



Kill

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD.
FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE.
TIL DEATH DO US PART.

Your

Darlings

Peter Swanson

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A NOVEL

Kill Your Darlings

A NOVEL

Peter Swanson

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*For Chiqui Sawyer and Jaqui DeMaio
And in memory of Tom*

Epigraph

If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination.

—Thomas de Quincey

Blood will have blood.

—Macbeth

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

2023

2018

2013

2013

2013

2012

2011

2009

2005

2003

2000

1998

1995

1993

1992

1992

1992

1992

1992

1991

1991

1991

1984

1982

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Peter Swanson

Copyright

About the Publisher

2023

i

The first attempt at killing her husband was the night of the dinner party. Wendy had been cajoled into hosting by Marcia Lever, the head of the English department. Marcia called Wendy directly, instead of going through Thom, Wendy's husband, even though he was the one who taught at New Essex State University. But Marcia and Wendy had long been friends, and Thom, especially of late, was unreliable about making plans.

"Feel free to say no," Marcia said on the phone. "But any chance you want to throw a small shindig out at Goose Neck? Just you and Thom, myself and Jim, if he doesn't get sick, and then our two new hires. You met Sally Johnson, right? She started back in the fall."

"I went to that introductory cocktail thing you threw, but I didn't talk with her. Who's the other new hire?"

"There's a new admin I thought we could invite. Emily. Has Thom mentioned her?"

He had, throwing her name out there in the awkward way he sometimes did when talking about his current crush. His voice would get very monotone and he'd say something like, "Emily saw such-and-such movie and said it was brilliant. I've mentioned Emily before, haven't I?"

"Sure," Wendy said.

"That's six," Marcia said. "I'd invite Roger and Don, as well, but only if it's okay with you. I know this is a big ask."

"I'll do it, Marcia. I could use a boozy dinner party myself, but I'm going to make you stay late and help me clean up."

"Of course, of course. Totally. Thank you, Wendy. I owe you."

The dinner party happened two weeks later. All said, it wasn't a total disaster. Marcia's husband, Jim, not surprisingly, canceled at the last moment with a lingering cold he thought might be the flu. Roger and Don came, and Roger, in particular, made sure that the conversation never lagged. When Thom had first gotten his tenure-track position in the English department, Roger had been the old guard. Nearing seventy now, Roger was still the old guard, but Thom wasn't too far behind. Roger's husband, Don, had recently retired as the CFO of a large Boston company that did something Wendy could never remember, and it was clear that his retirement plans involved drinking himself to death in short order.

Sally Johnson, recently poached from somewhere in California with the offer of tenure, was less chilly than Wendy remembered her being at the welcome party. Still, she wasn't exactly warm, but she did bring gerbera daisies, and she did drink two glasses of wine before the meal was served, and told everyone, again, about the thesis she'd written when she got her PhD at Cornell. Wendy watched her, fascinated by her posture and how carefully she chose her words. Everyone else was simply blurting out whatever crap popped into their heads. Sally seemed rehearsed somehow. Then Wendy remembered, a few years ago, when the poet Marcus Robertson had been a visiting professor, how he'd told her that Black academics learned very early on that they had to be twice as professional as everyone else, that they could never show a chink in their armor. That there was no room for error.

But the person at the party who really interested Wendy had been Emily Majorino, hired in January after Linda, the longtime department secretary, had retired. For one, Emily was Thom's type, *exactly*, down to the old-fashioned green cardigan she was wearing and a nervous habit of chewing at her lower lip. She had brown hair, shoulder-length, large eyes set a little too far apart, and narrow shoulders. She brought a bottle of white wine, and when she handed it to Wendy in their large open kitchen, she said, "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Oh," Wendy said.

"I'm a fan of your poetry."

Wendy actually laughed, since it was so far from what she was expecting to hear. "Sorry," she said. "You're maybe the first person who's ever said those words to me. Out of the blue, I mean. How did you end up reading my poetry?"

