Death of a Salesman
Date: 1949
Author: Arthur Miller

Act One

A faint melody is played on a flute, and the Loman house, surrounded by apartment buildings, is revealed. The action of the play begins as elderly traveling salesman Willy Loman arrives home, late and exhausted. His wife, Linda, is worried to see him as he was away on business and not expected back so soon. She worries that he has smashed the car, but he tells her that he just felt overwhelmed and had to return. When Linda suggests that he ask for a desk job, he insists that he is needed on the road and then asks about his sons. Their oldest, Biff, is visiting after a long absence, and their younger son, Happy, is staying so that they can all be together.

Linda is happy to have their sons home, but relations are strained between Biff and his father. Willy’s ambivalence toward his son is evident in the way that he declares that Biff’s "trouble is he’s lazy" and then a few seconds later states "There’s one thing about Biff—he’s not lazy." Biff is 34 and has worked a series of low-paying, temporary jobs. However, his father still wants to believe that he has great promise. In frustration, Willy criticizes Linda and complains about the way that the neighborhood has become so built up while his wife tries to calm him. As Willy grows more irate, his sons wake and overhear him. Willy responds to Linda, reminding her that "You’re my foundation and my support" as he settles down and promises to try to not fight with Biff. Linda suggests that they go on a picnic, leading Willy to recall an earlier car that he had owned.

Willy heads to the kitchen to get a snack, still talking to himself, and the scene switches to the boys’ room where they discuss their father’s condition. Happy is frustrated at his father’s inability to function normally. The brothers reminisce about their youth. Biff recalls arranging Happy’s first sexual encounter, and Happy credits him with teaching him everything he knows about women. But times have changed, and where Biff used to lead, now he is more reserved. Happy asks why, and Biff blames his father, feeling that he is constantly being mocked. Happy voices concern about how Willy has been acting, talking to himself and losing concentration. Biff explains how he hates the business world and the grind of the lower-level jobs that were all he could command. He has discovered enjoyment in working as a ranch hand but realizes that he cannot advance too far in such a job.

Biff is uncertain what he should do and asks Happy if he is content. Happy responds, "Hell, no!" He is in a dead-end sales position with little hope of promotion; he lives alone and seems equally discontent. Biff suggests that they buy a ranch together, and Happy finds the idea attractive but realizes that this is no way to get rich, so he backs out, saying that he has to prove a few things first in the city. Happy leads a dissolute life, sleeping with his bosses’ girlfriends in a kind of petty revenge because he wishes that he had their positions. He also takes bribes from manufacturers. Although he seems penitent, underneath he is proud of his deceit and is unlikely to change. Biff plans to ask an old employer, Bill Oliver, for a loan to start his own ranch. Happy encourages him, although he thinks that it would be better to start a business in town. As Biff recalls a carton of basketballs which Oliver believed that Biff had stolen from him, doubt is cast on how valued an employee he had been. Biff and Happy are interrupted as Willy grows louder. Biff is angry, but Happy is just embarrassed, hoping that Biff will take responsibility for their father and persuading him to wait until morning rather than make a scene now.
Attention shifts to Willy who is falling into a past memory of when he was advising a teenage Biff to be careful with girls. Willy recalls his sons simonizing the same car that Linda had brought to mind, and they physically appear as youths. Biff has a new football that he has stolen from school, but Willy lets this pass, even praising his son's initiative. Both sons idolize their father and strive to please him. Willy boasts of his exploits on the road and declares that one day, he will have his own business. His neighbor, Charley, already has his own business, but Willy denigrates him as a lesser man because he is not "well-liked." Biff promises to make a touchdown in his next game for his father.

Bernard, Charley's son, comes to warn Biff that he is failing math class and may not graduate. All three Lomans tease him. Biff expects to get to college on a sports scholarship and so pays scant attention to his studies. Willy boasts that his sons will achieve more than Bernard because they are more attractive and better liked. Linda joins them with laundry to hang, and at their father's insistence, the boys scurry to help. Linda asks how much Willy has sold and although he initially lies about the amount, Linda patiently waits for the truth, which is that he has barely earned enough to pay their bills. He worries that people do not like him, admitting that people seem to respect men like Charley who talks less, but Linda cheers him up, insisting that he will be fine. As she assures him that he is the handsomest man she knows, we hear The Woman laugh. Willy has been meeting someone on the road to cheer himself up. She is a secretary who enjoys his company and puts him through to the buyers. He gives The Woman new stockings, while back at home Linda darns her old stockings for want of new. Willy guiltily demands that she stop.

