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**PATRICIA HIGHSMITH, NICHOLAS BLAKE, AND THE
CASE OF THE DUPLICATE MURDER**

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In 1958 British poet C. Day-Lewis, in his role as detective novelist Nicholas Blake, found himself confronted by an unsettling real-life puzzle: he wrote a novel, published it, and then discovered that there were uncanny—and disconcerting—resemblances to a novel by another established writer—who had earlier published hers. As Blake himself describes it in his “Author’s Note” to later editions of *A Penknife in My Heart*:

After a British edition of this book had gone to press, I discovered that the basis of its plot is similar to that of a novel by Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*, published in 1950 by Harper & Brothers and later made into a film. I had never read this novel, or seen the film, nor do I remember ever hearing about them. My own treatment of the basic idea—the switching of victims—is very different from Miss Highsmith’s. But two of the chief characters in my story, I found to my consternation, bore the same Christian names as two in hers: these have been changed; and I should like to thank Miss Highsmith for being so charmingly sympathetic over the predicament in which the long arm of coincidence put me.¹

The long arm of coincidence was certainly at work: in both novels one man proposes to another a collaborative murder project: I’ll kill your wife if you’ll kill my father/uncle. Both proposals occur in the twilight land of travel, where both past and future are briefly suspended. In both cases the person who proposes the murder finally dies of drowning in the course of a trip on a sailing boat, a trip on which he is accompanied by his fellow murderer. In both cases, the second murderer chooses finally to confess, in both cases to his dead wife’s lover. And, most upsetting from Nicholas Blake’s point of view, there is the strange similarity mentioned in his “Author’s Note”—in each book the killer who proposes trading victims is named Charles, and the wife who becomes victim number one is named Miriam.

As Blake points out, his handling of the collaborative murder theme is dramatically different from that of Highsmith. Highsmith’s first murderer, Charles Bruno, is permanently caught in adolescence—

his emotions are erratic and uncontrolled, his desire to have his father murdered is largely a result of a classic Oedipal triangle, and one of his primary reasons for killing Guy Haines's wife is a hero-worshipper's need to ally himself with the object of his admiration, in this case architect Guy. The book as a whole traces Guy Haines's gradual recognition of the nature of the bond he shares with Charles 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."² When Charles Bruno is drowning, freeing Guy from the greatest threat to his freedom, Guy tries desperately to save him; once left alone, Guy finds the guilt of their joint venture too much for one person to bear.

Nicholas Blake's Charles Hammer (or Stuart Hammer, as he is called in later editions) is very different from Highsmith's Charles Bruno: Stuart is a coldblooded calculator who deliberately manipulates Edwin Stowe into a shared murder scheme. And Edwin Stowe—Ned—is far more like Nicholas Blake's C. Day-Lewis self than he is like Highsmith's Guy. As Sean Day-Lewis—C. Day-Lewis's son—points out, Ned is named after the home village of C. Day-Lewis's adolescence—Edwinstowe. And Ned Stowe shares with C. Day-Lewis a complicated and psychologically tangled double life of wife and mistress, and a sense of himself as a " 'moral desperado.' "³ Ned's role in the murders is also substantially different from that of Highsmith's Guy, who only realizes after the fact that Bruno has killed Guy's wife, Miriam. Blake's Ned *willingly* agrees to the death of his wife (Miriam in the first edition, Helena later) and sees her death as his only chance to be reborn into a new life with the woman he now loves. In the end, the perfect murder plot designed by Stuart Hammer is derailed by Ned's sense of responsibility for his wife's lover, an unstable young man who fears that he himself did the killing in a brainstorm. When Stuart Hammer, the originator of the murder plot, drowns, there is no rescue attempt, as in Highsmith, by his fellow murderer. Hammer is himself a murder victim, since Ned expiates his crime with a murder/suicide: a deliberately staged collision between Hammer's small sloop—with both men aboard—and a large steamer.

As these two short summaries suggest, the novels are so different in overall effect that, with the Miriam and Charles name changes, a reader familiar with Highsmith's work could easily read the Blake novel with no sense of familiarity whatsoever.

Could the resemblances between the two novels be indeed, as Blake describes it, simply a result of "the long arm of coincidence"? Could Blake perhaps have read a review of Highsmith's novel, or heard the

plot described? Such a situation could neatly account for the shared plot device, the name duplications, and the disposal of characters by drowning.