"I own *Specifics Omitted*. I thought of bringing it for you to sign but didn't want to embarrass you. Maybe some other time."

“Sure,” Wendy said, still a little confused. Twenty years earlier she’d won a first-book award from a university press and published her only work. She’d felt enormous pride at the time while also being cognizant of the fact that no one besides her immediate friends and family would ever read it. “Are you a poet too?” Wendy said to Emily. She’d mostly found that the only people in America who read poetry were people who also wrote it.

“No, not really. I mean, I’ve tried . . . unsuccessfully.” Now it was Emily’s turn to laugh awkwardly.

“Well, thank you. And thank you for the wine. I’m just going to put it in the fridge.”

Plating the appetizers, Wendy went over the strange interaction. There had been something oddly familiar about it, and then she realized that it had been years since someone had spoken to her in the way that Emily just had. Nervously wanting something. Eager to please. It reminded her of being courted, of boys and men from the distant past. Had Emily, this odd-duck young woman, developed some sort of faraway crush on her through her poetry? It was too ludicrous to even consider.

She kept an eye on her, though, throughout the night, partly because of the strange early conversation, and partly because there was something so familiar about her. About halfway through the party, while Emily was picking at her roast leg of lamb, Wendy blurted out, “Joan Fontaine.”

“Gesundheit,” Don said, and everyone laughed.

“That’s who you remind me of,” Wendy said to Emily.

Emily, startled, said, “Who?”

“Joan Fontaine, the actress. She played the second Mrs. de Winter in *Rebecca*.”

“Oh,” said Emily. She was turning a little red, probably because everyone was now looking at her.

“I suppose she does a little bit,” Thom said. “But *I* think she looks like Barbara Bouchet. No one here will remember Barbara Bouchet but she played Miss Money Penny in that terrible 1960s *Casino Royale*. That’s an interesting film because—”

Wendy interrupted by asking the table if anyone had been watching *Mare of Easttown* on HBO. Everyone nodded all at once. Thom glared in her direction. Still, she’d been with him long enough to know when he was getting ready to monologue about a subject that interested only him. Honestly, though, the real reason she’d stopped him was because once upon a time, many years ago, he used to tell *her* she looked like Barbara Bouchet, something he’d probably forgotten all about.

After dinner, while Marcia cleaned the dishes, the rest of the guests, all except Sally, who'd left early, moved in front of the fire in the living room. Thom doled out drinks: whiskey for Don and Roger, a rusty nail for himself, while Wendy bailed Emily out of having to drink something so strong by suggesting they open another bottle of wine. Time sped up, the way it does at the end of a party, and suddenly Roger was doing his most famous party trick, reciting all of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" while doing his Christopher Walken impression. Thom had managed to work his way onto the sofa next to Emily. He was very drunk, the most drunk Wendy had seen him in months, at least publicly. His voice was louder, he was swearing more. She wondered if he'd do something foolish, like make an actual pass at the thirtysomething administrative assistant, but she didn't think he would. Years of drinking and socializing had taught him what lines not to cross.

"What are you working on now, Thom?" Marcia asked, having now joined the group after finishing the dishes. She was drinking a can of grapefruit seltzer water.

"I'm writing a mystery," Thom said, then shrugged as though he'd said something ridiculous.

"Oh yeah?"

"Well, we'll see about it. I think it's a mystery story. It has a murder in it."

"Tell us about it, Thom."

Wendy listened intently as Thom explained that he wasn't willing to divulge any details yet. But even without details, gooseflesh had broken out along both her arms at this new information that Thom was writing a book. A book with a murder in it.

Wendy excused herself, knowing she wouldn't be missed, and went upstairs to their bedroom. The sweater she was looking for was draped across the chair on her side of the bed, and she wrapped it around herself. All Aprils in New England were cold but this particular one was breaking her heart; day after day of forty degrees and sporadic rain. She started back down the stairs but there was a pause in the jazz record that was playing and she could hear that Thom was still talking at length. She reversed course, deciding with sudden certainty that she needed to find out about this book.

