

INTRODUCTION

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What is it about trains? What is it about them that fires the imagination, that suggests to those of a certain disposition the possibility of danger lurking behind every seat and in every carriage? There is something in the collective experience of a journey that lends itself to storytelling, and then of course the tantalising proximity to strangers of every stripe. The chance meeting, whether fleeting or prolonged, the accidental brush of hands as the train hurtles around a sharp bend, a casual conversation in the dining car taking an unexpected turn.

In a letter she wrote to her friend Marc Brandel in 1985, Patricia Highsmith confessed to thrilling to the idea that anyone – the most ordinary neighbour, the dullest of co-workers, that unexceptional girl you see every day on the train – might be hiding a terrible secret or harbouring some sordid proclivity: ‘I can’t think of anything more apt to set the imagination stirring, drifting, creating, than the idea – the fact – that anyone you walk past on the pavement anywhere might be a sadist, a compulsive thief, or even a murderer.’

In *Strangers on a Train*, Highsmith’s exceptionally accomplished debut published when the writer was just twenty-nine years old, she explored this very idea. The novel begins with a chance meeting between two young men, and this fleeting encounter sets in motion a terrible chain of events: their drunken conversation leads to a macabre *folie à deux*, a good man turned murderous, utterly corrupted by guilt.

The fact that, more than seventy years after its publication, *Strangers on a Train* has lost none of its power to disturb is evidence of Highsmith’s extraordinary talent. Her novels, of which she wrote twenty-two over the course of her career, feel disarmingly fresh and modern, from their high concepts and economic style to her groundbreaking and frequently shocking device of allowing

the reader to occupy the mind of a killer. Decades before we rooted for Villanelle and Amy Dunne, Tony Soprano and Walter White, we were rooting for Highsmith's Guy Haines.

Highsmith wrote a draft of *Strangers on a Train* in 1948, during an apparently frenzied two-month period of creativity while she was staying at Yaddo, the artist's retreat in upstate New York. It is a sign of how important this period was to her that on her death, she left her entire \$3 million estate to Yaddo; however, the idea for the book had been percolating for many years. Indeed, she had met her villain – the inspiration for the despicable Charles Bruno – more than a decade earlier, when on a trip back to her hometown of Fort Worth. 'When I was seventeen, in Texas,' Highsmith told a BBC interviewer, 'I met briefly a very spoiled boy who was very much like Bruno, completely dissolute . . . completely worthless, and he was sort of the genesis of Bruno.'

Highsmith – who had an unhappy childhood, who suffered, as an adult, from depression, anorexia and alcoholism, who was deeply misanthropic – was not as a writer particularly interested in happiness. Contentment, she suspected, was often a sign of stupidity; well-balanced people must be, at best, mediocre. Nor was she interested in the simplicity of popular morality, but she was fascinated by the idea that all of us carried within the capacity for good and ill, that identity was not fixed but shifting, that a sort of dualism existed in all of us. 'There are always two,' she wrote in her notebook in 1947. 'One can love two people, the sexes are within all of us, emotions directly contrary do exist side by side.'

This idea, frequently expressed by the author, is a central theme of *Strangers on a Train*. A good man – kind, responsible, loving, conscientious Guy Haines – corrupted by fear and guilt, suffers a split in his personality; over the course of the novel he becomes someone he barely recognises, someone he refers to in the third person, as though he were talking about a stranger. 'What was he doing here at 1.15 in the afternoon,' Guy asks himself, 'growing swimmy on this third martini, making himself incapable of work, assuming he had any? Guy Haines who loved Anne, who had built the Palmyra?'

As Highsmith ratchets up the tension, as Guy's fear and guilt bloom, so too does his conviction that he is 'two people, one of whom could create and feel in harmony with God . . . and the other who could murder'. He sees this other self as 'a secret brother', a discrete part of his identity which he longs to crush.

Ultimately, however, Guy comes to express the view that Highsmith held, that the murdering part of himself is not something externally produced but something that was always inside him. In the end he believes that he had committed a terrible crime 'because there had been that measure of perversity within him sufficient to do it, that he had done it because of the worm in the wood'.

