

Characters:

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH, *an older woman, distinct vestiges of beauty*

EDWARD, *twenties, handsome, sexually ambiguous, a New Yorker*

Setting

It's 1995 We are in the spacious study of Patricia Highsmith, in her minimalist modern house in Tegna, Switzerland By contrast to the bunker-like architecture, the study is a brilliant archive of a life Books, pictures, rugs and artefacts – all somehow unique or beautiful – fill the space, including a collection of antique weapons, both knives and guns The overall effect is curatorial rather than cluttered Her desk is furnished with a 1956 Olympia Deluxe typewriter, papers, an ashtray, a packet of Camel cigarettes – she smokes on and off throughout the play – a half-empty bottle of Scotch and a glass Through the window, is a classic picture-postcard vista of Switzerland

This text went to press before the end of rehearsals and so may differ slightly from the play as performed

ACT ONE

Lights up 1995 Autumn Early morning PATRICIA HIGHSMITH is sitting at her desk She is wearing men's trousers, a boy's shirt and loafers She is older now, but there are vestiges of her once-great beauty and she has an innate gender-neutral style EDWARD, an ordinarily handsome young man of around twenty-five – neatly if inexpensively dressed – is standing A backpack and a small suitcase sit beside him on the floor His demeanour is distinctly nervous He's been dreaming of this moment and it's finally arrived

PATRICIA (*without turning to look at him, still typing*) You're late

EDWARD Oh

PATRICIA I know that because this is Switzerland

Beat She turns around to take him in

EDWARD The train was um late leaving Paris

PATRICIA Is that my business?

EDWARD I tried to call from the *Gare du Nord* –

PATRICIA I don't answer the phone

EDWARD I did email to say –

PATRICIA I don't do email

EDWARD No, I get that –

PATRICIA – if you're impulsive, it's downright dangerous

EDWARD I guess that's true!

PATRICIA No one realises that the whole point of an envelope and a stamp is to act as a buffer between *thought* and *deed* I can sound very pleasant, benevolent even, in a letter, but in an email, my personal generosity doesn't come through I emailed my German publisher and he completely misread my tone

EDWARD What did you write?

PATRICIA I said *'What the hell makes you think I'm going to have the goddamn wool pulled over my eyes by a bunch of Nazis who'd sell their mother to make an extra Deutschmark?'* It came across as 'hostile' apparently
He steps forward nervously and offers his hand

EDWARD Edward Ridgeway
She looks at it disdainfully He retracts it
Miss Highsmith, I'm hoping we're going to address the situation –

PATRICIA The 'situation' –

EDWARD I think we both know –

PATRICIA I guess we do know –

EDWARD The reason I'm here –

PATRICIA You're the troubleshooter?

EDWARD Well, I'm confident that –

PATRICIA Confident, eh? Think you're going to 'sort me out'?

EDWARD Well –

PATRICIA Once upon a time, you could *depend* upon confidence People asked themselves Do I have the *right* to be confident? You *earned* that degree of self-affirmation

EDWARD Well, I –

PATRICIA Whereas these days, young people they *start out* confident Why? I'll tell you why! Because they're deluded They're *silly little fuckers!* And then *life* has to take the wind out of their sails

EDWARD I don't think I'm deluded!

PATRICIA That's because you *are* deluded, genius!

EDWARD Miss Highsmith, first of all I want to take this opportunity to say that we're sure it was just all some kind of misunderstanding

PATRICIA Who's 'we'?

EDWARD Mr Hunter and the company And I would certainly add my vote to that

PATRICIA You would, would you? Are you old enough to vote?

EDWARD (*carefully*) We think Bradley Applebee probably just allowed himself to let his imagination get the better of him

PATRICIA Bradley Applebee didn't have any imagination

EDWARD Well, his mind –

PATRICIA There was no indication Applebee had a mind, either

EDWARD The company wants you to know there are no hard feelings

PATRICIA Presumably, Applebee has a couple of hard feelings

EDWARD Well, actually he's –

PATRICIA What?

EDWARD Bradley's left the company

Beat

PATRICIA Well, no doubt this is all some distant memory for Bradley Applebee He's probably pushing a pen in some mediocre office as we speak

EDWARD Oh no – no, Bradley's not ready for work yet

PATRICIA 'Not ready'?

EDWARD Well, he's – ah – in counselling I think he took it rather hard

PATRICIA The company had no business sending a timid little nobody with no sense of humour

EDWARD He's still having flashbacks, apparently –

PATRICIA Flashbacks!

