

IN THE BEDROOM

Directed by Todd Field
Produced by Todd Field, Ross Katz, and Graham Leader
Distributed by Miramax's Buena Vista Pictures
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Richard Stout is a creep. Violently possessive, his chilling presence constantly threatens to undermine the structure of Frank and Natalie's romance, but later offers a perverted hope to another relationship, that of Matt and Ruth.

Richard is upset at the attention young Frank is giving his wife. They have not yet divorced and Richard has expressed a desire to reconcile. But instead of reconnecting with the kids, he may just want to control Natalie's life and deny her a future apart from him. He's been getting mad for a while now; this is not her first lover since the split. Yet he has been sleeping around, himself. Neither one is a paragon of virtue, but Natalie wants peace, while what Richard really wants remains a mystery.

Frank wanted to keep the relationship innocent, convincing himself that it's all for fun, it's just a summer fling, no harm will come of it. He never wanted to talk, rudely dismissing the attention of his parents. From his perspective their love is warm and easy. He harbors feelings for her transcending lust, but Natalie seems wiser, aware of the prospects for a dark future, prospects Frank is happy to disregard.

Finally deciding that he does not want to throw away a career as an architect by hanging around with Natalie and her kids, they quietly break up. But he obligingly returns after Richard has trashed her house. Frank is shot to death.

From that point on Richard haunts Ruth and Matt. They see him in town, going about his business like nothing has happened while their son lies buried. Stout had stripped from them a mutual fixation on their son's well-being. Facing the prospects of a brief prison sentence, and finding his marriage interminable, Matt undertakes the task of killing Richard.

Neither one had been able to deal with the tragedy. Regret hangs over their lives, regret at not dealing with the situation ahead of time, regret at not having more children. One had been all they could handle with Dr. Fowler starting his practice—one child, indulged and protected, loved too well. Before Frank died, they were outgoing, involved, and demonstrated affection for each other.

Afterwards, he starts drinking, she begins smoking. They hardly talk. Before, they always read. Now the television provides an impotent balm for sleepless nights. Matt had eagerly embraced the trappings of grandparenting, teaching one of Natalie's sons how a lobsterman plies his trade and assembling a swing set so the two kids could play. Ruth had always been more reluctant to embrace Natalie and questioned the wisdom of Matt's acquiescence. She later declared that Matt found vicarious pleasure in his son's romance, reveling in a romance he was too old and too married to enjoy. This may be why after Frank's death Matt seeks Natalie out in halting conversation, while Ruth, visited at her school, slaps Natalie without saying a word.

Matt maintains that it was Ruth who drove Frank away, into the arms of the prospective divorcee, damning his wife for her "unforgiving" nature. He's mad she won't talk, but she says she won't talk because he doesn't seem to care. But she doesn't know he's been out trying to collect information sufficient to put Richard away for murder. They both realize they are at fault. Reconciled, the next step is to take the law into their own hands.

Yes, Richard Stout is a creep. We see nothing from him but callous, selfish behavior. But he is a father and demonstrates affection for his two sons. He wants to come to their games and he hangs their school work on his wall at home. When he visits, the little one runs to embrace him eagerly, but his elder brother is wary, remembering, like his mother. She knows Richard has not changed and cannot be trusted.

She is the only witness to testify at a preliminary hearing. She heard the confrontation between her ex-lover and estranged husband, but did not witness the kill. The defense claims it was the result of a struggle. In the confusion of it all Frank died. We think that with his money and connections, this rich man's son will be free to go on destroying people's lives. That's what we think.

But we never know that he is really guilty. Sure, it's extremely doubtful that mild-mannered Frank posed such a threat that Richard the Bully feared for his life and fired. What happened just can't be pieced together. It was confusing, and maybe Richard did something he hadn't intended to. His look just after the shooting is certainly not celebratory. But neither is it mournful. In the end, only he knows what transpired, and Frank's death will always rest heavily on his conscience. We cannot know, and neither do the Fowlers.

Still, Matt kidnaps Richard, fools him into thinking he will be forced to jump bail, and then proceeds to shoot him thrice. This we see, and of this there is no doubt. Justice may be served, but revenge is ugly. As the film concludes, Matt returns from his dark deeds, awaited by an approving Ruth. In the dark of early morning, she asks questions he can't bring himself to respond to. She, ambivalent to his feelings and unconcerned with the effect this has had on him, sets out to make him breakfast, figuring he must be hungry after all his hard work. Still, he lay numb, saying nothing, lost in the burden of what he has undertaken, the awful guilt he has heaped on himself. Meanwhile his wife veritably skips for joy at the death of the hated Richard.

Matt probably won't be caught. It's not certain because his plan, though a good one, was undermined by his eagerness to finish the man off ahead of schedule. But it's not fear of discovery that weighs heavy on his mind; it's guilt that he, as a veteran, did not anticipate in setting out to exercise justice. It was war, right? It wasn't murder. But Richard Stout was dead, and Matt Fowler had shot him, in cold blood.

With the killer vanquished, perhaps his son is now avenged. But Dr. Fowler is the killer now, and he killed in anger, and killed in haste, just like the very man he killed. And, sure, he may not be caught, but the marriage now appears beyond salvation. His guilt, her glee, their common demise, is now at hand.