This dualism, this push and pull between essential goodness and darker impulses, is mirrored in another of Highsmith's favourite themes, the relationship of love to hate, the proximity that loathing has to desire. In one of her notebooks, writing about a woman she has met and 'almost' fallen in love with, she confesses to murderous feelings about her, fantasises about putting her hands around the throat she longs to kiss, writing that 'murder is a kind of making love, a way of possessing'.

In *Strangers on a Train*, we see Guy's feelings for Bruno veer wildly from virulent dislike to affection and even identification with him. At the opening of the book, Guy finds Bruno brash and physically repulsive, and he immediately suspects this man is dangerous: 'Bruno could be violent,' he thinks during their first meeting, no ordinary stranger on a train but someone 'cruel and corrupt'. And yet during the encounter he describes a 'rush of affection for Bruno', he feels 'a burst of companionship'. Later, although he is sick of Bruno, positively loathes Bruno, he suspects that 'Bruno had always been able to read him', and later still Guy muses: 'And Bruno, he and Bruno. Each was what the other had not chosen to be, the cast-off self, what he thought he hated but perhaps in reality loved.'

A large part of Highsmith's talent for getting under the reader's skin comes from her creation of psychologically believable – if frequently monstrous – characters, whom she then entices us to

embrace. However, she has many other tricks up her sleeve, not least the way in which she tells her stories, her pared-back, laconic style, the deceptive one-note pitch at which she recounts the horrifying and the banal alike.

It is uniquely disturbing, as evidenced by one of the book's most memorable scenes, in which Bruno stalks Guy's wife, poor ill-fated Miriam, through a carnival. As we follow the hunt, it is through the cat's eyes that we see the mouse, and we are party to all Bruno's observations: 'The roller coaster made a *tat-tat-tat-tat-tat* like a machine-gun over their heads. There was a clang and a roar as someone sent the red arrow all the way to the top with a sledge hammer. He wouldn't mind killing Miriam with a sledge hammer.'

In one breath Bruno observes Miriam looking ugly and stupid with her mouth open, 'as if she were being strangled', while in the next he is musing that 'the prospect of a cool row was delightful'.

When it is Guy's turn to take up the mantle of murderer, there is a similar effect given by his prevaricating over which gun to take with him to do the killing: 'The gloves were purple and the flannel bag of his revolver was lavender. Suddenly it seemed fitting he should take the smaller revolver, because of the similar colours.' Such odd and inappropriate thoughts give the killings a sort of dreamlike irrationality, nightmarish and unsettling, the images staying in the mind long after the reader has closed the book.

This propensity to affect and disturb was noted by critics as unusual in a lowly crime writer: the critic Terrence Rafferty, writing in the *New Yorker*, observed that 'popular fiction isn't supposed to work on us this way'. Rafferty's comment is rather typical of the reception meted out to Highsmith by literary critics and novelists alike, those eager to stress that she cannot be a crime writer – she's too good for that. And while it is true that Highsmith herself disdained the traditional whodunnit ('puzzles do not interest me,' she said), she did place her writing within the scope of popular fiction, stressing that she was 'an entertainer' who liked 'to tell a fascinating story'.

From a crime writer's perspective, all talk of Highsmith's work being 'relegated' to the classifications of crime and suspense is

irritating in the extreme. The notion that her books do not belong on those shelves, because of the complexity of their characters or the acuity with which they interrogate social mores, is laughable – for this is exactly what the very best crime novels do.

It is why they endure. It is why we find them irresistible.

And it is why we will likely be reading Patricia Highsmith for the next one hundred years, too.

To all the Virginias

The train tore along with an angry, irregular rhythm. It was having to stop at smaller and more frequent stations, where it would wait impatiently for a moment, then attack the prairie again. But progress was imperceptible. The prairie only undulated, like a vast, pink-tan blanket being casually shaken. The faster the train went, the more buoyant and taunting the undulations.

