

Exposition

SCENE I

Yonkers, New York, 1942.

We are in an apartment that sits just above "Kurnitz's Kandy Store." . . . It consists of a living room, dining room, small kitchen, one bathroom, and two bedrooms. The entrance door leads from downstairs directly to the candy store.

It's about six-thirty in the evening on a hot, sultry day in August. It's still quite light outside. A fan blows in the living room.

Two young boys are in the living room. One, ARTHUR KURNITZ, about thirteen and a half, sits on an old armchair, looking apprehensive. He is wearing an old woolen suit, his only one, with knickered pants, a shirt, tie, long socks, and brown shoes.

The other boy is his brother, JAY KURNITZ, not quite sixteen. He sits on the sofa, in a suit as well, but with long pants, shirt, tie, and shiny black shoes. He looks more sullen and angry than apprehensive.

ARTY keeps wiping his sweaty brow with his handkerchief.

JAY I hate coming here, don't you?

ARTY *(In front of fan)* It's hot. I'm so hot.

JAY I'd hate coming here if I was cool. Pop doesn't even like to come and it's his own mother . . . I was so afraid of her when I was a kid. She'd come out of that door with a limp and a cane and look like she was going to kill you. When I was five, I drew a picture of her and called it "Frankenstein's Grandma."

ARTY Did she ever see it?

JAY If she did, you'd be an only child today. Pop said she could swing her cane so fast, she could have been one of the greatest golfers in the world.

ARTY All I remember was, I hated kissing her. It felt like putting your lips on a wrinkled ice cube.

JAY Yeah, she's cold alright. She was the only one at Mom's funeral who didn't cry . . . I wonder what Pop's talking to her so long for.

ARTY Because she's deaf in one ear, isn't she?

JAY Yeah . . . Did you ever notice there's something wrong with *everyone* on Pop's side of the family? Mom used to tell me that.

ARTY She didn't tell me. Like who?

JAY Like all of them. Like Aunt Bella . . . She's a little—*(Points to his head)*—you know—closed for repairs.

ARTY I don't care. I like her. Nicer than "hot house" Grandma.

JAY I didn't say she wasn't nice. But she's got marbles rolling around up there . . . Mom said she got that way because when she was a kid, Grandma kept hitting her in the head every time she did something stupid . . . which only made her stupider.

ARTY *(He lies down on the floor, in front of the sofa)* She wasn't stupid at making great ice cream sodas.

JAY Hooray! Wonderful! She's thirty-five years old and she can make ice cream sodas. They don't give you a high school diploma for getting the cherry on top of the whipped cream.

ARTY She went to high school?

JAY A little. She missed the first year because she couldn't find it.

(The bedroom door opens. Their father, EDDIE KURNITZ, about forty-one, steps out into the room. He wears a suit and tie and seems hot and nervous. He wipes his brow with a handkerchief.)

EDDIE You kids alright?

JAY Yeah, Pop. Fine.

EDDIE I'll be through talking to Grandma in a few minutes. *(To ARTY)* What are you lying on the floor? Don't do that, Arty. You'll crease your pants. You want Grandma to see you with creased pants?

(He goes back in and closes the door)

ARTY *(Stands)* What's he want me to do, carry an iron with me?

JAY He's afraid of her the same as Aunt Bella. Like Aunt Bella couldn't count so good, so instead of two scoops of ice cream in a soda, she'd put in three or four. For the same price. And if Grandma saw it, Whacko! Another couple of IQ points gone. *(He picks up a photo)*

from behind the sofa) Here, look at this. Aunt Gert when she was a kid! See how her head is down? Probably ducking. The old cane was coming at her . . . You don't think Aunt Gert's a little coconuts too?

ARTY No. She's just sick. She's got bad lungs or something.

JAY Bad lungs, my eye. She can't talk right. She says the first half of a sentence breathing out and the second half sucking in. You've seen it.

