

Build

ARTY She won't. Because I'm going to break something. What's her favorite thing in this room?

JAY You're not breaking anything. Because we have to stay here and save Pop's life.

ARTY And what about *our* lives? We could grow up like Aunt Bella. I could be in the seventh grade for the next twenty years.

JAY Listen, if you act like this when Grandma comes out, that's like putting a gun to Pop's head and pulling the trigger.

ARTY Oh. So we stay here and get whacked in the head every time we cry . . . or suck candles back on like Aunt Gert. *(He sucks his breath in and says)* "Hello, Arty. How are you?"

JAY *(He grabs ARTY by his shirt collar)* One more word from you and I'll whack you, I swear to God.

(ARTY pulls away but JAY holds on . . . and ARTY's collar gets torn halfway off and dangles there) Oh, my God. It tore!

ARTY Well, that's it. The war is over for us . . . I hope Pop bought the grave next to Mom.

JAY *(Looking in a drawer)* Jesus! It's all your goddamn fault . . . Look for a pin, maybe we could stick it back together.

ARTY Right. I'm going to be looking in drawers when Grandma walks in. I'm sure she wants to adopt a couple of crooks.

(He rushes to JAY, but the drawer slams shut and JAY bows in pain)

JAY *(Starting to cry)* Dammit! I hate you so much. I hate Mom for dying. I hate Pop for putting us in this spot. I hate Grandma for being such a rotten old lady. I hate everybody in the whole goddamn world.

(And the bedroom door opens and EDDIE comes out with a smile)

EDDIE You ready, boys? *(And then he looks at them)* . . . What the hell is going on here? . . . What are you crying about? What happened to your collar?

(He quickly closes the bedroom door)

ARTY Nothing.

EDDIE Don't tell me nothing. Were you fighting? Of course you were fighting, just look at you. I can't believe it. If I can't trust you for two minutes, how can I trust you for a year? . . . And do you think I would

do this to my mother? To my sister, Bella? . . . I knew this was a stupid idea in the first place. I never would have tried it if I wasn't so desperate . . . I'm ashamed of you. I'm ashamed of you both . . . Wait outside for me. Out in the street. I don't want to look at you . . . Go on, get out.

ARTY We weren't fighting. It was an accident. I was trying to straighten my tie and I straightened it too tight.

JAY I was crying about Mom. She'd be so sad to see you in such trouble . . . We really want to stay here. We like Yonkers. We were just praying that Grandma would let us stay.

ARTY Gee, I hope she does . . . It looks like such a nice place to live.

EDDIE Are you serious? Or are you just trying to lie your way out of this?

JAY Serious. Very serious.

ARTY It's the most serious we've been in our lives.

EDDIE I hope so. For all our sakes . . . Alright. Fix yourself up. Tuck in your collar. Wipe your eyes . . . I'll get Grandma. *(The door opens and BELLA comes out. She rushes to the sofa and throws herself on it, sobbing)* Oh, Jesus! Bella? . . . What's wrong? . . . What is it, Bella? *(She buries her face in a pillow like a five-year-old child. ARTY and JAY look at each other . . . EDDIE sits next to BELLA and puts his arm around her shoulder. To BELLA,*

softly) . . . Did Momma say something? . . . Was she angry with you? *(BELLA whispers in EDDIE's ear)* No, no, Bella. She does too love your back rubs, she told me that . . . She's just got a lot on her mind today. *(He looks at the boys disapprovingly, then back to BELLA)* You alright now, sweetheart? *(BELLA whispers again to him)* Yes, I know you're lonely . . . I know it's hard to be alone with her all the time . . . But, Bella, I have good news for you . . . Maybe you won't be alone anymore . . . You know who's going to stay here, Bella? If Momma says yes . . . Arthur and Jay . . . Wouldn't that be nice? . . . To have Arthur and Jay here? . . . They'd live here and spend time with you and you'd have someone to talk to at nights. *(ARTY and JAY look at each other)* Would you like that, honey?