Bernard and Linda list things that Biff is doing wrong—not studying, stealing, being rough with girls, driving a car without a license, acting stuck up—and Willy becomes angry at them, insisting that it cannot be his fault that Biff is like this. The adult Happy comes to calm his father, and Willy talks about his older brother Ben who became rich at 21 having discovered a diamond mine. Willy is beginning to regret not taking Ben up on a business offer that he once made. He becomes angry at Happy because he sees his life beginning to unravel and that Happy is doing little to help. Charley comes to see what is happening and offers to play cards, while Happy returns to bed. They gently squabble as they play; Charley offers Willy a job, but Willy turns it down. Willy becomes distracted by a memory of Ben visiting him on his way to Alaska. In real time, he had recently heard that his brother had died but left all his money to his seven sons.

As Willy talks to Ben, Charley becomes confused, thinking that Willy is talking to him; the two argue, and Charley leaves. The dream takes over, and we learn of the influence that Ben has had on Willy over the years. Ben had not seen Willy since he was three, but Willy has longed to meet his brother, hoping that he can better discover from him a sense of his own identity. Although Ben abandoned him, Willy admires his brother for being rich. Willy has Ben tell his sons about their grandfather, whom Ben describes as a "wild-hearted man." A younger Charley enters to warn Willy that Biff is stealing lumber and may get caught, but Willy ignores this, teasing Charley about his attire. He asks Ben for advice and gets the mantra, "When I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!" which Willy seems to accept as an answer. As Ben leaves, Willy is drawn back to the present, with Linda asking him if he is alright. He asks her what happened to the diamond watch fob that Ben had given him, and she reminds him that he pawned it years back to pay for one of Biff's correspondence courses. Though in his slippers, Willy decides to go out for a walk.

Biff joins his mother to find out what is wrong with Willy. Linda instinctively tries to calm Biff's fears but then decides to let him know that his estrangement from his father is the root of the problem. She chastises Biff for never writing and for arguing with his father when he sees him. She asks Biff why he is so antagonistic, but he evades answering. Linda is also beginning to give up hope that Biff will ever settle down and tells him to grow up. She sticks by her husband, making it clear to Biff that he is not to come home anymore if he cannot get on with his father.
Biff is angry, pointing out that Willy has always treated Linda badly, and Happy has to hold him back from going after Willy. Linda knows that Willy is not perfect, but she loves him and insists that "Attention must be paid" as Willy is going through hard times.

Her husband has not told her, but Linda knows that Willy has been taken off salary, is making no sales to earn commission, and has borrowed money from Charley to hide the fact. Happy has given little money to help, being too wrapped up in his own life to notice. Linda criticizes both sons for their wasteful and selfish lives and for not caring about their father. Linda is especially puzzled over why Biff is so antagonistic since he and his father had been so close, but Biff remains evasive. Reluctantly, he promises to stay around to help, but Linda demands more, telling him that Willy has been trying to kill himself. The insurance company is investigating his car “accidents,” and Linda mentions a woman, which makes Biff nervous. However, the woman whom Linda means is one who witnessed Willy crashing on a bridge on purpose. Linda has also found rubber tubing in the basement with which she believes that Willy is planning to gas himself.

Biff agrees to try harder, and then he and Happy argue about how to advance in business. It is clear that neither are hard workers, always trying to bend the rules. Biff suggests that they would all have been better off as carpenters, but Willy, returning from his walk, disagrees, and he and Biff begin to argue. Considering what he has just learned, Biff backs down and tries to cheer his father. He tells him his plan to see Oliver to obtain a loan to start his own business. As Biff falters, Happy encourages this idea by suggesting that he and Biff are planning a sporting-goods partnership; their father is enthused by this dream. For a moment, the whole family is excited. Then Willy and Biff fall back into arguing after Biff defends his mother when Willy treats her dismissively. Linda tells Biff to make up, which he does to keep the peace, and cheers Willy back up. Happy declares his intention to get married, but no one takes any notice. Willy goes to bed recalling Biff's greatest moment—when he won the high school football championship—while Biff goes to remove the rubber tubing.