ARTY Do it for me.

JAY I don't want to.

ARTY Come on, do it.

JAY No, I don't want to.

ARTY Do it!

JAY *(Imitating AUNT GERT. He breathes out)* "Oh, hello, Jay, how are you? And how is your father? And—*(Then talks as he sucks in breath)*—how is your little brother, Arty?"

ARTY *(Laughs)* I love it! I love when you do that.

JAY I once saw her try to blow out a candle and halfway there she sucked it back on.

ARTY You didn't.

JAY With these two eyes. Mom says she talks that way because she was so afraid of Grandma. She never allowed her kids to cry.

ARTY Never?

JAY Never. Well, if you're growing up here like Aunt Gert and you're not allowed to cry, you're going to end up sucking in the last half of your sentences.

(EDDIE comes back in)

EDDIE Grandma's worried about the doilies. Don't lean your head back on the doilies. It gets grease on them. She just had them laundered.

(He goes back in)

ARTY *(To JAY)* You mean only people who just had a shampoo can sit here?

JAY And what about Uncle Louie? You know what *he* is, don't you?

ARTY Yeah. A gangster. You believe that?

JAY You bet. They say he's some big mobster's henchman.

ARTY You mean he's got a bad back?

JAY Not a hunchback. A *benchman!* . . . And real tough. He's a bagman.

ARTY What do you mean, a bagman? He puts people in bags?

JAY Not people. Money. *Hot* money. He collects bags of it from one guy and delivers it to the mob . . . (ARTY rises and crosses to the window) Listen, I'm not going to tell you any more because he could walk right in on us. They say he comes back here to sleep every once in a while.

ARTY (Looking out the window) Hey! There's Aunt Bella . . .

JAY Is she coming up?

ARTY No. She's walking past the house.

JAY I'll bet she's lost again. (He looks out the window, then calls down) Aunt Bella? . . . Hi! . . . It's Jay and Arty . . . Up here. (He waves to her) That's right. Up here . . . Here she comes. (They walk away from the window) She ought to wear a compass or something.

(The bedroom door opens. EDDIE comes out again)

EDDIE Will you keep your voices down. Grandma said, "What are they yelling for?"

JAY We were calling down to Aunt Bella. She's on her way up.

ARTY Can I take my jacket off?

EDDIE After Grandma sees you. And no ice cream sodas from Aunt Bella. Even if she asks you. I don't want to get Grandma upset now. Fix the doilies.

JAY Is she alright?

EDDIE Her back is bothering her. When Aunt Bella comes in, tell her Momma wants a back rub . . . Comb your hair, Arty, and don't make a mess.

(EDDIE goes back in. We hear a knock on the front door)

BELLA (Offstage) Jay? Arty? It's me. Aunt Bella. Can I come in?

JAY Guess who forgot how to open a door? . . .

(JAY opens the door. BELLA KURNITZ, in her mid-thirties, stands there. Although she's a mess at dressing—nothing matches at all—she is neat and sweet and pretty, if looking a little older than her age. She's as warm and congenial as she is emotionally arrested)

BELLA (Smiles) I forgot my key.

JAY How'd you get in downstairs?

BELLA I used my spare key. I'm glad you called me. I walked right by the house, didn't I? Sometimes I daydream so much, I think I should carry an alarm clock . . . Oh, God, I'm so happy to see you. Arty! Jay! My two favorite cousins.

JAY Aren't we your nephews?

BELLA Of course you are. My cousins, my nephews, my boys. Come here, give your Aunt Bella a kiss. (She puts

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down her purse, pulls JAY and ARTY into her arms, and kisses them both) Let me look at you. You both got so much bigger. You're growing up so fast, it almost makes me cry . . . Where's your father? I haven't seen your father in so long . . . *(She calls out)* Eddie! It's Bella . . . Is he here?

ARTY He's in there, talking to Grandma.

