes get wild and kind of roll around in his head. He says the end of the world is coming.

Laura

And how does he know?

Susie

He's been studying numerology. It has something to do with the number of letters in the president's name.

Laura

And you actually let your children spend time with this man?

Susie

I have to. He's got visitation rights. I could take him back to court, but I'd sound like a nut myself.

Laura

Wally used to be so much fun. Remember the Thanksgiving that John dropped the turkey and Wally dove to catch it? Only it slipped out of his hands and went skidding across the floor?

Susie

Yeah. We should have carved up those two instead of the turkey.

Laura

So many missed opportunities.

Susie

Remember that time we all went fishing out on the lake and the two of them got so drunk? We should have tipped the boat over and swam for shore.

Laura

They would have never made it. No one could have blamed us. We would have been heroes. Why is it you always think of these things when it's too late?

(She starts holding the albums up and shaking the pages.)

Susie

What are you doing?

Laura

It occurred to me she might have hidden some money in here. I found fifty-two dollars in a box of detective novels.

(A five dollar bill falls out.)

Ah ha! Told you.

(They both start ruffling pages and shaking books.)

When she first went into the hospital, I came over here and went through everything. I felt like a vulture. I know Mrs. Baxter thought I was. She stayed up until midnight watching me through the blinds.

Susie

Did you find much?

Laura

About enough to pay for the organist. I don't know. I guess I'll keep paying it in installments.

Susie

Ask John for help.

Laura

He doesn't pay his child support, Susi. Do you think he's gonna help with my mother's funeral? (Finishes shaking last album) Well, that's it.

Susie

Twenty, twenty one, twenty-two dollars. You want to go get drunk?

Laura

On twenty-two dollars? We would just get started. (Goes to window and looks out.) I wish that guy would get here. He didn't give me a time. He just said some time this afternoon. He had to finish clearing out another house over in Brownstown first. Jesus! I can't believe I'm doing this. Selling my mother's life to a junk man.

Susie

You said he was a ragman.

Laura

Trash by any other name.

Susie

What else can you do?

Laura

Give it to the Church. Give it to Mrs. Baxter. Save it for my old age? Carry it around with me forever?

Susie

You need the money.

Laura

I wish I hadn't left it so long.

Susie

For God's sake, Laura. Your mother had died. You felt bad. Nobody does these things right away.

Laura

And now I can't pay the rent anymore. It's not my fault she didn't have any money. Why didn't my father leave her anything? Why didn't he have insurance? It's all his fault.

Susie

Maybe she should have killed him.

Laura

Killed my father?

Susie

It's a thought.

Laura

What good would it do me now? Look at this house! Look at all this crap of hers! Look at how she lived! If she wasn't dead, I'd want to kill her. Look how she glued the head back on that stupid unbreakable plastic horse. Look at the walls! That's duct tape there holding the wallpaper up. That's what she taught me to do with my life. Stick it together with whatever was handy. Make do with whatever it takes to keep from falling apart. Don't throw things away or really fix them because that would be wasteful or too expensive. Just patch up your life with duct tape.

Susie

That's bound to hurt when you tear it off.

(Three loud knocks on the door.)

Laura

Oh shit! He's here. Do I look all right? What am I saying? It's the damned ragman. Does the house look all right?

Susie

Calm down. Don't be too anxious. We'll take our time. Let him look around. Then we'll talk business. Okay?

Laura

Okay.

(Taking deep calming breaths. There are more knocks on the door.)

I'm okay. It's okay. Let him in.

Susie

(Opens door.)

Hi! You must be--

Ragman

(Entering. He is a large, dark man in his late forties or early fifties. He is something of a ladies man, dripping charm. Only his

appearance is a little too smarmy to bring it off. He smiles sadly at Susie and extends his hand.)

I have to tell you ma'am, how truly sorry I am about your poor mother. 'Course we all have to go sometime, but it is still a sad, sad--

Susie

It's not me.

Ragman

Beg pardon?

Susie

I'm not the bereaved. That's Laura over there. It's her mother's house. She's the one in mourning.

Ragman

Well, now. My mistake.

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