BELLA *(Beams)* Yes.

EDDIE *(To BELLA)* Alright. Then give me a smile and a hug.

(BELLA throws her arms around EDDIE's neck)

BELLA Don't go away, Eddie . . . Stay and live with us . . . I miss you so much . . . She's so mean sometimes.

EDDIE No, she's not. She's just getting old . . . I can't stay, honey. I have to go away for a while. But the boys will be with you. They're looking forward to it . . . Look how happy they look. *(ARTY and JAY force two big smiles at her)* . . . Would you like to lie down in your room for a while, Bella? Momma has to talk to the boys now.

BELLA (*Grabs his hand*) No. I want to stay here with you.

EDDIE It would be easier, I think, if Momma and the boys talked alone.

BELLA (*Sternly*) I want to stay here with you.

EDDIE Ohh, God . . . Alright. You sit right there. But you be very quiet now, alright? . . . Just don't interrupt because we don't want to get Momma upset . . . Okay. Here we go.

(He crosses to the bedroom door, knocks, and goes in.

JAY and ARTY look at BELLA. *She looks up at the ceiling)*

JAY Er . . . Arty and I are really hoping it works out, Aunt Bella.

BELLA (*She puts her finger to her lips*) Shhh. Mustn't interrupt.

JAY Oh, yeah. Right.

(EDDIE comes out of the bedroom and arranges the boys to greet GRANDMA)

EDDIE Her back is killing her but she doesn't want me to help her. *(He calls in)* Okay, Momma.

(There is a beat, as Momma is going to make her entrance when she wants.

GRANDMA KURNITZ *enters slowly from the bedroom. She is a big woman, or, hopefully, gives that appearance. Not fat, but buxom, with a strong, erect body, despite her seventy-odd years. She has white hair pulled back in European style with buns. She carries a cane and walks with a slight dragging of one foot. She wears rimless glasses and has a pasty-white complexion. She wears a large-print dress of the period with a cameo brooch pinned on. Authority and discipline seem to be her overriding characteristics and she would command attention in a crowd. She speaks with few but carefully chosen words, with a clear German accent.*

She walks to the armchair, not looking at anybody, least of all the boys. Then she sits and looks at EDDIE)

GRANDMA So?

(EDDIE motions with his head to the boys)

JAY (*On cue*) Hello, Grandma.

ARTY Hello, Grandma.

(EDDIE looks at them again and gives them another head signal. JAY steps up and kisses her quickly on her cheek and steps back. ARTY does the same and steps back. GRANDMA KURNITZ hardly reacts)

EDDIE I know you haven't seen the boys in a long time, Mom. They wanted to come, but with their mother sick so long, they felt they should spend as much time as they could with her . . . I bet they've grown since you've seen them, haven't they?

GRANDMA (*She looks at them, then points her cane at ARTY*)
Dis iss the little one?

EDDIE Yes. Arthur. He's two years younger, right,
Arty?

ARTY Yes. I'm two years younger . . . than him.

GRANDMA (*She looks at JAY, points her cane at him*) Dis
one I remember more . . . Dis one looks like his mother.

JAY Yes. A lot of people tell me that.

GRANDMA Vot's wrong with your eyes?

JAY My eyes? Oh. They're a little red. I got something
in them and I scratched them too hard.

GRANDMA You vere crying maybe?

JAY Me? No. I never cry.

GRANDMA Big boys shouldn't cry.

JAY I know. I haven't cried in years. A couple of times
when I was a baby.

EDDIE Oh, they're strong kids, Ma. Both of them.

GRANDMA (*Looks at JAY*) Yakob, heh?

JAY Yes, but they call me Jay.

GRANDMA No. I don't like Jay . . . Yakob iss a name.

JAY Sure. Yakob is fine.

GRANDMA And Arthur.

ARTY Arthur. But they call me Arty.

GRANDMA I don't call you Arty.