BELLA *(Suddenly nervous)* Oh, I'd better not disturb them . . . Did she ask for me?

JAY Pop said her back was hurting. She wanted you to give her a back rub when you came in?

BELLA Oh. Did you tell her I was here?

JAY No. You just came in.

BELLA Did you tell her where I went?

JAY We didn't know where you went.

BELLA Well, let's not tell her I'm here yet. Then we won't be able to visit. *(She takes off her sweater)* Oh, you're both getting so handsome.

JAY Thank you.

ARTY Thank you, Aunt Bella.

BELLA I bet I look much older to you two. Do I? The truth. Tell me.

JAY I don't think so.

ACT ONE

ARTY No.

BELLA I was hoping you'd say that. I'm thirty-five. And I don't even look it, do I?

JAY No.

ARTY Not to me.

BELLA And how old are you boys now? About twenty?

ARTY I'm thirteen and a half.

JAY I'm fifteen and a half.

BELLA Well, that adds up to about thirty-five. So we could be brother and sisters. Isn't that wonderful?

JAY Yeah.

BELLA Yeah . . . I just got back from the movies. I had the most wonderful time. I wish I knew you were here, we all could have gone.

JAY What did you see?

BELLA I don't know. I couldn't find the theater I was looking for, so I went to the one I found. But it was better than the picture I wanted to see. It was with Bette Davis and George Brent . . . Maybe we could all go again next week, if I can find the wrong theater again.

ARTY Sure. I'd love to.

JAY Except we won't be here next week. We're going to the Yankee game with Pop.

BELLA Oh, well, you do that. Boys like baseball much better than love stories . . . Why don't you take your jackets off, you two? Look at you both perspiring.

ARTY We're fine. We're cool in here with the fan.

BELLA That fan doesn't cool anything off. It just makes the hot air go faster . . . They had air-conditioning at the movie house. I was actually cold. I felt so happy for the actors to be in an air-conditioned theater.

JAY (*He looks at ARTY, then at BELLA*) I don't think the actors feel it. They're just pictures on the screen.

BELLA Well, I know that, silly. I meant they'd be happy to know that people who were watching their movies were nice and cool so we enjoyed the movie better.

JAY Oh. Right. I bet they would.

BELLA I bet I know what would make you two cool in a second. How about a big ice cream soda deluxe? With everything in it? Look at your faces lighting up. Come on. I'll make it for you downstairs.

JAY I think we have to wait here. Pop'll be out in a second and he wants us to see Grandma.

BELLA Well, I'll bring them up here. That's no trouble. What kind? Chocolate? Vanilla? Butter Pecan? What's your favorite, Arty?

ARTY All of them.

BELLA I can make that. With three different kinds of ice cream. I used to make one with *four* different kinds. They were selling like crazy, but we lost a fortune . . . How long ago did she ask for me?

JAY Grandma? A couple of minutes ago.

BELLA Did you tell her I was here?

JAY No, we told Pop we saw you from the window. But maybe he didn't say anything to her.

BELLA It doesn't make any difference. She heard my footsteps coming up the stairs.

ARTY How? Isn't she partly deaf?

BELLA Oh, sure. But the other part hears perfectly . . . What about a small sundae? Chocolate ice cream with hot-fudge sauce and some whipped cream and chopped walnuts? Are you going to say no to that, Arthur? I bet you can't. Say no. Let me hear you.

ARTY (*He looks at JAY*) It sounds like just a small one.

JAY (*To BELLA*) He can't. We're having dinner soon. It's just that Pop told us to wait.

BELLA Oh, your father. He never takes anything from anybody. I couldn't even give your mother a cup of coffee . . . Did you know that? . . . Where is she, anyway?

(JAY looks confused)

JAY She's dead. Mom is dead.

BELLA (*She looks confused a moment*) Yes. I know . . . I mean where is she buried?

JAY At Mount Israel Cemetery in the Bronx. You were at the funeral. Remember?