Guy took his eyes from the window and hitched himself back against the seat.

Miriam would delay the divorce at best, he thought. She might not even want a divorce, only money. Would there really ever be a divorce from her?

Hate had begun to paralyse his thinking, he realized, to make little blind alleys of the roads that logic had pointed out to him in New York. He could sense Miriam ahead of him, not much farther now, pink and tan-freckled, and radiating a kind of unhealthy heat, like the prairie out the window. Sullen and cruel.

Automatically, he reached for a cigarette, remembered for the tenth time that he couldn't smoke in the Pullman car, then took one anyway. He tapped it twice on the face of his wristwatch, read the time, 5.12, as if it meant anything today, and fitted the cigarette into the corner of his mouth before he brought the cupped match up. The cigarette replaced the match inside his hand, and he smoked in slow, steady pulls. Again and again his brown eyes dropped to the stubborn, fascinating ground out the window. A tab of his soft shirt collar began to ride up. In the reflection the dusk had started to create in the window's glass, the peak of white collar along his jaw suggested a style of the last century, like his black hair that grew high and loose on top and lay close in back. The rise of hair and the slope of his long nose gave him a look of intense purpose and somehow of forward

motion, though from the front, his heavy, horizontal brows and mouth imposed a stillness and reserve. He wore flannel trousers that needed pressing, a dark jacket that slacked over his slight body and showed faintly purple where the light struck it, and a tomato-coloured woollen tie, carelessly knotted.

He did not think Miriam would be having a child unless she wanted it. Which should mean the lover intended to marry her. But why had she sent for him? She didn't need him to get a divorce. And why did he go over the same dull ground he had four days ago when he had got her letter? The five or six lines in Miriam's round handwriting had said only that she was going to have a child and wanted to see him. That she was pregnant guaranteed the divorce, he reasoned, so why was he nervous? A suspicion that he might, in some unreachable depth of himself, be jealous because she was going to bear another man's child and had once aborted his own tormented him above all. No, it was nothing but shame that nettled him, he told himself, shame that he had once loved such a person as Miriam. He mashed his cigarette on the heater's grilled cover. The stub rolled out at his feet, and he kicked it back under the heater.

There was so much to look forward to now. His divorce, the work in Florida – it was practically certain the board would pass on his drawings, and he would learn this week – and Anne. He and Anne could begin to plan now. For over a year he had been waiting, fretting, for something – *this* – to happen so he would be free. He felt a pleasant explosion of happiness inside him, and relaxed in the corner of the plush seat. For the last three years, really, he had been waiting for this to happen. He could have bought a divorce, of course, but he hadn't ever amassed that much spare money. Starting a career as an architect, without benefit of a job with a firm, had not been easy and still wasn't. Miriam had never asked for an income, but she plagued him in other ways, by talking of him in Metcalf as if they were still on the best of terms, as if he were up in New York only to establish himself and eventually send for her. Occasionally she wrote him for money, small but irritating amounts which he let her have because it

would be so easy for her, so natural to her, to start a campaign in Metcalf against him, and his mother was in Metcalf.

A tall blond young man in a rust-brown suit dropped into the empty seat opposite Guy and, smiling with a vague friendliness, slid over into the corner. Guy glanced at his pallid, undersized face. There was a huge pimple in the exact centre of his forehead. Guy looked out the window again.

The young man opposite him seemed to debate whether to start a conversation or take a nap. His elbow kept sliding along the window-sill, and whenever the stubby lashes came open, the grey bloodshot eyes were looking at him and the soft smile came back. He might have been slightly drunk.

