

An Excerpt from Miller's *Autobiography Timebends*

Willy Loman based on a real uncle of Miller's

Arthur Miller's most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, is rooted in his childhood experiences. In this third part of a five-part series, Miller describes how he found the model for Willie Loman within his own family.

By Arthur Miller

I actually spent no more than a couple of hours in my Uncle Manny's presence in my life, but he was so absurd, so completely isolated from the ordinary laws of gravity, so elaborate in his fantastic inventions, and despite his ugliness so lyrically in love with fame and fortune and their inevitable descent on his family, that he possessed my imagination until I knew more or less precisely how he would react to any sign or word or idea. His unpredictable manipulations of fact freed my mind to lope and skip among fantasies of my own, but always underneath was the river of his sadness.

In those days, before the parkways and superhighways, a traveling salesman had to drive through every town, stop at every traffic light, and he carried a short-handled shovel in the trunk to dig his way out of drifts, since there were no snow tires as yet and many towns only plowed their roads once in a storm.

It was the unpredictability of his life that wove romance around it. He was not in some dull, salaried job where you could never hope to make a killing. Hope was his food and drink, and the need to project hopeful culminations for a selling trip helped, I suppose, to make life unreal.

Much more than a single model would ultimately go into Willy Loman. Indeed, since I saw so little of Manny he was already, in my youth, as much myth as fact.

Manny had managed to make his boys into a pair of strong, self-assured young men, musketeers bound to one another's honor and proud of their family. Neither was patient enough or perhaps capable enough to sit alone and study, and they both missed going to college. Buddy joined the Seabees during the war and welded landing mats for aircraft on Pacific islands, married an older woman who had her own children, and died at 40 of cancer, an entrepreneur at last, serving aircraft workers sandwiches from a small fleet of vans he had managed to buy or lease. Abby fought with the infantry at Anzio.

The last I saw of Abby was a number of years before he died, in his early 40s, like his mother, of hypertension. He had invited me to his bachelor apartment in Manhattan after I phoned him. I had not seen him since before the war. Wearing blue silk pajamas and slippers, he ushered me into his small living room overlooking lower Lexington Avenue.

"What did your pop want?" I asked him. This was what I had come for.

I was obsessed these days by vague but exciting images of what can only be called a trajectory, an arched flow of storytelling with neither transitional dialogue nor a single fixed locale, a mode that would open a man's head for a play to take place inside it, evolving through concurrent rather than consecutive actions. By this time I had known three suicides, two of them salesmen. I knew only that Manny had died with none of the ordinary reasons given.

"I mean if you had to say the one thing he wanted most, the one thing that occurred to him most often, what would it be?"

"He wanted a business for us. So we could all work together," my cousin said. "A business for the boys."

This conventional, mundane wish was a shot of electricity that switched all the random iron filings in my mind in one direction. A hopelessly distracted Manny was transformed into a man with purpose: He had been trying to make a gift that would crown all those striving years; all those lies he told, all his imaginings and crazy exaggerations, even the almost military discipline he had laid on his boys, were in this instant given form and point. To be sure, a business expressed his own egotism, but love, too.

It was an accidental meeting almost a year earlier that had set me up for the particular question I asked and for the resonances of the answer my cousin gave. On a late winter afternoon I had walked into the lobby of the old Colonial Theater in Boston, where *All My Sons* had just opened, its Broadway premiere a few weeks away, and I was surprised to see Manny among the last of the matinee audience to leave.

"Manny! How are you? It's great seeing you here!"

Without so much as acknowledging my greeting, he said, "Buddy is doing very well." Then I saw a passing look of embarrassment on his face, as though, perhaps, he had not always wished me well.

We chatted for a moment, and he went out of the vast lobby and into the street. I thought I knew what he was thinking: That he had lost the contest in his mind between his sons and me. An enormous welling sorrow formed in my belly as I watched him merge into the crowd outside. Collected in his ludicrous presence was all of life.

But it was the absence of the slightest transition to "Buddy is doing very well" that stuck in my mind; it was a signal to me of the new form that until now I had only tentatively imagined could exist. I had not the slightest idea of writing about a salesman then, totally absorbed as I was in my present production. But how wonderful, I thought, to do a play without any transitions at all, dialogue that would simply leap from

bone to bone of a skeleton that would not for an instant cease being added to, an organism as strictly economic as a leaf, as trim as an ant.

And more important than even that, a play that would do to an audience what Manny had done to me in our surprising meeting--cut through time like a knife through a layer cake or a road through a mountain revealing its geologic layers, and instead of one incident in one time frame succeeding another, display past and present concurrently, with neither one ever coming to a stop.

One afternoon, after attending to some business in midtown, I was about to head for the subway and a bit of warmth when my eye caught *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* on one of the 42nd Street marquees. I decided to look in on it again. It was one of the films that over the years since I had first seen it had become part of my own dream tissue and had the same intimacy as something I had invented myself.

The dingy theater at 3 o'clock in the afternoon was almost empty. Even worse, I had been making preliminary sketches of scenes and ideas for a salesman play and should have been home at my desk. I was still at the stage of trying to convince myself that I could find a structural arch for the story of the Lomans, as I called the family. The name had appeared suddenly under my hand one evening as I was making my vagrant notes. "Loman" had the sound of reality, of someone who had actually lived, even if I had never known anyone by that name.

Now, watching Fritz Lang's old film, I was drawn into the astounding tale, gradually recalling it from the past. From time to time, Paris is experiencing fires, derailments, explosions, but the chief of the *Surete* is baffled because he can find no motive for these catastrophes, which he has come to believe are not accidental but the work of criminals. But to what end and for whose profit he cannot imagine. He visits a great psychiatrist, Dr. Mabuse, who heads a famous clinic outside Paris. The doctor explains that indeed these are probably not accidents but that the perpetrators will be very difficult to find. They may be people of all classes who have one thing in common--a disgust with civilization and the wish simply to destroy it. Being psychological and moral, the profit is impossible to track.

The chief, played by Otto Wernicke, proceeds to send out men to keep watch on the crowds that collect at fires and other calamities. In time, one young detective notices a man watching a particularly awful fire in an orphanage and recalls having observed him at a previous fire. He begins to track this fellow and is led into a great printing plant closed for the night. The detective finds himself in a basement auditorium that is about a quarter filled with men and women representing every class of people in Paris, from pretentious business types to common laborers, students and shopkeepers. They seem unrelated and sit quite apart from one another, all watching a curtain drawn across a stage. From behind it now is heard a voice that in quiet, rather businesslike tones instructs the audience on the next objective, a Paris hospital that is to

Death of a Salesman
Supplementary Materials

Name _____
Date _____

be dynamited and set afire. The detective rushes the stage, parts the curtain--and discovers a phonograph playing a record. The chase is on.

He slips into a tiny office, quietly shuts the door, switches on the light and sits down at a phone to call the chief. The camera moves into a close-up on the young detective's desperate face as he clamps the receiver to his ear and whispers, "Hello? Hello! Lohmann? Lohmann!" The light snaps out and the screen goes black before he can give his location. The next shot finds him in an asylum in a white gown, seated on a bed with his hand up to his ear gripping a non-existent phone receiver, a look of terror in his face, repeating, "Lohmann? Lohmann? Lohmann?"

My spine iced as I realized where I had gotten the name that had lodged so deep in me. It was more than five years since I had last seen the film, and if I had been asked, I never could have dredged up the name of the chief of the *Surette* in it. In later years I found it discouraging to observe the confidence with which some commentators on *Death of a Salesman* smirked at the heavy-handed symbolism of "Low-man." What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come.

Source: Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (Grove Press Inc., 1987).