

## **Act Two: Scene Two**

### **Summary**

Willy goes to the office with the intention of asking Howard for a New York position. Howard tells Willy about his new recorder and demonstrates how it works. Howard plays recordings of his children and his wife and convinces Willy to buy a recorder. Willy expresses his desire to work in New York rather than continue traveling. Howard hesitates until Willy reminds him of the Christmas party and Howard's promise to give Willy an in-town job if possible. Howard says there are no openings at the moment. Willy begs Howard for a job, each time asking for less money, but Howard insists that a job is not available.

In an effort to convince Howard, Willy resorts to old memories of his glory days when he worked for Howard's father. In addition, Willy attempts to explain why he became a salesman. He describes Dave Singleman, a well-respected professional salesman who made a lasting impression on people and was publicly mourned when he died. Howard remains impassive to Willy's entreaties and instead informs Willy that Willy can no longer work for the company. Howard advises Willy to appeal to Biff and Happy for financial assistance, and he instructs Willy to return his sample cases by the end of the week.

### **Analysis**

Willy's world begins crashing down around him during Scene 2. Willy does not like to deal with Howard because his boss fails to appreciate him; however, Willy is confident that Howard will accept his request to work in New York. Willy's confidence is the result of Linda's encouragement during Scene 1 and Biff's appointment with Oliver. Just as Willy projected Ben's success onto himself during Act I, Scene 9, so he envisions his own victory with Howard because of Biff's imminent success with Oliver.

Howard is a bottom-line businessman who sees Willy as a tired old salesman relying on his ability to talk rather than his ability to sell. Howard sympathizes with Willy, but he is not willing to give him a job in New York for two reasons. First, a New York job would give Willy a base salary again. Howard is aware that Willy's sales have not been adequate for some time; it was for this reason that he withdrew Willy's salary and put him on commission. By keeping Willy on commission, Howard is only obligated to pay Willy according to his gross sales. If Willy does not sell well, it does not adversely affect the company. Second, Howard does not want Willy in New York because he would have to deal with him every day. Howard does not dislike Willy, but he tires of Willy's rambling exaggerations and references to times when Willy worked for Howard's father. Having Willy in New York would be a nuisance.

It is important to note that Howard does not fire Willy out of spite. It is a business decision that Howard has been putting off for some time. Willy's behavior during the interview prompts Howard to act upon his decision. At first Howard is sympathetic to Willy's desire to work in New York, but he does not want him there, and so he emphasizes the fact that Willy is a "road man." At this point, Howard still intends to keep Willy, in spite of his inconsistent behavior in the past.

Willy realizes that he is not getting through to Howard, so he resorts to his safety mechanism: When the present is not tolerable, revert to the past. Willy attempts to persuade Howard by reminding him that he named him as a child. Once this fails, Willy is forced to move deeper into the past. He rationalizes that Howard will change his mind if he will only listen to Willy's story of Dave Singleman. Willy describes Singleman's success and admiration so vividly because he believes he can claim some of Singleman's success for himself. If he projects these traits to Howard, then Howard cannot refuse him. Although Howard does not change his mind, he listens to Willy considerably. Nevertheless, Willy's exaggeration makes Howard impatient and finally compels him to fire Willy.

Howard tells Willy to look to his family for support. Even at the end of the scene, Howard should not be judged too harshly. His motto is "business is business," and therefore business must go on. He realizes that Willy is no longer just an ineffective salesman; now his behavior makes him an embarrassment to the company and a source of potential loss of customers and revenue. Willy's attempt to create order — by working in New York and by using his memories to obtain the New York job — has effectively backfired, leaving him without a job, without financial security, and without his identity as a "salesman."

## **Glossary**

**self-reliance** reliance on one's own judgment, abilities, etc.

**cut and dried** an expression meaning "strictly business" without time for or need of pleasantries.

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