Guy opened his book, but his mind wandered after half a page. He looked up as the row of white fluorescent lights flickered on down the ceiling of the car, let his eyes wander to the unlighted cigar that still gyrated conversationally in a bony hand behind one of the seat backs, and to the monogram that trembled on a thin gold chain across the tie of the young man opposite him. The monogram was CAB, and the tie was of green silk, hand-painted with offensively orange-coloured palm trees. The long rust-brown body was sprawled vulnerably now, the head thrown back so that the big pimple or boil on the forehead might have been a topmost point that had erupted. It was an interesting face, though Guy did not know why. It looked neither young nor old, neither intelligent nor entirely stupid. Between the narrow bulging forehead and the lantern jaw, it scooped degenerately, deep where the mouth lay in a fine line, deepest in the blue hollows that held the small scallops of the lids. The skin was smooth as a girl's, even waxenly clear, as if all its impurities had been drained to feed the pimple's outburst.

For a few moments, Guy read again. The words made sense to him and began to lift his anxiety. But what good will Plato do you with Miriam, an inner voice asked him. It had asked him that in New York, but he had brought the book anyway, an old text from a high-school philosophy course, an indulgence to compensate him, perhaps, for having to make the trip to Miriam.

He looked out the window and, seeing his own image, straightened his curling collar. Anne was always doing that for him. Suddenly he felt helpless without her. He shifted his position, accidentally touched the outstretched foot of the young man asleep, and watched fascinatedly as the lashes twitched and came open. The bloodshot eyes might have been focused on him all the while through the lids.

‘Sorry,’ Guy murmured.

‘’S all right,’ the other said. He sat up and shook his head sharply. ‘Where are we?’

‘Getting into Texas.’

The blond young man brought a gold flask from his inside pocket, opened it, and extended it amiably.

‘No, thanks,’ Guy said. The woman across the aisle, Guy noticed, who had not looked up from her knitting since St Louis, glanced over just as the flask upended with a metallic splash.

‘Where you bound?’ The smile was a thin wet crescent now.

‘Metcalf,’ Guy said.

‘Oh, Nice town, Metcalf. Down on business?’ He blinked his sore-looking eyes politely.

‘Yes.’

‘What business?’

Guy looked up reluctantly from his book. ‘Architect.’

‘Oh,’ with wistful interest. ‘Build houses and things?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t think I’ve introduced myself.’ He half stood up. ‘Bruno. Charles Anthony Bruno.’

Guy shook his hand briefly. ‘Guy Haines.’

‘Glad to meet you. You live in New York?’ The hoarse baritone voice sounded false, as if he were talking to wake himself up.

‘Yes.’

‘I live in Long Island. Going to Santa Fe for a little vacation. Ever been to Santa Fe?’

Guy shook his head.

‘Great town to relax in.’ He smiled, showing poor teeth. ‘Mostly Indian architecture there, I guess.’

A conductor stopped in the aisle, thumbing through tickets. 'That your seat?' he asked Bruno.

Bruno leaned possessively into his corner. 'Drawing-room next car.'

'Number Three?'

'I guess. Yeah.'

The conductor went on.

'Those guys!' Bruno murmured. He leaned forward and gazed out the window amusedly.

Guy went back to his book, but the other's obtrusive boredom, a feeling he was about to say something in another instant, kept him from concentrating. Guy contemplated going to the diner, but for some reason sat on. The train was slowing again. When Bruno looked as if he were going to speak, Guy got up, retreated into the next car, and leapt the steps to the crunchy ground before the train had quite stopped.

The more organic air, weighted with nightfall, struck him like a smothering pillow. There was a smell of dusty, sun-warm gravel, of oil and hot metal. He was hungry and lingered near the diner, pacing in slow strides with his hands in his pockets, breathing the air deeply, though he disliked it. A constellation of red and green and white lights hummed southward in the sky. Yesterday, Anne might have come this route, he thought, on her way to Mexico. He might have been with her. She had wanted him to come with her as far as Metcalf. He might have asked her to stay over a day and meet his mother, if it had not been for Miriam. Or even regardless of Miriam, if he had been another sort of person, if he could be simply unconcerned. He had told Anne about Miriam, about almost all of it, but he could not bear the thought of their meeting. He had wanted to travel alone on the train in order to think. And what had he thought so far? What good had thinking or logic ever been where Miriam was concerned?

The conductor's voice shouted a warning, but Guy paced till the last moment, then swung himself aboard the car behind the diner.