But other evidence in the book suggests differently—that despite Blake’s failure to remember the book, he indeed had at some point encountered it. Nicholas Blake/C. Day-Lewis saw himself as a poet first—and a detective writer only second (his first detective novel was written to finance repairs to a leaky roof). And it is C. Day-Lewis’s fascination with images that helps provide compelling evidence that Blake must have at least skimmed through the pages of Highsmith’s novel.

In *The Poetic Image*, a book derived from his Clark Lectures, C. Day-Lewis describes three stages in the construction of a poem. In the first, “The poet ...starts with an impression, a drop of the river of experience, crystallized perhaps into an image.”⁴ For the second stage, Day-Lewis describes Yeats’s method: Yeats spoke “of the trance-like state in which ‘images pass rapidly before you,’ and said that it is necessary ‘to suspend will and intellect, to bring up from the subconscious anything you already possess a fragment of’” (69). In the third stage, for Day-Lewis, “the work of criticism begins, the selection or rejection of associated images in conformity with the now emerging pattern of the poem” (69).

For Day-Lewis, then, the first two stages in the writing of a poem involve encounters with images, the second stage being an almost hypnotized session in which there emerges from the subconscious “anything you already possess a fragment of.” If Day-Lewis the prose-writer were to be heavily influenced—albeit unknowingly—by another writer, one would expect some trace of it to remain in flashes of imagery—some of which would undoubtedly be appropriate to the emerging pattern of Day-Lewis’s/Blake’s own work.

For a reader of Highsmith’s novel, the scene on the merry-go-round in Metcalf is likely to be one of the most striking images of the book. Miriam, the victim to be, rides round and round, accompanied without her knowledge by her murderer to be. For Charles Bruno, the merry-go-round is a center point—a moment of anticipation linked with his sense of the promise and excitement of the childhood world he has never quite outgrown: “He felt he was about to experience again some ancient, delicious childhood moment that the steam calliope’s sour hollowness, the stitching hurdy-gurdy accompaniment, and the drum-and-cymbal crash brought almost to the margin of his grasp” (69).

Such an image would be wildly inappropriate to Blake's Stuart Hammer, who except in his resentment for his uncle/guardian seems to never have been a child. But a tiny merry-go-round image flashes through Blake's pages nevertheless—linked not with Stuart, but with Stuart's cousin Barbara, whom he has ruthlessly romanced as a matter of financial prudence. Barbara, looking back, sees their affair in terms of a childhood whirl now outgrown:

His buccaneering air, his flashy spending, his brassy effrontery in love-making had appealed to the inexperienced girl as a merry-go-round at a fair might appeal to an overprotected child. Barbara had been lifted off her feet, whirled round and round, then the whole thing had ground to a stop, and her natural good sense told her how garish it had all been. She was lucky to have paid so lightly for her ignorance and folly, she thought ... (72)

There are limits, of course, to how far this argument can go, since merry-go-rounds have been one of the staples of childhood for generations. In addition, Alfred Hitchcock's 1951 film adaptation of *Strangers on a Train* featured a merry-go-round even more prominently than Highsmith had, using it both for Miriam's murder and for a dramatic final encounter between Guy and Bruno.

Far less ambiguous evidence, however, appears in the two authors' descriptions of the murders, with Blake using images that appear in Highsmith's novel but not in the Hitchcock film. Two of the murders—that of Charles Bruno's father by Guy in *Strangers on a Train* and that of Ned's wife Helena by Stuart Hammer in *A Penknife in My Heart*—are roughly analogous since they involve the killer's using a detailed description by the other party to enter a house, creep up to the bedroom, and eliminate the chosen victim. Highsmith's description includes a detailed picture of Guy as he reaches the upper hall of "the Doghouse," the house where he will kill Charles Bruno's father:

The floor gave the tiniest wail of complaint, and Guy resiliently withdrew his foot, waited, and stepped around the spot. Delicately his hand closed on the knob of the hall door. As he opened it, the clock's tick on the landing of the main stairway came louder, and he realized he had been hearing it for several seconds. He heard a sigh.

A sigh on the main stairs!