In Thom's office she opened his laptop up and punched in his password, the same one he'd had for many years. There was an array of open browser tabs, but Wendy wasn't interested in those. She went to his writing folder and found his latest Word document, titled "WIP" for "work in progress," and opened it up. Thom had created a title page already:

Come End of Summer

a novel of suspense
by Thom Graves

Wendy scrolled to the next page and found an epigraph.

And the thought that, after all, he had not really killed her.
No, no. Thank God for that. He had not. And yet . . . had he?
Or, had he not?

—Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy*

She didn't need to keep reading. The quote, alone, had made her instantly sober. And furious. She decided to keep scrolling and read the first paragraph of the book, enough to know that Thom was writing some version of their own story, a story they had agreed was *never* to be shared with anyone. A story the world could never know. His novel began:

He saw her in Bryant Park, dusk of a summer night, the city parting its shoulders to facilitate her grand re-entrance into his life. She must have seen him, as well, because before he had a chance to extinguish his cigarette, to re-order his mind and body, she was there in front of him, jacket collar quivering, a threat to the tranquility he had created in the ten years since last they'd met.

"Blech," Wendy said out loud, mainly in response to the prose. For a moment Thom's words had distracted her from the realization of what he'd done, what he was doing. They'd grown apart over the years, but Wendy believed, *had* believed, that the one thing that cemented them together was a commitment to never speak of the past. Their sins were private sins. It was Thom who saw the world through books and movies, who once upon a time had said that they were like Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*. They had boarded a train together and there was no getting off, all the way to the final stop. Wendy had also believed that no one else would ever be allowed on that particular train, not friends or priests or other lovers. And their story wasn't for books either.

What was he thinking?

Back downstairs the album had ended, and the guests were searching for coats. Thom was at the bar, pouring himself another drink, then turned around to scowl at the deserters.

"Is he going to be all right?" Roger said to Wendy at the door, which was rich, considering his own husband was currently weaving his way toward a collision with a rosebush.

“He’ll be fine. He won’t remember a thing.”

Wendy picked up Emily’s scarf, which she’d dropped to the floor while struggling with her winter parka. “Here you go. How did you get here? Are you driving?”

“Marcia’s driving me home,” she said.

“Oh, good. Our only sober guest. It was nice meeting you.”

“Maybe we could get together,” Emily said, the words coming fast, like a Band-Aid being ripped away. “We could talk about poetry.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Wendy said, wondering if her voice sounded as bemused to Emily as it did in her own head.

Everyone left, and Wendy let Thom pour her another glass of wine she wasn’t planning on drinking. But they sat together and listened to side two of *Live at the Pershing*. “Party poopers,” Thom said.

“It’s two a.m.”

“Is it?”

“Yep.”

Wendy considered bringing up the book he was writing but knew it wouldn’t be worth it. She hadn’t been kidding when she told Roger that he wouldn’t remember anything the next day. He wouldn’t. She could see it in his blank eyes and the way his mouth was slightly ajar, lower lip hanging. She took a tiny sip of her wine. He had put his empty glass down and was mimicking playing the piano along with Ahmad Jamal. God, she despised him. It was a new realization. For a long time she’d known she disliked him, known that the thought of spending the remainder of her years in his company filled her with a kind of dread. She’d also known that he was never going to change, but she hadn’t admitted to herself yet that she truly hated him. That she wanted him gone.

I should just kill him, she thought.

“What are you smiling about?” Thom said.

“Just murder,” she said back. “Your murder.”

He laughed and moved his hands along the imaginary keys.

But twenty minutes later he was standing at the top of the stairs on the second-floor landing, a hand loosely on the banister, a confused look on his face. Wendy was passing from the bedroom to the bathroom but stopped to ask him what was wrong.

“I thought I’d forgotten something downstairs and now I can’t remember what it was.”

He really was drunk, his head drooping, his free hand wagging a finger.

“Your glasses, maybe,” Wendy said.

