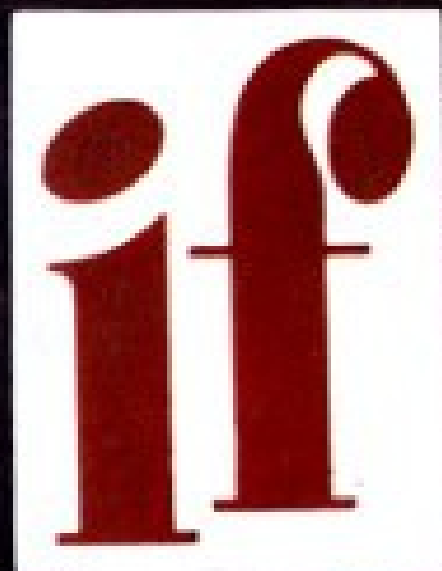




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JUNE 1955

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THE STRANGERS

By ALGIS BUDRYS



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TWILIGHT
YEARS ***

THE TWILIGHT YEARS

BY KIRK AND GAREN DRUSSAI

*It was a new era—an era of practicality
and cruelty, an era for youth.... An era of
alarm, too, for people who were over sixty....*

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
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Sydney Mercer stopped his pacing and listened; his head tilted expectantly. When he heard the elevator stop, he went with quick, awkward steps to the apartment door and opened it just a crack. "This time," he sighed with relief, "It's Eleanor." He opened the door for her.

His wife breezed down the hall and through the open door. She dumped her armful of packages beside her on the couch as she kicked off her shoes. "Whew! What a relief!"

Closing the door carefully, Sydney hurried over to her. "Ellie—I've been worried. You didn't tell me you were going to be so late. And when you didn't call—"

"Nonsense," she said gaily. "It's only 6:15. Why, the stores are just now starting to board up. And you know the "A Cars" don't start running till seven." She smiled at him. "Would you get my slippers, honey?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then shuffled into the bedroom. Eleanor stood in front of the couch flexing her tired toes. She had a small and rather dumpy figure without her high heels. And though her fashionably dressed body was usually molded into the latest silhouette, now in her more relaxed state she frankly looked her sixty-one years.

Sydney came back with her slippers, and bent to put them on. "Thanks, dear, shopping just kills my feet. But, enough of this," she sighed, "I've got only a few minutes to get dinner ready before 'Manhunt' comes on." And she started for the kitchen.

He followed and caught her heavily by the shoulders, his face stern. "Listen, Ellie—I don't *ever* want you to come home so late that you have to take an armored car." He shook her to emphasize his statement.

"But why?" she asked with genuine wonder. "They're safe enough. Edith and Ruth often take 'A' cars, and nothing's ever happened to them."

He let her go reluctantly. "Ellie," he said gently, "I just want to be sure that nothing happens to you, that's all. We're at such a dangerous age now, with both of us over sixty. You're all I've got. I'd be so all alone without you."

She thrust out her ample chest indignantly. "Sydney, the trouble with you is that you're still living in the past. You've got to keep up with the times. Sure, things are different now, than they were, say, ten years ago. But what of it? If life is more dangerous now, it's certainly more thrilling—and more intense, too!"

He eyed her steadily. "What's so thrilling about being sixty plus?"

"You've just got to accept," she continued glibly, as though it had been memorized, "the fact that it's a young people's world, now. Live for the day! That should be our motto." She smiled placidly at him. "That's the way I've been living this past year. As though each day was completely separate from the one before it—and the one after. In a young people's world—what else is there to do?"

Eleanor patted her husband's cheek, and then looked past him into the living room, a shocked expression on her face. "Why Syd, have you been sitting here all alone without the T.V. on? Goodness, that's enough to make anyone start thinking! You march right in there and turn it on."

He turned, with a slight shrug, to comply, and Eleanor started to fix dinner. The T.V. screen was in full view of the kitchen cubicle, of course. Apartments had been designed that way for years now. So, she was able to open the few cans and containers that constituted dinner, with her eyes almost entirely on the T.V.

Sydney gave it a glance or two as he set the table. But he was too preoccupied with his thoughts to enjoy the programs as much as he usually tried to. He wondered why this day to day living didn't seem to be as much fun to him as it did to others. He fingered the "Sixty-Plus" insignia sewn onto his shirt sleeve. To him, it had turned out to be merely a matter of waiting.