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A chime rang out. The knob rattled, and he squeezed it hard enough to break it, he thought. *Three. Four.* Close the door before the butler hears it! (136-7)

The picture is a compelling one: a man creeping along the hall, caught in terror by what seems to be a sigh, and then realizing that the sound is merely that of the clockworks preparing for the chimes that follow.

Blake includes a similar moment, as Stuart Hammer enters the front hall of the home of Ned and Helena Stowe the night Helena is killed:

He shone his torch beam into the black, gaping throat of the hall. Empty. He slipped in, closing the door behind him and releasing the catch of the lock. The faint click this made, as if it were the start of a chain reaction, merged into a hoarse, strangled, rasping sound, which set his heart bumping. He swung round in the darkness to face whatever the thing was. And the next instant, a grandfather clock, which had been gathering its senile forces to strike, began chiming the hour. (92)

Again, the voice-like sound—now harsh and strangled—and the sudden ringing out of the chimes. The image has a vivid symbolic appropriateness for both books: the sense of the ticking away of the minutes of the victim's life, the ringing out of the chimes that is like a slightly premature death knell for the chosen victim.

But a far more striking resemblance appears in terms of what happens to Highsmith's Guy as he flees the scene of the crime. In approaching the house before the murder, Guy's hat is torn from his head by a branch. After the murder, in the panic of flight, he takes a route other than those Charles Bruno had marked out for him, and finds himself in the midst of a small woods:

Something had caught him and was holding him. He fought it automatically with his fists, and found it was bushes, twigs, briars, and kept fighting and hurling his body through it, because the sirens were still behind him and this was the only direction to go. He concentrated on the enemy ahead of him, and on both sides and even behind him, that caught at him with thousands of sharp tiny hands whose crackling began to drown out even the

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sirens. He spent his strength joyfully against them, relishing their clean, straight battle against him.

He awakened at the edge of a woods, face down on a downward sloping hill. Had he awakened, or had he fallen only a moment ago? But there was greyness in the sky in front of him, the beginning of dawn, and when he stood up, his flickering vision told him he had been unconscious. His fingers moved directly to the mass of hair and wetness that stood out from the side of his head. Maybe my head is broken, he thought in terror, and stood for a moment dully, expecting himself to drop dead.

Below, the sparse lights of a little town glowed like stars at dusk. Mechanically, Guy got out a handkerchief and wrapped it tight around the base of his thumb where a cut had oozed black-looking blood. (141-142)

In a symbolically appropriate move, the brambles have scarred Guy's face and hand, emphasizing the second self he has chosen by his alliance with Bruno. The barely visible traces of those scars permanently mark the change in Guy: a man now both different from and linked to the Guy Haines who existed before the ride on the train.

In Blake's book, the sense of likeness between Stuart Hammer and Ned Stowe, while present, is far more underplayed—in the end their differences remain most vividly in the reader's mind. And yet Blake also uses this idea of the scars of the killing. Ned Stowe, the character corresponding to Highsmith's Guy, is attacked by the victim's dog (an echo perhaps of the reference to the Doghouse in Highsmith's novel?) and, despite his gloves, Ned's hand is bitten through to the bone. But it is in Stuart Hammer's approach to the Stowe house that the parallel to the Highsmith novel comes through most clearly:

He had taken off his gloves to alter the number plates; and now, getting out of the car, he stumbled in a deep rut, and throwing out a hand for support, found himself gripping a bramble while another bramble branch slashed viciously across his cheek, and his cap was torn off his head. He fumbled for a handkerchief, mopped at his bleeding hand and face ... (90-91)

The murderous Stuart is scarred on both face and hand by what he is about to do; Ned, who at the last moment changes his mind and tries to avoid killing his chosen victim, is only scarred in the hand.

In both novels, the brambles—and the striking clocks—are not vitally necessary to the plot, but have a vivid appropriateness to the overall pattern each author is constructing. Had Nicholas Blake indeed encountered Highsmith's novel? C. Day-Lewis had no conscious memory of having read *Strangers on a Train*, but his unconscious memory, with its keen sense of image and pattern, seems to have known better.

NOTES

¹*A Penknife in My Heart* (New York, 1958). Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

²*Strangers on a Train* (Baltimore, 1950), p. 163. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

³*C. Day-Lewis: An English Literary Life* (London, 1980), pp. 232, 237.

⁴*The Poetic Image* (New York, 1947), p. 68. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.