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DEATH OF A SALESMAN by Arthur Miller – Act I Summary

The play begins on a Monday evening at the Loman family home in Brooklyn. After some light changes on stage and ambient flute music (the first instance of a motif connected to Willy Loman’s faint memory of his father, who was once a flute-maker and salesman), Willy, a sixty-three-year-old traveling salesman, returns home early from a trip, apparently exhausted. His wife, Linda, gets out of bed to greet him. She asks if he had an automobile accident, since he once drove off a bridge into a river. Irritated, he replies that nothing happened. Willy explains that he kept falling into a trance while driving—he reveals later that he almost hit a boy. Linda urges him to ask his employer, Howard Wagner, for a non-traveling job in New York City. Willy’s two adult sons, Biff and Happy, are visiting. Before he left that morning, Willy criticized Biff for working at manual labor on farms and horse ranches in the West. The argument that ensued was left unresolved. Willy says that his thirty-four-year-old son is a lazy bum. Shortly thereafter, he declares that Biff is anything but lazy. Willy’s habit of contradicting himself becomes quickly apparent in his conversation with Linda.

Willy’s loud rambling wakes his sons. They speculate that he had another accident. Linda returns to bed while Willy goes to the kitchen to get something to eat. Happy and Biff reminisce about the good old days when they were young. Although Happy, thirty-two, is younger than Biff, he is more confident and more successful. Biff seems worn, apprehensive, and confused. Happy is worried about Willy’s habit of talking to himself. Most of the time, Happy observes, Willy talks to the absent Biff about his disappointment in Biff’s unsteadiness. Biff hopped from job to job after high school and is concerned that he has “waste[d] his life.” He is disappointed in himself and in the disparity between his life and the notions of value and success with which Willy indoctrinated him as a boy. Happy has a steady job in New York, but the rat race does not satisfy him. He and Biff fantasize briefly about going out west together. However, Happy still longs to become an important executive. He sleeps with the girlfriends and fiancées of his superiors and often takes bribes in an attempt to climb the corporate ladder from his position as an assistant to the assistant buyer in a department store.

Biff plans to ask Bill Oliver, an old employer, for a loan to buy a ranch. He remembers that Oliver thought highly of him and offered to help him anytime. He wonders if Oliver still thinks that he stole a carton of basketballs while he was working at his store. Happy encourages his brother, commenting that Biff is “well liked”—a sure predictor of success in the Loman household. The boys are disgusted to hear Willy talking to himself downstairs. They try to go to sleep.

Analysis

It is important to note that much of the play’s action takes place in Willy’s home. In the past, the Brooklyn neighborhood in which the Lomans live was nicely removed from the bustle of New York City. There was space within the neighborhood for expansion and for a garden. When Willy and Linda purchased it, it represented the ultimate expression of Willy’s hopes for the future. Now, however, the house is hemmed in by apartment buildings on all sides, and sunlight barely reaches their yard. Their abode has come to represent the reduction of Willy’s hopes, even though, ironically, his mortgage payments are almost complete. Just as the house is besieged by apartment buildings, Willy’s ego is besieged by doubts and mounting evidence that he will never experience the fame and fortune promised by the American Dream.

Willy’s reality profoundly conflicts with his hopes. Throughout his life, he has constructed elaborate fantasies to deny the mounting evidence of his failure to fulfill his desires and expectations. By the time the play opens, Willy suffers from crippling self-delusion. His consciousness is so fractured that he cannot even maintain a consistent fantasy. In one moment, he calls Biff a lazy bum. In the next, he says that Biff is anything but lazy. His later assessment of the family car is similarly contradictory—one moment he calls it a piece of trash, the next “the finest car ever built.”