The waiter had just taken his order when the blond young man appeared in the doorway of the car, swaying, looking a little truculent with a short cigarette in his mouth. Guy had put him quite out of mind and now his tall rust-brown figure was like a vaguely unpleasant memory. Guy saw him smile as he sighted him.

‘Thought you might have missed the train,’ Bruno said cheerfully, pulling out a chair.

‘If you don’t mind, Mr Bruno, I’d like privacy for a while. I have some things to think over.’

Bruno stabbed out the cigarette that was burning his fingers and looked at him blankly. He was drunker than before. His face seemed smeared and fuzzy at the edges. ‘We could have privacy in my place. We could have dinner there. How about it?’

‘Thanks, I’d rather stay here.’

‘Oh, but I insist. Waiter!’ Bruno clapped his hands. ‘Would you have this gentleman’s order sent to Drawing-Room Three and bring me a steak medium rare with French fries and apple pie? And two Scotch and sodas fast as you can, huh?’ He looked at Guy and smiled, the soft wistful smile. ‘Okay?’

Guy debated, then got up and came with him. What did it matter after all? And wasn’t he utterly sick of himself?

There was no need of the Scotches except to provide glasses and ice. The four yellow-labelled bottles of Scotch lined up on an alligator suitcase were the one neat unit of the little room. Suitcases and wardrobe trunks blocked passage everywhere except for a small labyrinthine area in the centre of the floor, and on top of them were strewn sports clothes and equipment, tennis rackets, a bag of golf clubs, a couple of cameras, a wicker basket of fruit and wine bedded in fuchsia paper. A splay of current magazines, comic books and novels covered the seat by the window. There was also a box of candy with a red ribbon across the lid.

‘Looks kind of athletic, I guess,’ Bruno said, suddenly apologetic.

‘It’s fine.’ Guy smiled slowly. The room amused him and gave him a welcome sense of seclusion. With the smile his dark

brows relaxed, transforming his whole expression. His eyes looked outward now. He stepped lithely in the alleys between suitcases, examining things like a curious cat.

‘Brand-new. Never felt a ball,’ Bruno informed him, holding out a tennis racket for him to feel. ‘My mother makes me take all this stuff, hoping it’ll keep me out of bars. Good to hock if I run out, anyway. I like to drink when I travel. It enhances things, don’t you think?’ The highballs arrived, and Bruno strengthened them from one of his bottles. ‘Sit down. Take off your coat.’

But neither of them sat down or removed his coat. There was an awkward several minutes when they had nothing to say to each other. Guy took a swallow of the highball that seemed to be all Scotch, and looked down at the littered floor. Bruno had odd feet, Guy noticed, or maybe it was the shoes. Small, light tan shoes with a long plain toecap shaped like Bruno’s lantern chin. Somehow old-fashioned-looking feet. And Bruno was not so slender as he had thought. His long legs were heavy and his body rounded.

‘I hope you weren’t annoyed,’ Bruno said cautiously, ‘when I came in the diner.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘I felt lonely. You know.’

Guy said something about its being lonely travelling in a drawing-room alone, then nearly tripped on something: the strap of a Rolleiflex camera. There was a new white scratch deep down the side of its leather case. He was conscious of Bruno’s shy stare. He was going to be bored, of course. Why had he come? A pang of conscience made him want to return to the diner. Then the waiter arrived with a pewter-covered tray, and snapped up a table. The smell of charcoal-broiled meat cheered him. Bruno insisted so desperately on paying the check that Guy gave it up. Bruno had a big mushroom-covered steak. Guy had hamburger.

‘What’re you building in Metcalf?’

‘Nothing,’ Guy said. ‘My mother lives there.’

‘Oh,’ Bruno said interestedly. ‘Visiting her? Is that where you’re from?’

‘Yes. Born there.’

‘You don’t look much like a Texan.’ Bruno shot ketchup all over his steak and French fries, then delicately picked up the parsley and held it poised. ‘How long since you been home?’

‘About two years.’

‘Your father there, too?’