Then, without really thinking about it, or rather, as though she'd planned this very maneuver before, she reached out toward the front pocket of his shirt and gently pushed him in the chest. "Jesus," he said, tottering backward then righting himself, but he was wearing socks and one of his legs gave way and he fell down the stairs, hard, spinning all the way over then thudding to a halt at the bottom landing. The violence of it was extraordinary.

"Thom!" Wendy yelled, then followed him carefully down the steps. He was silent except for a low purr that reminded her of a cat. But when she'd reached him, he suddenly came to, springing back onto his feet as though he'd simply fallen onto a couch and was now getting up again.

"Fuck," he said. "What just happened?"

"You fell down the stairs, Thom," she said. "You're drunk."

He asked again in the morning, when he'd found the bruises on his body. "I don't know how you fell," Wendy said. "I was brushing my teeth. Anything broken?"

"My last shred of dignity," he said, and went downstairs to start the coffee.

ii

Thom checked the weather app on his phone; it told him it was currently raining in New Essex. He looked outside but saw no sign of rain, even though the dark, swollen sky was threatening. He felt terrible, having drunk far too much the night before, and he'd woken up with about five mysterious bruises down one side of his body (Wendy had gleefully informed him he'd fallen down the stairs). Still, he was determined to ignore the pain, to get outside and take a walk, try to stretch his muscles, clear his head a little. He stared at the app again, then out through the window that looked onto Naumkeag Cove, now at low tide, gulls and crows hovering overhead. Goose Neck was a small, rocky peninsula that jutted into the outer harbor of New Essex, and for whatever reason it had its own weather patterns, ignoring all forecasts. He decided to risk it and went to get his coat.

He was halfway through the circling walk that would take him along most of the perimeter of Goose Neck when the rain started up. He didn't mind. It was a misty kind of rain, and he was planning on showering anyway when he got back, so what difference did it make if he got wet? He buttoned the top button of his coat and kept walking, still trying to pick apart the chronology of the dinner party the night before.

It had started fine, Roger and Don in good form, Marcia jumpy as always, Wendy's roast lamb a huge hit. Sally Johnson hadn't wanted to be there, but he wasn't sure Sally wanted to be anywhere, except for maybe alone with a book. She was a true academic, that one, almost as though she'd gotten into the field out of a love for literature instead of the desire to only have classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays and the chance to take sabbaticals every five years.

He was surprised that Marcia had invited Emily Majorino. Pleased too. When she'd first been brought on, back in January, he'd been entranced by her quiet beauty. She'd mesmerized him, but not in any lustful way. Something about her stillness, her quiet voice, her mysterious life. (She was much younger than he was, but as far as he could tell she had absolutely zero social-media presence. He'd looked.) He imagined them talking to each other, confiding in each other. He imagined giving her advice. Sometimes, oddly, these fantasies would warp into her pressing a cold washcloth against his head, the way his mother used to do. Or else he imagined her cooking him a meal, telling him everything was going to be okay. He supposed he was getting old.

The mist was being replaced by actual rain, and Thom sped up, lowering his head, and still picking away at the memories from the previous night. He knew that Roger had done his party trick—his J. Alfred Walken—and that the drinks had flowed. Sally had left early. No surprise there. And he knew that he'd sat next to Emily for some time and that they'd been talking passionately, or maybe it had just been he who was doing the talking. But the words were gone. He also had no memory of how the evening had ended, just that he'd been downstairs by the fire and the next thing he knew he'd woken up in the morning, his mouth dry, his forehead damp, and his body aching as though he'd been beaten with a croquet mallet.

He turned onto Jewett Lane and stopped for a moment to look across the harbor, pocked with rain. He rubbed at his ribs and a memory from the night before, a fragment of a memory, pricked at his mind. The upstairs hallway. Wendy's face. A look of revulsion. Then it was gone.

"Okay there, Thom?"

It was one of his neighbors, Fred, out walking his dog. Thom blinked in Fred's direction. "Oh hey, Fred," he said. "Just thinking about going for a swim."

"Ha-ha."