**Act Two**

Bright music suggests a lightened mood from the night before. It is morning, and Biff and Happy have already left, but Linda and Willy breakfast together and speak hopefully of the future. Willy imagines his sons prosperous and married, while he and Linda live out in the country where the sons can come and visit. Linda reminds him that they need extra money for the insurance, which is in the grace period, and money for various essential repair jobs. Willy complains about his "race with the junkyard" to pay off his big-ticket items before they break down, but they do almost own their house. Willy is even hopeful that he could grow something in their small garden. Linda tells Willy that his sons plan to meet him later in the day for a celebratory dinner. After he leaves, Biff telephones while he is waiting for Oliver. Linda tells him to wait patiently, reminding him to be good to his father.

Willy has finally accepted Linda's suggestion that he demand a desk job at the company and is full of hope for the prospect. It is clear on his arrival that his boss, Howard Wagner, has little time for him. Fascinated by his latest acquisition, a wire recorder, Howard hardly listens to what Willy says, making him listen to his family on the recorder. Willy finally makes his request, and Howard unsympathetically refuses, saying that he has no place for him in the office. Willy tells him about Dave Singleman, an old-time salesman who inspired Willy as a younger man to go into sales. Singleman had lived and died traveling on the railroad, and his funeral drew a crowd of friends from around the country. Willy bemoans the old days when this type of salesman was more popular and reminds Howard of all the years that he has put into the company. Howard is not interested, and as soon as he can, he fires Willy, which he has been hoping to do for some time. He suggests that Willy look to his sons for help when Willy insists he needs income, but Willy is appalled at the thought of being so dependent. The shock sends Willy to seek advice from his brother Ben.

On his way back from Alaska, Ben had stopped by again to see if Willy is interested in
managing some timberland that he has bought, and Willy recalls this visit. Not liking Ben, Linda encourages Willy to turn it down, saying that he has good prospects where he is, and Ben leaves. Willy then recalls the glory of Biff’s championship game, with Bernard trotting after Biff, eagerly holding his shoulder guards, and the chance of his son getting a college scholarship. Charley teasingly deflates what Willy sees as the importance of the game, putting it into a more reasonable perspective, but this is Willy’s biggest moment of glory, and he is angry at Charley.

Meanwhile, Willy has arrived at Charley’s office, and hearing him seemingly talking to himself, Charley’s secretary Jenny asks Bernard, who is waiting to see his father, to deal with him. As an adult, Bernard is now a successful lawyer with a wife and two sons of his own, although he modestly plays this down to Willy. Willy lies about Biff’s great prospects but cannot resist asking Bernard how he managed to do so well while Biff turned out so poorly. Bernard asks him why Biff ruined his chances by refusing to retake the Math class. Willy pretends to have no idea, but as Bernard keeps asking, Willy becomes argumentative until Charley interrupts. Charley sends his son off; proudly letting Willy know that Bernard is about to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court. Bernard, good-naturedly, tries to give Willy the best advice he can, but not knowing the truth, he can only offer platitudes.

Charley gives Willy his usual $50, but Willy needs more. Charley again tries to get his friend to accept a job, but Willy responds angrily; his pride will not allow him to work for a man whom he has derided for all these years. He tells Charley that he has been fired, and Charley gives him the money he needs, pointing out that being well liked is not a good business philosophy because it is money that really talks. Charley is concerned about Willy’s state of mind and worries that he may be considering suicide. He warns Willy against it. Willy admits that Charley is his only friend as he leaves to meet his sons for dinner.

Happy is already at the restaurant, acting big for Stanley, the waiter, and attracting a girl, Miss Forsythe. He pretends to be a champagne salesman to pick her up, and when Biff arrives, he tells her that Biff is a professional football player, sending her to find a friend to make a foursome. Biff has come down to earth, realizing that the dream that the family had constructed of his borrowing money from Bill Oliver and becoming a successful businessman was entirely unrealistic. He waited all day to see him, and Oliver did not even remember who he was. In revenge, Biff slipped into his office and stole his fountain pen before running out. He is a little drunk and plans to force his father to face the truth, although Happy insists that it is better that he maintain the lie.