‘My father’s dead.’

‘Oh. Get along with your mother okay?’

Guy said he did. The taste of Scotch, though Guy didn’t much care for it, was pleasant because it reminded him of Anne. She drank Scotch, when she drank. It was like her, golden, full of light, made with careful art. ‘Where do you live in Long Island?’

‘Great Neck.’

Anne lived much farther out on Long Island.

‘In a house I call the Doghouse,’ Bruno went on. ‘There’s dogwood all around it and everybody in it’s in some kind of doghouse, down to the chauffeur.’ He laughed suddenly with real pleasure, and bent again over his food.

Looking at him now, Guy saw only the top of his narrow thin-haired head and the protruding pimple. He had not been conscious of the pimple since he had seen him asleep, but now that he noticed it again, it seemed a monstrous, shocking thing and he saw it alone. ‘Why?’ Guy asked.

‘Account of my father. Bastard. I get on okay with my mother, too. My mother’s coming out to Santa Fe in a couple days.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘It is,’ Bruno said as if contradicting him. ‘We have a lot of fun together – sitting around, playing golf. We even go to parties together.’ He laughed, half ashamed, half proud, and suddenly uncertain and young. ‘You think that’s funny?’

‘No,’ said Guy.

‘I just wish I had my own dough. See, my income was supposed to start this year, only my father won’t let me have it. He’s deflecting it into his own exchequer. You might not think so, but I haven’t got any more money now than I had when I was in school with

everything paid for. I have to ask for a hundred dollars now and then from my mother.' He smiled, pluckily.

'I wish you had let me pay the check.'

'A-aw, now!' Bruno protested. 'I just mean it's a hell of a thing, isn't it, when your own father robs you. It isn't even his money, it's my mother's family's money.' He waited for Guy to comment.

'Hasn't your mother any say about it?'

'My father got his name put on it when I was a kid!' Bruno shouted hoarsely.

'Oh.' Guy wondered how many people Bruno had met, bought dinners for, and told the same story about his father. 'Why did he do that?'

Bruno brought his hands up in a hopeless shrug, then hid them fast in his pockets. 'I said he was a bastard, didn't I? He robs everyone he can. Now he says he won't give it to me because I won't work, but that's a lie. He thinks my mother and I have too good a time as it is. He's always scheming up ways to cut in.'

Guy could see him and his mother, a youngish Long Island society woman who used too much mascara and occasionally, like her son, enjoyed tough company. 'Where'd you go to college?'

'Harvard. Busted out sophomore year. Drinking and gambling.' He shrugged with a writhing movement of his narrow shoulders. 'Not like you, huh? Okay, I'm a bum, so what?' He poured more Scotch for both of them.

'Who said you were?'

'My father says so. He should've had a nice quiet son like you, then everybody would've been happy.'

'What makes you think I'm nice and quiet?'

'I mean you're serious and you choose a profession. Like architecture. Me, I don't feel like working. I don't have to work, see? I'm not a writer or a painter or a musician. Is there any reason a person should work if they don't have to? I'll get my ulcers the easy way. My father has ulcers. Hah! He still has hopes I'll

enter his hardware business. I tell him his business, all business, is legalized throat-cutting, like marriage is legalized fornication. Am I right?’

Guy looked at him wryly and sprinkled salt on the French fried potato on his fork. He was eating slowly, enjoying his meal, even vaguely enjoying Bruno, as he might have enjoyed an entertainment on a distant stage. Actually, he was thinking of Anne. Sometimes the faint continuous dream he had of her seemed more real than the outside world that penetrated only in sharp fragments, occasional images, like the scratch on the Rolleiflex case, the long cigarette Bruno had plunged into his pat of butter, the shattered glass of the photograph of the father Bruno had thrown out in the hall in the story he was telling now. It had just occurred to Guy he might have time to see Anne in Mexico, between seeing Miriam and going to Florida. If he got through with Miriam quickly, he could fly to Mexico and fly to Palm Beach. It hadn’t occurred to him before because he couldn’t afford it. But if the Palm Beach contract came through, he could.