EDWARD About the knife

PATRICIA There was no knife!

EDWARD Well, that's what we mean about his imagination taking the lead

PATRICIA As if I'd –

EDWARD Exactly That's what we said As if Miss Highsmith would –

PATRICIA I don't have time to threaten underlings with –

EDWARD Of course not!

PATRICIA I'm not in the habit of –

EDWARD He kept saying it wouldn't have been so bad in the daylight –

PATRICIA *Nothing's* so bad in the daylight That's why we revel in darkness!

EDWARD For whatever reason, he had a strong sense of waking up in the pitch black and feeling the steel blade against his throat –

PATRICIA Crazy

EDWARD Crazy Exactly

PATRICIA *He* woke *me* up in the dead of night It's not my fault Hunter sent a kid with a capacity to hallucinate I tell you what though, that kid could scream! Hitchcock would have bottled it

EDWARD Anyhow, Bradley aside, we still feel very strongly –

PATRICIA 'We'?

EDWARD Mr Hunter and the company –

PATRICIA Want to make some money

EDWARD Well, yes Okay Companies generally like to make money Is there anything wrong with that?

PATRICIA They want to make money off of me

EDWARD They want *you* to make money, too

PATRICIA I'm touched

EDWARD And they wanted me to come and tell you that the reason they are overlooking – the reason I'm here, is to let you know we have every confidence

PATRICIA Really? You're the company spokesman? You've still got your baby teeth!

EDWARD I'm older than I look And not to blow my own trumpet but I think I have the sensibility to understand you

PATRICIA Notice how it's only trumpet-blowers who use that phrase?

EDWARD I think I can help and everyone will be happy

PATRICIA From the moment you walked through that door, I could see that you brought all the slapdash of America with you Maybe I've been in Europe too long, but the attention to detail is very beguiling here – Europeans use their *senses* Americans like you and Americans *are* like you, think close enough is good enough It's a general national callow youth The sensibility is just not *fine* How is your mind? Is it a fine mind?

EDWARD My mind?

PATRICIA Is the taxi still here? Tell him to keep the meter on

EDWARD Please, Miss Highsmith –

PATRICIA That's the very best thing about Switzerland When you call a cab, *the cab comes*

EDWARD Just give me a chance – just a –

PATRICIA They should put *that* on the tourism ads Enough with the *chocolate*, for Christ's sake

EDWARD I've come a long way

PATRICIA Yes, you have And for absolutely no reason

EDWARD All the way from New York City

PATRICIA New York City!

EDWARD The greatest city on earth

PATRICIA The greatest city on earth! Full of pseuds and Jews and Catholics! *The greatest city?* Is that where you get your air of self-congratulation? Sitting there at your little desk in a publishing house that thinks it's hit the big time with Tom Wolfe Tom Wolfe! What a joke! I can see you in your cheap suit sitting in Emmett's coffee shop thinking that those pretty girls eating pie and drinking coffee are going to be impressed that you're some big cheese because you get to fraternise with authors Like you're an intellectual!

EDWARD Emmett's has gone

PATRICIA What?

EDWARD There is no Emmett's

PATRICIA (*wind out of sails*) Emmett's is gone?

EDWARD And girls don't eat pie They eat *Romaine*

PATRICIA What the hell is Romaine?

EDWARD It's a lettuce They eat lettuce And yogurt There are very few – (*Makes the quotation mark sign with his fingers*) 'diners'

PATRICIA (*mimicking and nasty*) Please don't do that

EDWARD (*continuing*) And girls don't smoke

PATRICIA They don't smoke?

EDWARD Nobody smokes Apart from models

PATRICIA Nobody smokes?

EDWARD And they don't drink coffee – they get organic caffè lattes in paper cups to go

PATRICIA What the hell is *that*?

EDWARD It's the new coffee

PATRICIA I liked the old coffee! Caffè lattes! So Americans can pretend they're in Europe even though they don't know where it is!

EDWARD There are also nineteen different brands of bottled water –

PATRICIA What happened to *tap* water?

EDWARD That's like saying what happened to white bread

PATRICIA What happened to white bread?

EDWARD We lost the fight

PATRICIA Who lost the fight?

EDWARD White-bread lovers of the world It's all rice cakes and oat loaves Don't even mention butter

PATRICIA Good God!