BELLA You mean the first time?

JAY What do you mean, the first time?

BELLA When I came in the car. Not the bus.

ARTY The bus?

BELLA (*Thinks . . .*) No. No. I'm thinking of someone else. Sometimes my mind wanders. The kids in school used to say, "Hey, Bella. Lost and Found called and said, 'Come get your brains.'" . . . (*She laughs*) . . . but I didn't think that was funny. (*The boys nod*) I bet you miss Mom a lot, don't you? Don't you, Arty?

ARTY Yeah. A lot.

BELLA She was a lot like your father. Very independent. Stuck to her own family mostly. (*She lowers her voice*) She didn't get along too well with your grandmother. Nobody does. My sister, Gert, was once engaged to a man. She brought him over to meet Grandma. The next day he moved to Boston.

JAY That's too bad.

BELLA Don't tell Grandma I said that.

ARTY I won't.

BELLA What?

ARTY I won't.

BELLA You're both so shy. I used to be shy. Grandma didn't like me to talk too much . . . I had a lot of friends, but I didn't talk to them . . . It's a shame your mother couldn't have had more children . . . She didn't, did she?

JAY No.

BELLA No . . . Because it would be easier for you now that she's gone. Big families are important when you have trouble in your life. We were a big family . . . Me and your father and Louie and Gert . . . That was before Rose and Aaron died . . . Rose was just a baby but Aaron was almost twelve so I didn't know Rose as well as Aaron . . . You never knew them, did you?

JAY I don't think we were born yet.

BELLA No. I don't think so . . . My father died before I was born. But I wasn't sad about that.

JAY That's good.

BELLA Because I loved him so much. Did you know you could love somebody who died before you were born?

JAY I guess so.

BELLA Because I knew he would have taken care of me . . . Like your father takes care of you. You know what I mean?

JAY I think so.

BELLA So what about that sundae? It's going to sit down there melting on the counter if I make it and you don't eat it . . . Last time I'm asking, Arthur. Yes or no?

ARTY I'd . . . I'd like to . . . *(He looks at JAY who shakes his head "No")* . . . Maybe later.

BELLA *(Snaps coldly, angrily)* NO! NOT LATER!! IT'S TOO LATE NOW!!! . . . I'm not asking you again. You hurt my feelings, the both of you. You tell your father to teach you better manners before I'm ever nice to you again . . . I know you miss your mother but that doesn't mean you can be disrespectful to me . . . I *always* liked your mother whether she took coffee from me or not. And you can tell that to your father, the both of you. You hear me? . . . I'm sick of it.

(She goes into the bathroom and slams the door hard. JAY and ARTY just look at each other)

JAY You see why I don't like to come here too much?

(The bedroom door opens, and a bedraggled EDDIE comes out and looks around)

EDDIE Where's Aunt Bella? I thought I just heard her.

JAY She's in the bathroom.

EDDIE I heard the door slam. Did you say anything to upset her?

JAY Yeah. Everything.

ARTY Is it time to go yet, Pop?

EDDIE We'll go when I tell you. You haven't even seen your grandmother. Stop rushing me. You just got here, didn't you?

ARTY It's okay. Talk as long as you want, Pop.

EDDIE And then the three of us have to talk. You, me, and Arty. *(He knocks on the bathroom door)* Bella! It's Eddie. Momma wants to see you. It's her back again . . . Bella? *(No answer. To the boys)* Is she alright?

JAY How do you know when she's alright?

EDDIE Hey! No remarks about Aunt Bella, you hear me? She loves you boys. Always has. She'd do anything for you two. So just sit there and be quiet. God, my head is splitting.

(He goes back into the bedroom and closes the door.)

The bathroom door opens and BELLA steps out, holding a towel and oil)

BELLA Was that your father banging on the door just now?

JAY Yes.

BELLA Is he angry with me?

JAY With you? No.