‘Can you imagine anything more insulting? Locking the garage where my own car is?’ Bruno’s voice had cracked and was stuck at a shrieking pitch.

‘Why?’ Guy asked.

‘Just because he knew I needed it bad that night! My friends picked me up finally, so what does he get out of it?’

Guy didn’t know what to say. ‘He keeps the keys?’

‘He took *my keys!* Took them out of my room! That’s why he was scared of me. He left the house that night, he was so scared.’ Bruno was turned in his chair, breathing hard, chewing a fingernail. Some wisps of hair, darkened brown with sweat, bobbed like antennae over his forehead. ‘My mother wasn’t home, or it never could have happened, of course.’

‘Of course,’ Guy echoed involuntarily. Their whole conversation had been leading to this story, he supposed, that he had heard only half of. Back of the bloodshot eyes that had opened on him in the Pullman car, back of the wistful smile, another story of

hatred and injustice. ‘So you threw his picture out in the hall?’ Guy asked meaninglessly.

‘I threw it out of my mother’s room,’ Bruno said, emphasizing the last three words. ‘My father put it in my mother’s room. She doesn’t like the Captain any better than I do. The Captain! – I don’t call him anything, brother!’

‘But what’s he got against you?’

‘Against me and my mother, too! He’s different from us or any other *human*! He doesn’t like anybody. He doesn’t like anything but money. He cut enough throats to make a lot of money, that’s all. Sure he’s smart! Okay! But his conscience is sure eating him now! That’s why he wants me to go into his business, so I’ll cut throats and feel as lousy as he does!’ Bruno’s stiff hand closed, then his mouth, then his eyes.

Guy thought he was about to cry, when the puffy lids lifted and the smile staggered back.

‘Boring, huh? I was just explaining why I left town so soon, ahead of my mother. You don’t know what a cheerful guy I am really! Honest!’

‘Can’t you leave home if you want to?’

Bruno didn’t seem to understand his question at first, then he answered calmly, ‘Sure, only I like to be with my mother.’

And his mother stayed because of the money, Guy supposed. ‘Cigarette?’

Bruno took one, smiling. ‘You know, the night he left the house was the first time in maybe ten years he’d gone out. I wonder where the hell he even went. I was sore enough that night to kill him and he knew it. Ever feel like murdering somebody?’

‘No.’

‘I do. I’m sure sometimes I could kill my father.’ He looked down at his plate with a bemused smile. ‘You know what my father does for a hobby? Guess.’

Guy didn’t want to guess. He felt suddenly bored and wanted to be alone.

‘He collects cookie cutters!’ Bruno exploded with a snickering laugh. ‘Cookie cutters, honest! He’s got all kinds – Pennsylvania

Dutch, Bavarian, English, French, a lot of Hungarian, all around the room. Animal-cracker cookie cutters framed over his desk – you know, the things kids eat in boxes? He wrote the president of the company and they sent him a whole set. The machine age!’ Bruno laughed and ducked his head.

Guy stared at him. Bruno himself was funnier than what he said. ‘Does he ever use them?’

‘Huh?’

‘Does he ever make cookies?’

Bruno whooped. With a wriggle, he removed his jacket and flung it at a suitcase. For a moment he seemed too excited to say anything, then remarked with sudden quiet, ‘My mother’s always telling him to go back to his cookie cutters.’ A film of sweat covered his smooth face like thin oil. He thrust his smile solicitously half across the table. ‘Enjoy your dinner?’

‘Very much,’ Guy said heartily.

‘Ever hear of the Bruno Transforming Company of Long Island? Makes AC-DC gadgets?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well, why should you? Makes plenty of dough though. You interested in making money?’

‘Not awfully.’

‘Mind if I ask how old you are?’

‘Twenty-nine.’

‘Yeah? I would’ve said older. How old you think I look?’

Guy studied him politely. ‘Maybe twenty-four or five,’ he answered, intending to flatter him, for he looked younger.