EDWARD A little African ceramic dish of Ligurian virgin olive oil, perhaps But butter, Jesus, keep your voice down!

PATRICIA And if you don't happen to have any Ligurian virgins on hand?

EDWARD You couldn't possibly have a character who eats a Wonder Bread sandwich any more White-bread eating is an act of a dedicated radicalised anarchist Which, of course, is someone you *could* write!

PATRICIA Maybe this country has influenced me, but there's altogether too much *personality* going on here you and your world view about what I can and can't do I don't know why I said yes to Hunter He manipulated me, that fucker! He said 'I'm sending an emissary to persuade you to sign and by the way he can bring you over some of the things you want' and I fell for it He didn't tell me the emissary would be *twelve years old* Goodbye

EDWARD You don't mean that

PATRICIA I mean it And I'm not signing a damn thing

A momentary steeliness comes over the genial EDWARD

EDWARD *Yes, you will*

Beat

PATRICIA (*stunned*) I beg your pardon?

EDWARD You will sign In the end

PATRICIA Get lost Get outta here Before I call the cops Who won't like you 'Cause they don't like trouble That's why they're neutral Trouble bothers them I'll say you're an intruder and they'll haul your ass into a Swiss jail where they'll torture you with intravenous bircher muesli!

EDWARD (*determined*) Not until you sign

PATRICIA *watches him as he unscrews the lid of a fountain pen and lays it next to the contract* Beat

PATRICIA What if I don't agree?

EDWARD Then I guess I'm staying (*Beat This is the moment he's been waiting for This is his chance to woo her with his memorised speech*) *We have faith* That is the bottom line We have faith There comes a time in every writer's life when they feel as if the fuel has dried up They've peaked They've written a classic or two They've had the best-seller The invitations to literary festivals have come and gone, the fan letters, once a deluge, are now a trickle The, the – (*Glances at the prompt notes written on his palm With rehearsed conviction*) insidious figure of mortality beckons on the horizon And suddenly they feel as if they've said all they have to say The well dries up The words stop flowing 'My preoccupations haunt me but where is the spark of novelty, of *originality*? Where is my capacity to surprise not just my publishers and my readers but myself *Myself*' All great writers experience doubt But I am here to remind you that you do have that capacity to surprise yourself Because life is the grist to your mill and *you still live*

Beat

PATRICIA *What the fuck?*

EDWARD (*failing and knowing it but still trying valiantly*) *You still live* Oh, yes!

PATRICIA 'The insidious figure of mortality'?

EDWARD Well, I –

PATRICIA Thanks for the pep talk What I'm wondering is – Why on earth did Hunter think you would make a difference? He's a jerk and pain and a cheapskate and an asshole, but he's not a fool

EDWARD I persuaded Mr Hunter –

PATRICIA I find that very hard to believe –

You do know I was made an Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters of France? You do know that, don't you? Do you know what that means?

EDWARD A grand *fromage*

PATRICIA A very damn grand *fromage*, baby

EDWARD So Norman Mailer doesn't bother you?

PATRICIA Mailer!

EDWARD Doesn't bother you he called you a high-class detective novelist?

PATRICIA I know what he called me!

EDWARD At least it was high class!

PATRICIA (*unable to contain herself, bile building*) 'Detective novels'! Was *Crime and Punishment* a detective novel? I write about *life* Life as it *is*, no sugar added I'm ugly at the heart, so what? *We all are* That's what makes us more interesting than *rocks* The French like me just the way I am The American literary establishment? Oh, they swan about Manhattan reading the *New Yorker* but while their antecedents were building log cabins and eating corn grits, Delacroix was painting *Liberty Guiding the People* The French may be repulsive, but they know their stuff Not like America where the over-praised literary fraternity – a bunch of middle-aged male writers with massive egos is fawned upon by middle-aged male *critics* with massive egos They are locked in symbiotic, even *sexual* embrace They *fuck each other* There Let's be clear Because, apparently, women are not and cannot be geniuses

EDWARD I can see how that might –

PATRICIA (*on a roll*) I won't say there are days I'm not eaten up with injustice Writers sit inside injustice very easily It's their most comfortable chair But I do not need to parade my insecurity by clawing my way into their good graces *I'm a writer* My impulses live in their own kingdom – a kingdom driven by death And I'm rather good at writing about it So Norman Mailer can go fuck himself Drink?