Eleanor was fixing a salad, with hardly a glance at what she was doing, so automatically did her fingers accomplish their task. He looked at her, cheerfully doing what the times and fashion decreed, and wished he could accept things the way she did. He was very fond of her. Now that he had been retired, they should have had time to enjoy each other. But something was wrong. Most people tried to have fun while they were waiting. Their closest friends, Eddie and Jean, seemed to be enjoying their retirement period. Or were they really, he asked himself, remembering a few times in past

conversations when the talk had verged momentarily in that direction, only to break off guiltily.

They sat down to eat at the table in front of the screen, sitting side by side, of course, so they wouldn't miss any of the programs during dinner.

Part way through the meal the phone rang. Sydney quickly got up to answer it. He knew Eleanor hated to be disturbed during a T.V. program.

"Hello, Jean," he said pleasantly, recognizing her voice at once. "What's the matter? You sound so—" His lips remained open, unexpectedly. Then, he put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Ellie!" he called so sharply that she turned at once.

"What is it?" she snapped back at him between mouthfuls.

"It's Jean. She says Eddie's gone out for 'fair game'!" His voice faded to a whisper. "Good God, Ellie. I don't know what to say to her!"

Eleanor dropped her fork to the plate with an air of disgust rising to the surface. "Oh, that woman! She always did let Eddie worry her." She smiled benignly. "Tell her we're sorry to hear it, of course. But he had only a year to go anyway."

"But she wants to know what to do!" He looked at her pleadingly. "She's acting hysterical. If she decides to go out herself—"

Eleanor got up and took the phone from his shaky hand. He sat down on the couch, only distantly hearing snatches of what Eleanor was saying to Jean, picturing Eddie walking down the deserted streets. Probably right out in the middle, where anyone could see him.

"No—you stay right where you are—no point in both of you.... Yes, that's right. I've always known you had more pride than he did.... Sure, we'll be over to see you—no, not tonight!... Of course not; wait until morning—remember, I'm counting on you, Jean."

Eleanor finally hung up and, going back to the table, finished spearing the bit of salad she had been working on.

Sydney looked at her, unbelievably. "Ellie, how can you go right back to eating after what's happened to Eddie?"

Her eyes remained on the screen. "Why should I feel sorry for him, if he didn't have the guts to wait? I just feel sorry for Jean. The shame of it! If it had happened some other way, it would have been different. And Jean hasn't even got enough sense to realize it isn't 'fair game' for Eddie. It's just plain suicide!" Eleanor glanced at her husband sharply. "What on earth's got into you tonight, Syd! You're jumpier than I've ever seen you."

He concentrated, a puzzled look on his face. "I don't know. I never thought much about it until today. And with Eddie. Everything falls into place suddenly, it all seems so wrong, so useless." He looked at her intently as she pushed her empty plate away and lit a cigarette. "Ellie, doesn't it strike you as strange—almost unbelievable—that we accept the concept of longevity as a subversive one? Doesn't it seem—well, weird—that we sixty plus-ers sit around every night—just waiting?"

Eleanor turned innocuous grey eyes to him. "Oh, Sydney, you're talking like a silly pup. Let's pay attention to the show."

"Some people kill themselves." He muttered, almost savoring the words.

"Oh bosh, don't say such things!" Her voice was tight and angry. "Sydney, you wouldn't shame me like that, would you; not like that weak-kneed Eddie?"

"Why not?" he retorted. He was beginning to feel ashamed of arguing with Eleanor but he couldn't stop. "Since my retirement, since I became a sixty plus-er, I've just been sitting around doing nothing. I feel like a stupid animal being kept in a pen." He buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

She stroked his head lovingly but nevertheless condescendingly. "Sydney, there's so much you could be doing, now that you have time for it."

He raised his head tiredly. "It's too late for that. But—what have I missed? Have you got an answer?"

"Well," she looked slightly disconcerted. "What all the others do. They play golf, and sunbathe, and go to lectures and shows, and uh—" Her ingenuity gave out. She stole a glance at the T.V. screen. "You've got to relax, honey, stop all this thinking. You know, 'eat, drink, and be merry' sort of—"

He noticed that her attention had wandered. He knew why. That cold chill in the pit of his stomach had told him that it was almost time.

"Do we have to watch it, tonight?" Sydney asked her almost bitterly. "How can you really sit there and enjoy seeing all that violence and—"

She leaned back comfortably, watching the screen. "What else are the boys to do? The psychiatrists say, that since the war is over, our boys need to drain off their energies somehow. Besides, sometimes it's really merciful." She folded her arms over her stomach, as though to dismiss the subject.