Back at home, Thom felt worse than he had before his walk. The cold had gotten into his bones, and the partial memory from the night before, his wife's face, was haunting him.

“How’d I fall down the goddamn stairs?” he said to Wendy, who was putting together some kind of casserole in the kitchen.

“I pushed you, naturally,” she said.

Wendy had a morbid sense of humor, she always had, and he sometimes wondered if it was because of what the two of them had done in the past. Or was it in spite of it?

“No, really, you must have heard me fall.”

“I did. I was brushing my teeth. For a moment I thought you were dead.”

“And how did that make you feel?” Thom was pouring himself coffee and noticed a slight tremor in the hand that held the cup. It was worrying.

“In the time it took me to walk down the stairs and check on you I’d already spent the life insurance.”

“Oh yeah? What on?”

“A couple trips to France. A new downstairs bathroom. Maybe a Birkin bag.”

“You *did* think about it.”

She smiled, and Thom felt colder.

“You read the text from Jason?”

“No,” Thom said, pulling out his phone.

Their son had planned a visit for the weekend, and Thom assumed that the text was a cancellation, but instead he’d texted to remind them that he was now completely vegetarian and then he’d asked if he could bring a friend along, some girl named Ashtyn.

Thom nearly asked who Ashtyn was, because he couldn’t remember, but something told him not to ask, something told him that, once again, he’d forgotten some crucial information about his family’s life. “I think I’ll go read,” he said, and took himself to his office.

He lay down on the couch across from his desk, looked at his phone a little, checking his son’s Instagram to see if there was a picture of this girl he was bringing. They’d only just gotten used to the previous girlfriend, Tonya, who had been eerily uncommunicative but whom Jason seemed to genuinely love. And now he was dating someone called Ashtyn. He put his phone down and picked up his book—*Lying to Doctors* by Catalina Soto—reading just a few pages before shutting his eyes, hoping to get some sleep. But images kept appearing and disappearing in his mind. His wife’s face in the dim hallway light, her eyes cold and unloving. Emily’s face in the firelight as he spoke words at her, words that he couldn’t conjure up. What had they been talking about? He felt deep shame that he couldn’t remember. And then all he could think about was the coldness in his bones. He turned onto his side, tucked his knees up. Something flickered in the corner of his attic office, and for a

moment he thought it was his cat, Samsa, skirting the baseboards. But Samsa had been dead for six months. And for a terrible moment Thom thought he might cry, something he hadn't done in years. Instead, he sat up, rubbed at his ribs again, and wondered how long Wendy would be in the kitchen. He wanted a beer but didn't want her to see him get one.

iii

The weather had cleared by Sunday morning and they all took a walk, Wendy and Thom; their son, Jason; and his new girlfriend, Ashtyn, who had turned out to be the exact opposite of his last girlfriend. Blond instead of dark, inquisitive and talkative instead of standoffish. In fact, she'd barely stopped talking since arriving late on Friday evening. She was talking now—she just couldn't get *over* how beautiful it was on Goose Neck, and she couldn't believe she'd never been here, but she was really more of a South-Shore girl, having grown up in Wareham.

"You'll have to switch your allegiance," Thom said.

"What, South Shore to North Shore? I'm a Cape girl; you're kidding, right?"

Wendy watched as Thom sped up ahead of them so that he was just with Ashtyn. He liked her, she could tell. Well, Wendy liked Ashtyn as well. She wasn't intellectual, exactly, but she seemed to exude some joy, a character trait not usually shared by Jason's string of moody girlfriends. Wendy slowed her pace, Jason beside her, so that she could talk privately to her son.

"So?" Jason said.

"So what?"

"What do you think of Ashtyn? You were just watching her and analyzing. I could tell."

"She's lovely. So different from Tonya."

"You didn't think Tonya was lovely?"

"Lovely to look at, but she wasn't exactly a conversationalist, was she?"