EDWARD Ah Sure

She pours two shots one large one in a large glass for her, one small one in a shot glass for him

Okay, so, you hate Americans And you hate the French

PATRICIA Not to mention blacks –

EDWARD You're joking, aren't you?

PATRICIA *I'm not joking*

EDWARD Jesus!

Two more shots and they down them

You're a very complicated woman

PATRICIA And you know so much about women! You're a homo, aren't you?

EDWARD What?

PATRICIA You like men

EDWARD That's just –

PATRICIA You're a fairy

EDWARD I don't think my sexual preference is relevant here

PATRICIA Do you have a sexual preference? Or are you a snail? What's the big secret?

EDWARD It's not a secret It's just not your –

PATRICIA I think it's interesting you're so damn secretive –

EDWARD I think it's interesting that a writer whose entire creative – (*Clumsy pronunciation*) *oeuvre* –

PATRICIA (*correcting him*) *Oeuvre* You know, with your linguistic skills, I'd stick to 'body of work'!

EDWARD (*resolving*) You know, I'm not going to let that go You sit up here in the *Alps*, surrounded by people in *dirndls* making *fondue*, like a fossil I keep thinking you know better than to be racist, but you *don't* know 'Cause you're stuck in the 1950s when you were out there in the world and you're oblivious to the fact that *civilisation has moved on* Ignorant views like yours have been *outed* –

PATRICIA You're calling me ignorant – ?

EDWARD Yes, I am!

PATRICIA I'm not ignorant I'm just *mean*

EDWARD Thanks for the newsflash! You carry on about not liking African-Americans, not realising that you're paralysed in some antiquated social bubble

PATRICIA (*rattled*) I never said I didn't like African-Americans I said I didn't like *blacks* That's a much larger pool, obviously But they shouldn't feel bad because I can't stand Jews more And I'm not crazy about Portuguese or Latinos, either

EDWARD Of course you aren't

PATRICIA Not to mention Catholics *Catholics!* Yuck! *Big deal* Go And take your contract with you!

EDWARD *looks over at the contract*

Send Hunter my best regards! Tell him to go fuck himself! And good luck selling insurance

EDWARD *takes a long beat and studies her carefully, reappraising*

EDWARD (*growing confidence*) You know, I have a sneaking suspicion you say this stuff *for effect*

She's astonished by this gumption

PATRICIA Oh, really!

EDWARD All this viciousness feels a tiny bit overplayed (*Pleased with his insight*) I don't think you're anywhere near as awful as you come across

PATRICIA Believe me, I *am* this awful

EDWARD I don't think that these sentiments tally with your grasp of humanity

PATRICIA Oh, I like humanity all right, only *edited!*

EDWARD I think you don't want to let anyone in 'Cause you're frightened of your feelings

PATRICIA I *feed off* my feelings!

EDWARD No You *give them away* You give them to your characters Whatever you may be, Miss Highsmith (and let's not go there) – you are not *crude* Your racism is *schtuck* *It's your song-and-dance act*

Beat

PATRICIA (*more affected than she would like to be*) I like people! Just not *all* people!

EDWARD Who *do* you like?

PATRICIA Plenty!

EDWARD Who?

PATRICIA *Lots!*

She pours them two more shots The alcohol is beginning to work on them

Beat

Francis Bacon I would have liked to have met *him* (*On her desk*) Here's a postcard of his *Study No 6* One of the screaming popes He had a nanny that locked him in a cupboard for hours That's why he painted in a little tiny room Now someone your generation would be lying on the shrink's couch complaining of post-traumatic stress but Bacon said 'That cupboard was the making of me' *That's* an artist Everyone else can go to hell Especially the Jews!

EDWARD Here she goes, *the curtain goes up!*

PATRICIA It's a free world If I can't stand Red Indians – and I can't, as it happens – that's my problem, not yours You can be a one-man publicist for every two-bit minority on Earth You can go your merry way loving everyone and everything and leave me to my exultant cynicism

EDWARD *drowns her out with the tune and upbeat style of 'Happy Talk'*

She stares at him stand-off He won the point and her confidence is surprisingly dented When he gains power, she loses it

You want your goddamn contract signed?

PATRICIA The *actual* Mr Ridgeway?

TOM The *actual* Mr Ridgeway

Beat

PATRICIA Whatcha do, Tom? Cut the brake cable?