ARTY Sure. I *love* Arthur. Like King Arthur.

GRANDMA You go to school?

ARTY Yeah.

GRANDMA Vat?

ARTY Yes. I go to the same school as Yakob.

GRANDMA Vitch one iss da smart one?

(*JAY and ARTY look at each other*)

EDDIE They both do very well in school.

GRANDMA (*She points her cane at EDDIE*) They'll tell me.
(*She looks at them*) Vitch one iss da smart one?

ARTY (*Pointing to JAY*) Yakob is. He gets A's in every-
thing. I'm better at sports.

GRANDMA Shports?

ARTY Baseball. Basketball. Football.

GRANDMA You play in the mud? In the dirt? You come home with filthy shoes and make marks all over the floor?

ARTY No. Never. I clean them off at the field. I bring a brush and polish and shine them up on a bench.

(He looks at EDDIE to see if he got away with that)

GRANDMA If the smart one iss smart, he'll make sure you do.

EDDIE No, the boys are very neat. Even their mother said so.

(GRANDMA taps her cane a few times on the floor, like an announcement)

GRANDMA So tell me . . . vy do you want to live with Grandma?

(The boys look at each other)

ARTY . . . Why don't you tell Grandma, Yakob?

(JAY glares at bim)

JAY . . . Well . . . because . . . Pop has to go away. And we had to give up our apartment . . . and when Pop said we had the opportunity to live here with you—our only living grandmother . . . and our only living Aunt Bella . . . I thought that families should sort of stick together now that our country is at war with Germ—Japan . . . so we can all be together during times like this . . . and I also think that—no. That's all.

GRANDMA *(Nods)* Hmm . . . And this is the smart one?

EDDIE I thought he said that very well, Momma.

GRANDMA *(She points her cane at ARTY)* And what about this King Artur? . . . Vy do you want to live with Grandma?

ARTY *(After looking at GRANDMA)* . . . Because we have no place else to go.

EDDIE *Arty!!* . . . I think what Arty is trying to say, Momma—

GRANDMA *(Pointing her cane at EDDIE)* No! . . . he knows vot he wants to say . . . *(She looks at ARTY)* I tink maybe *diss* is da smart one.

EDDIE He's always been very honest. But he's just a boy, Momma—

GRANDMA So! You haff no place else to go. Dot's vy you want to live vith Grandma . . . Alright . . . Alright . . . So now Grandma vill tell you vy she doesn't tink you should live vit her . . . Dis house is no place for boys. I'm an old woman. I don't like to talk. I don't like noise. I don't like people in my house. I had six children once, I don't need more again . . . Bella and I take care of the store six days a veek and on Sunday ve rest. Today is Sunday and I'm not resting . . . Bella is not—she's not goot vit people too long. A little bit yes, then she gets too excited . . . You understand vot I'm saying? . . . Vot vould you do here? There's no games in dis house. There's no toys in dis house. I don't like the

radio after six o'clock. The news yes, dot's all . . . Ve go to sleep nine o'clock, ve get up five o'clock. I don't have friends. Bella don't have friends. You would not be happy here. And unhappy boys I don't need.

EDDIE Momma, can I just say something—?

GRANDMA (*She holds up her cane*) I'll just say something . . . I think about dis inside. Because anger hass been in me for a long time . . . Vy should I do dis? . . . Vot do I owe your father? . . . Ven did he ever come around here after he married your mother? I never saw him . . . Because she turned him against me. His own mother . . . She didn't like me, I didn't like her. I'm not afraid to tell da truth either . . . I don't vish anybody's death. Maybe she vas a goot mother to you, may she rest in peace, to me she vas nothing . . . And your father was afraid of her. Dot's vy he stopped coming here. You're big boys now, how many times haff I seen you since you were born? Four, five times? . . . Dose are not grandchildren. Dose are strangers . . . And now he comes to me for help? . . . He cried in my bedroom. Not like a man, like a child he cried. He vas always dot vay . . . I buried a husband and two children und I didn't cry. I didn't haff time. Bella vas born vit scarlet fever and she didn't talk until she vas five years old, und I didn't cry . . . Your father's sister, Gertrude, can't talk vitout choking und I didn't cry . . . Und maybe one day, they'll find Louie dead in da street und I von't cry . . . Dot's how I vas raised. To be strong. Ven dey beat us vit sticks in Germany ven ve vere children, I didn't cry . . . You don't survive in dis world vitout being like steel. Your father vants you to grow up, first let *bim* grow up . . . Ven he learns to be a father, like I learned