‘Yeah, I am. Twenty-five. You mean I do look twenty-five with this – this *thing* right in the centre of my head?’ Bruno caught his underlip between his teeth. A glint of wariness came in his eyes, and suddenly he cupped his hand over his forehead in intense and bitter shame. He sprang up and went to the mirror. ‘I meant to put something over it.’

Guy said something reassuring, but Bruno kept looking at himself this way and that in the mirror, in an agony of

self-torture. ‘It *couldn’t* be a pimple,’ he said nasally. ‘It’s a boil. It’s everything I *hate* boiling up in me. It’s a plague of Job!’

‘Oh, now!’ Guy laughed.

‘It started coming Monday night after that fight. It’s getting worse. I bet it leaves a scar.’

‘No, it won’t.’

‘Yes, it will. A fine thing to get to Santa Fe with!’ He was sitting in his chair now with his fists clenched and one heavy leg trailing, in a pose of brooding tragedy.

Guy went over and opened one of the books on the seat by the window. It was a detective novel. They were all detective novels. When he tried to read a few lines, the print swam and he closed the book. He must have drunk a lot, he thought. He didn’t really care, tonight.

‘In Santa Fe,’ Bruno said, ‘I want everything there is. Wine, women, and song. Hah!’

‘What do you want?’

‘Something.’ Bruno’s mouth turned down in an ugly grimace of unconcern. ‘Everything. I got a theory a person ought to do everything it’s possible to do before he dies, and maybe die trying to do something that’s really impossible.’

Something in Guy responded with a leap, then cautiously drew back. He asked softly, ‘Like what?’

‘Like a trip to the moon in a rocket. Setting a speed record in a car – blindfolded. I did that once. Didn’t set a record, but I went up to a hundred sixty.’

‘Blindfolded?’

‘And I did a robbery.’ Bruno stared at Guy rigidly. ‘Good one. Out of an apartment.’

An incredulous smile started on Guy’s lips, though actually he believed Bruno. Bruno could be violent. He could be insane, too. Despair, Guy thought, not insanity. The desperate boredom of the wealthy, that he often spoke of to Anne. It tended to destroy rather than create. And it could lead to crime as easily as privation.

‘Not to get anything,’ Bruno went on. ‘I didn’t want what I took. I especially took what I didn’t want.’

‘What did you take?’

Bruno shrugged. ‘Cigarette lighter. Table model. And a statue off the mantel. Coloured glass. And something else.’ Another shrug. ‘You’re the only one knows about it. I don’t talk much. Guess you think I do.’ He smiled.

Guy drew on his cigarette. ‘How’d you go about it?’

‘Watched an apartment house in Astoria till I got the time right, then just walked in the window. Down the fire escape. Sort of easy. One of the things I cross off my list, thinking thank God.’

‘Why “thank God”?’

Bruno grinned shyly. ‘I don’t know why I said that.’ He refilled his glass, then Guy’s.

Guy looked at the stiff, shaky hands that had stolen, at the nails bitten below the quick. The hands played clumsily with a match cover and dropped it, like a baby’s hands, on to the ash-sprinkled steak. How boring it was really, Guy thought, crime. How motiveless often. A certain type turned to crime. And who would know from Bruno’s hands, or his room, or his ugly wistful face that he had stolen? Guy dropped into his chair again.

‘Tell me about you,’ Bruno invited pleasantly.

‘Nothing to tell.’ Guy took a pipe from his jacket pocket, banged it on his heel, looked down at the ashes on the carpet, and then forgot them. The tingling of the alcohol sank deeper into his flesh. He thought, if the Palm Beach contract came through, the two weeks before work began would pass quickly. A divorce needn’t take long. The pattern of the low white buildings on the green lawn in his finished drawing swam familiarly in his mind, in detail, without his trying to evoke them. He felt subtly flattered, immensely secure suddenly, and blessed.

‘What kind of houses you build?’ Bruno asked.

‘Oh – what’s known as modern. I’ve done a couple of stores and a small office building.’ Guy smiled, feeling none of the