Long beat Through the following speech, EDWARD slowly morphs into TOM Lighting helps to physically transform him The overall effect is bone-chilling as the psychopathic TOM emerges

TOM I waited for spring, I knew from my paper round that spring rains make the roads greasier I saw some fierce smashes on Middleton Road, with the bends and the river flooding Saturday nights on newly wet roads, people hurrying to parties, running late They were driving to bridge Saturday night Dad had already had a couple of drinks Going to the Fidgetts' up on Hastings Road I was home with my brother When they left, I hugged them both and in that final embrace I already felt a kind of release I watched TV and sat there waiting for the knock on the door I thought *Get ready, Tom You're going to have to fake it (Beat)* But from the moment the knock sounded, and I opened the door to the policemen, I was right there, right inside my own performance I could hear myself – exquisite, subtle – a model of innocence *We've got some bad news kids and I think you need to sit down Is there a grandma we could call? Or an aunt? That's it, I thought, this is exactly how it played out in my imagination He's doing it the exact same way!* The miracle of it! *'Is there a grandma we could call? Or an aunt?'* One of the cops was tearing up – I knew this would go down as an anecdote about the difficulty of a policeman's job – To tell a couple of kids – just like his own boys – that their lives were forever altered And all the time I was standing there thinking *it's not that hard It's actually not that hard to kill*

PATRICIA *absorbs the unambiguous arrival of TOM*
RIPLEY

PATRICIA *What would happen, you thought to yourself, if I was alone in the world? What could I do if there was no one to hold me back, to remind me I'm nothing special?*

PATRICIA I went to a great deal of trouble making you
breakfast

EDWARD I'm touched

PATRICIA Are you hungry?

EDWARD I'm ravenous

EDWARD *sits and spreads the napkin on his lap* PATRICIA
sits opposite him

(*Surprise*) They actually look quite good

PATRICIA I do something, I do it properly

*She's priming herself for another round Over the course of
PATRICIA's speech, EDWARD readies himself to eat,
having buttered his toast, applied salt and pepper, etc , but
as she reaches the second half and he is ready to take his
first mouthful, his appetite starts to wane She gradually
re-embodies her confidence*

You know, it's not murder that interests me It's love Love is
what interests me It's just that love is indivisible from
murder I like guns And knives I like strangling and
drowning I like the wax museum attendant who kills his
customers and turns them into wax sculptures I dream of
beheadings And I love poison (*Beat*) I especially love
poison (*Beat*) Because poison is so playful One droplet of
dimethyl mercury can penetrate cell membranes and
devour the brain cells like termites

Beat EDWARD's fork, laden with food, is poised in his
hand, paralysed in mid-air

Snake venom Simply marvellous

*She leaves long enough a beat to make him think she's
finished He moves the mouthful towards his mouth and she
starts up again and he stops again*

Not to mention, the classics Arsenic – unoriginal but with
a certain iconic status – a little will make the victim weak
and confused, then low blood pressure, nausea, vomiting,
paralysis and the really great thing about it, the *fabulous*
thing about it, that makes it the poison of choice for

murderers everywhere and for always, is that it has no
colour (*Beat*) And no smell (*Beat*) And no taste

*She looks at him challenging, her control back Long beat
Slowly he moves the fork to his mouth and with great
deliberation eats the mouthful She watches for a few
moments Suddenly, PATRICIA notices the objects on her
desk have been moved*

(*Calmly*) Did you move my things?

EDWARD (*not a care in the world*) Oh I guess I did

PATRICIA *You moved my things?*

EDWARD I do apologise, Pat, but honest to God, I do think it's
time you lightened up about that stuff

PATRICIA (*quietly*) I beg your pardon?

EDWARD It's not as if they're Fabergé eggs! It's just a bunch
of mementos

PATRICIA (*growing fury*) How dare you speak to me like that!

EDWARD *I said* I apologise

PATRICIA Get the fuck out!

EDWARD I can't do that, Pat

PATRICIA You *can* do it if I *make* you do it

EDWARD That wasn't the deal

PATRICIA You'll do exactly what I tell you to! If I want you to
leave, you'll leave

EDWARD (*softly*) But that's *not* what you want

PATRICIA I can snap my fingers any time I like and you'll
vanish right out that door in a puff of goddamn smoke

EDWARD (*very calm, assured*) Then snap your fingers

Beat as they both acknowledge that she will never do that

PATRICIA Who was on the phone?

EDWARD/TOM (*very casual*) Edward Ridgeway From New
York