to be a mother, den he'll be a man. Den he von't need my help . . . You think I'm cruel? You tink I'm a terrible person? Dot a grandmother should say tings like dis? I can see it in your faces vot you tink . . . Goot, it'll make you hard. It'll make you strong. Den you'll be able to take care of yourselves vitout *anybody's* help . . . So dot's my decision. Maybe one day you'll tank me for it. (*She gets up*) Give da boys an ice cream cone, Bella. Den come inside and finish my legs.

(*She starts for the bedroom. They all stand, stunned. BELLA, who has remained seated, seems impervious to this*)

EDDIE (*Without anger*) . . . You're right, Momma. I am the weak one. I am the crybaby . . . Always was. When you wouldn't pick me up and hug me as a child, I cried . . . When my brother and sister died, I cried . . . And I still haven't stopped crying since Evelyn died . . . But you're wrong about one thing. She never turned me against you. She turned me towards *her* . . . To loving, to caring, to holding someone when they needed holding . . . I'm sorry about not bringing the boys out here more. Maybe the reason I didn't was because I was afraid they'd learn something here that I tried to forget . . . Maybe they just learned it today . . . I'm sorry I bothered you on your Sunday. I'm sorry I imposed on your rest. I'm sorry about what they did to you as a child in Berlin. I'm sure it was terrible. But this is Yonkers, Momma. I'm not angry at you for turning me and the boys down. I'm angry at myself for not knowing better . . . Take care of yourself, Momma . . . Never mind the ice cream cones, Bella. I used up all my obligations for this year. (*He crosses to the door*) Come on,

boys. We're going. (*JAY and ARTY are too dumbstruck to move, to have been in the middle of all this*) . . . I said let's go.

(*They start for the door*)

BELLA *Arty?* (*She gets up with a warm, sweet smile on her face*) We'll have dinner another night . . . Why don't you and Jay go home and pack your things and I'll get your bed ready and make room in the closet for when you move in.

(*The boys stop, look at EDDIE*)

EDDIE Thank you, Bella . . . but Momma and I just decided it's not a good idea.

BELLA (*Still smiling, she begins to make up the sofa bed*) And, Jay, you make a list of all the things you boys like for breakfast, and I'll make sure we have it . . . And don't forget your toothbrushes because we don't carry them in the store . . . And each of you bring something from your house that you really love, even if it's big, and we'll find someplace to put it.

GRANDMA Dot's enough, Bella. Diss is not your business.

BELLA (*To the boys*) How about a picture of your mother? And we can put it right here on the table. It'll be the last thing you see at night and the first thing you see in the morning . . . It's going to be such fun with you both here . . . Momma's right. I do get so excited around people but it makes me so happy.

GRANDMA Bella! Nicht sprecken! Enough!! . . . They're going. Dot's the end of it.

BELLA (*Quite calmly*) No, Momma. They're not going. They're staying. Because if you make them go, I'll go too . . . I know I've said that a thousand times but this time I mean it . . . I could go to the Home. The Home would take me . . . You're always telling me that . . . And if I go, you'll be all alone . . . And you're afraid to be alone, Momma . . . Nobody else knows that but me . . . But you don't have to be, Momma. Because we'll all be together now . . . You and me and Jay and Arty . . . Won't that be fun, Momma?

(*They stand there, all frozen, except BELLA, who is beaming . . .*)

(*The stage goes to black*)