Jason kicked at a horse chestnut, knocking it a few feet ahead of him. She'd taken enough walks with him, ever since he'd been a boy, to know that he would keep kicking that particular chestnut for as long as he could keep it in front of him. "No, she was difficult. Ashtyn's easy, although she's smarter than she looks."

"Did I say she didn't look smart?"

“You probably thought it. She went to school on a full scholarship, you know.”

Up ahead, Thom and Ashtyn had stopped walking so that Thom could point out the city hall across the harbor. Wendy and Jason stopped as well. “Yes, she told me. What are her parents like?”

“Nice, I think. Different. Neither of them went to college. She’s the first in her family—”

“She has two older brothers, though.”

“They’re both plumbers, like their father.”

“Smart boys.”

Wendy took a look at her son’s profile as he squinted toward the water. He’d had sort of a hipster mustache that he’d recently removed from his upper lip, and he looked so similar to the way Thom had looked at the same age. Dark-brown eyes, full brows, that beautiful rosebud mouth that was almost girlish. But he wasn’t like Thom, Wendy thought. He wasn’t a striver, wasn’t someone who cared what others thought of him, despite the ill-fated mustache. He seemed mostly happy in his own skin.

“How are you and Dad?” he asked. They were walking again.

“How do *you* think we are?”

“Dad’s drinking a lot.”

“That’s not exactly a new thing, is it?”

“No, I suppose not. Does it worry you?”

Instead of answering right away, Wendy thought about the question. “Ten years ago it did. I thought he’d do something to wreck his career or else he’d wreck the car, end up killing himself, or worse, someone else. But now it’s just part of our life, I guess. He drinks more when people are visiting. I don’t know what to say. Does it worry you?”

“Yes,” Jason said emphatically. “It makes me crazy that he’s always telling me we don’t spend enough time together, and then when we do get together, he’s so drunk he probably doesn’t even remember it.”

“I hear you, Jason, you’re preaching to the choir.”

That night, after her son and his girlfriend had left, and after Thom had fallen asleep in front of a hockey game, Wendy sat in the living room with a blanket around her, and her book in her lap, just thinking. What would she be doing right now if Thom’s fall on Thursday night had broken his neck and killed him? He’d be dead three days. Jason would have come earlier, and he’d still be here. What else? The neighbors would have made casseroles, and old friends would have called or sent text messages. And she’d be planning a funeral.

It would be a lot, those first few weeks, but once Thom was in the ground, then the next phase of her life could begin. She'd delete that novel he had begun work on, make sure it never saw the light of day. And then she'd be free to do what she wanted, not just for the remainder of her life but for every day of that life. The house would be hers, and the garden, and even the television remote. She could cook more fish. Maybe even one day she could form a new relationship. Not another husband. She would never have one of those again. But maybe a painter who only came to New Essex in the summers, some uncomplicated man who was good in bed and knew how to fix tricky sump pumps and failing gutters.

Wendy realized she was smiling while she thought of this new life, then told herself to think of the alternative. What would the next thirty years be like with Thom in them? Would it be possible to get back to the kind of relationship they'd had for the first half of their married life? The feeling that they were an exclusive club of two, with their own jokes and rules? A bubble that was both exciting and comforting and only for them. In the old days when they'd started to drift apart they always managed to find each other again, remind each other that they had authored their own existence, that they were special. Plus, they'd raised Jason, someone better than either of them. In that, they were in agreement.

But now, ever since Thom started having the bad dreams and the black moods, then the affairs and the drinking, it had all gone wrong. And it wasn't going to get better. Thirty more years with Thom was not going to make either of them happy. And there was no such thing as divorce, not for them. They were together forever all the way to the end of the line, just like in *Double Indemnity*.

She sipped her tea, gone cold. Without moving from her seat she made a decision. Life would be better without Thom in it. Far better.

Another movie quote went through her mind and made her smile again. It was a shame she couldn't share it with Thom, because she thought it was quite clever.

I'm going to need a bigger set of stairs.

iv

Thom was walking across campus when he got the phone call from Wendy. She usually texted so he answered quickly. "What's wrong?"

"Why do you say that?"