When Willy arrives, Biff begins to tell him what happened, but his father cuts him off realizing that it is not good news. Announcing he just got fired, Willy tries to strong-arm his stunned son into creating a happier version of the meeting. As his father’s refusal to hear the truth frustrates Biff, Willy hears voices from the time when he and Biff originally fell apart. As Biff tries to tell his father that Oliver would not see him, Willy bemoans Biff failing his math, and we see Bernard telling Linda that Biff has gone to Boston to see his father. Caught in his memory, Willy misses everything that Biff is currently telling him. He focuses for a moment on the fact that his son stole a pen but slips back into the memory. His behavior worries Biff so much that he begins to fall back on the lie to calm his father down, telling him that Oliver will loan the money. It begins to work, but Biff cannot maintain the pretense. Willy thinks that he is doing this out of spite, and Happy calms them both down as Miss Forsythe returns with her friend, Letta. Biff tries to get Willy to sit for a drink but hearing The Woman’s voice in his head, Willy goes to the washroom.

Biff vainly appeals to Happy for help, but Happy does not want to accept any responsibility. Distraught and feeling inadequate to help his father, Biff runs out. Happy follows with the two women, callously leaving his father alone in the washroom and announcing, "That's not my father. He's just a guy." Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Willy relives the whole experience of Biff arriving at his hotel room in Boston. Willy had tried to hide his lady friend, Miss Francis, in the bathroom, but she refused to wait, coming out just as Willy is promising to fix Biff’s math.
problem. Young Biff loses all faith in his father when he realizes that he is an adulterer. Calling him a liar and a fake, he dashes away. Stanley discovers Willy shouting to himself and explains that Biff and Happy already left. Disappointed, Willy decides to buy some seeds on his way home.

The boys arrive home late to find their mother fuming at the way that they treated their father and determined to throw them both out for good. Happy tries to pretend that they never left their father but Linda calls them both animals, accusing Happy of whoring and throwing the flowers that he had brought her to the ground. Biff wants to confront his father, but Linda insists that he leaves Willy alone. She orders Happy to pick up the flowers, and he refuses, heading upstairs while Biff picks them up. Biff accepts her criticisms but despite his mother's pleas, heads outside to see his father. Willy is planting seeds and talking to Ben about his plan to kill himself to get Linda money and to show Biff, by his massive funeral, how truly popular he was. Ben offers doubts—pointing out the insurance company may not pay out and that Biff may hate Willy or see him as a coward for doing this—then he fades away.

Biff joins Willy to tell him that he has decided to leave for good and brings him inside. Willy finds this news hard to process but decides that Biff is doing this out of spite. Willy refuses responsibility for Biff's failure, and Biff's insistence that he does not blame his father makes Willy feel more guilty and belligerent. All the shouting brings Happy down. As Willy curses him, Biff tries one final time to get his father to face the truth, confronting him with the rubber tube and declaring that the whole family are fakes. Although Linda and Happy try to stop him, Biff insists on speaking the truth as he sees it: Happy has a lowly job without prospects and is wasting his life, Biff himself is a thief and a bum who has never held down any kind of job, and his father is a "dime a dozen" like the rest of them. Willy refuses to accept any of this, continuing to accuse Biff of spite, but when Biff breaks down into tears, he understands that his son still loves him.

Exhausted, Biff heads upstairs as Ben suggests that he will be "outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him." With Ben's encouragement, Willy decides to go through with his suicide plans so that Biff will have enough money to make a success of his life. He sends Happy and a worried Linda to bed, saying that he needs to sit. Ben offers final words of advice, then vanishes, and Willy nearly panics but steels himself to do this for his son. He drives off to crash his car one last time. Linda and Biff both call out for him to stop, but it is too late. The family, along with Charley and Bernard, walk to stare at Willy's grave.

Requiem
At the close of the play, there is a short scene following the group standing at the graveside as they discuss what Willy's death means. Linda seems stunned; she cannot understand why no one else showed up for the funeral or why Willy killed himself. Biff views his father as a man who held the wrong dreams, but both Happy and Charley disagree. Charley points out that dreams are all some men have and insists that Willy was a great man. Happy seems determined to follow in his father's footsteps, forever the dreamer, but Biff refuses to be dragged back in. Linda asks them all to go and, alone for a moment, lets out her true grief. She feels utterly lost without her husband; they have paid off the house, but she has no one left to live in it. As she begins to weep, Biff leads her away, and the flute sound is heard once more as the surrounding apartment buildings are emphasized.

Further Information