The screen had darkened. There were two young men, dim and strange looking, with masks over the lower part of their faces. And they were making plans—in a small, darkened room. Then, silently, they left the room, and crept through the somber streets. The camera followed them faithfully as they slipped cautiously from shadow to shadow.

Sydney found himself watching the screen now, too. It compelled him against his will. "I went through a war," he hissed, clenching his fists tightly. "The Korean War—when I was young. And when it was over I went back to work in an office. I didn't need any violence drained out of me!"

"Sshhh," Eleanor insisted, and then relented. "I keep telling you, Syd, these boys went through a different kind of war than yours. They've had more taken out of them than you had." She whispered it, her eyes never leaving the screen, her breath coming in excited gasps. "People have just outlived their usefulness, now, by the time they are sixty. It's natural for the young folks to resent us, especially if we are a burden and there are too many of us. You've got to adjust, Sydney, just adjust to the times."

The two men paused at an intersection—paused for endless moments—while millions of people watched, hardly daring to breathe. Then slowly and deliberately, with overtly melodramatic malice, they turn a corner, and start to run swiftly along the street. Of the millions who watched—there were some who felt a cold clutching within them.

Sydney leaned forward on the couch, his pale eyes almost bulging with intentness. The intersection on the screen had been familiar. The street the cameras were recording—was more so.

Adjust, he thought, I wish it was that easy for me. Adjust to the times, she says—they all say—thereby excusing everything hideous, and violent, and

disgusting that exists in the present. Nobody objects to anything. There's nothing constructive for individuals anymore. They just accept. Adjust to being idle and useless at sixty, whether I like it or not. Adjust to A Cars, the boarding up of shops every night, not daring to go out after dark. Get used to violence and fear, sitting in front of this screen as though it were an object of worship. Endure "Manhunt" every night; not knowing—just waiting—waiting ... those of us who live to sixty-five.

Eleanor cleared her throat and then whispered huskily. "They've been up the same street before." She turned to him, her eyes watery with agitation pushed almost to its limit.

He couldn't help it. All his resentment was momentarily stilled by his affection for her. He smiled. "Sure, Ellie. Many times." Involuntarily, he put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed.

Without warning, the two men stopped in front of an apartment house. They glanced quickly around, and then slipped into the building, the camera close upon them.

Sydney took his wife's hand. "Why they've even been in the very same building before." His face felt cold and damp. He added resolutely, "It's a big apartment house, Ellie, a real big one."

Suddenly he found himself listening—listening—hardly breathing. It seemed as though sound didn't exist anymore. There was just silence, grotesque and unnatural.

Then he heard it. First there was a stealthy shuffling sound coming a long ways down the hall. Then the slight regular noise of a wheeled object, following.

Sydney saw that she had not heard. Her eyes were desperately fixed on the screen. It could be, he thought chaotically, it could be the Masons across the hall. They're almost sixty-five.





Then the door knob turned, and the door swung silently open. Stiffly, Sydney turned his head to the door. There was time, they saw to that. There was time to see the two masked men with guns in their hands. And behind them was the T.V. camera, registering the scene that was duplicated on his own screen. There was even time to turn to Ellie; to see the look of cheated disappointment in her eyes change to astonishment as the bullet cut cleanly into her open mouth. And then there was no more time for Sydney Mercer either, who had reached the age of sixty plus and therefore was past his usefulness. Another bullet stopped his intake of breath.

The camera moved in for a close up of the two men; their lips, beneath the masks, smiling and guileless. Then the camera

*hovered for a few moments over the ludicrously postured bodies
on the couch for a fade out.*

"Manhunt" was over for the night. The announcer's voice and figure gradually took over the expanse of the screen.

"Tonight's program has been sponsored, as a Public Service," the oily voice intoned, "by the National Casket Company, with offices in all principal cities.

"Remember your duty as a citizen.

"All you oldsters, between the ages of "sixty and Annihilation Day"—you may be among the ones who don't have to wait until your sixty-fifth birthday—and you others who are nearing the twilight years—be sure you have your burial arrangements taken care of. Do it tonight—at the very latest, tomorrow. For the next day may be too late.

"The management, the staff, and the actors want to extend their respects to the wonderful old couple who played *their* parts in tonight's real life drama.

"Goodnight all!"

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YEARS ***

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