BELLA I hope not. Do I look better?

ARTY Better than when?

BELLA Than before. When you said I wasn't looking well.

ARTY I didn't say that.

BELLA Then who said it? . . . Jay?

ARTY Maybe. Did you say it, Jay?

JAY Nobody said anything.

BELLA Oh. I know. It was Grandma. She didn't like the way I looked today. She hates this dress . . . I made it myself.

ARTY Really?

BELLA (*She nods*) It took me almost a year.

JAY . . . Grandma wants you, Aunt Bella.

BELLA Oh, yeah . . . As soon as I finish Momma's rub, I'll start dinner . . . Are you boys hungry?

ARTY I don't know. Jay knows. Tell her, Jay.

JAY I'm not so sure we're staying for dinner.

BELLA Of course you are. You think I'd let you go all the way home without dinner? . . . Are you going to say no to me again, Arty?

ARTY (*Quickly*) I'm not. I'm eating. I'm hungry. No matter what Jay does. I'm eating.

BELLA Well, we're *all* eating. It's Sunday. The family always eats together on Sunday. And you think about what you want for dessert, Arty, because whatever you want is what you're going to get . . . Start thinking now.

ARTY I started! I started! I want a big ice cream soda with a sundae with whipped cream and hot-fudge sauce. Is that okay?

BELLA Sounds perfect to me. And don't give any to Jay. He missed the deadline.

(*She puts her nose up to JAY and goes into GRANDMA'S room*)

ARTY (*To JAY*) Don't be mad. I had to say it. I was afraid she was going to strangle me with the towel.

JAY It's up to Pop. We'll see what Pop says.

(*ARTY lies on the sofa. The bedroom door opens. EDDIE comes out. He looks strained. He crosses to the open window and takes a deep breath of air*)

EDDIE Jay! Get me a glass of water, please.

JAY Right, Pop.

(He rushes into the kitchen)

EDDIE It must be over a hundred in here. *(He looks at ARTY)* Get your shoes off the sofa, what's wrong with you?

ARTY *(Moves his shoes)* I'm feeling kind of faint.

EDDIE What do you mean, faint? Kids your age don't faint.

ARTY Maybe I'm getting older.

JAY *(He comes in with the glass)* Here you go, Pop. Nice and cool.

EDDIE Don't spill it on the rug. *(He takes the glass and drinks, then puts the glass down)* Alright . . . Time to talk. Sit down, Jay. Next to Arty. *(JAY sits on the sofa next to ARTY. EDDIE sits on the stool. He is thinking about how to start)* I er . . . I wanted to tell you boys—

(And suddenly he breaks and tears come to his eyes. He quickly tries to stifle it. He wipes his eyes. He goes to the window for some air)

ARTY Is anything the matter, Po—

EDDIE It's so damn hot in here, isn't it? . . . So, I just had a talk inside with your grandmother . . . Because I've had a problem . . . When your mother and I had a problem, we always tried to keep it from you boys because we didn't want to worry you . . . The first year she was sick, I never even told you about it . . . Well,

you can't keep cancer a secret forever . . . You knew without me telling you, didn't you, Jay?

JAY Yes, Pop.

EDDIE I did everything I could. The best doctors, the best hospital I could get into . . . She had a nice room, didn't she? Semiprivate, no wards or anything . . . I paid the nurse extra to put her next to the window. She loved looking at that tree every day . . . It was worth whatever it cost.

JAY It was a great tree, Pop.

EDDIE Do you remember how long she was in that hospital? Remember, Arty?

ARTY A long time.

EDDIE Almost four months . . . She wanted to go home because of the money but I knew she wouldn't get the same care at home. Even with a private nurse, they don't always show up. And with this war, you're lucky to find one.

JAY I know, Pop.

EDDIE We're not rich people, boys. I know that doesn't come as a surprise to you . . . but I'm going to tell you something now I hoped I'd never have to tell you in my life . . .