

Lost In Yonkers

PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1, Scene 1

Lost in Yonkers begins in the apartment above "Kurnitz's Kandy Store," where Grandma and Bella Kurnitz live. It is a hot day in August, and Jay and Arty Kurnitz sit waiting for their father in one of the rooms of the apartment. They soon find out that this is no standard visit and that their father, Eddie, is in debt to a loan shark because he borrowed money to help pay for their dead mother's hospital bills. Because of this, Eddie is trying to leave Jay and Arty with their grandma while Eddie travels south to work in metal scrapyards that are servicing the war effort. Grandma Kurnitz refuses to let the boys stay there until Bella, who is mentally impaired, threatens to leave Grandma Kurnitz and go stay at a home for the mentally ill if she does not let the boys stay.

Act 1, Scene 2

Jay reads a letter from Eddie, talking about his work experiences and letting them know that he has developed an irregular heartbeat from all of the traveling. Grandma Kurnitz scolds Bella for going to the movies and takes away the movie magazine that Bella has bought.

Act 1, Scene 3

Weeks later, the boys receive another letter from Eddie that says he had to take a week off and rest from overexertion. Jay notices a black car that has been hanging around the apartment looking for their uncle Louie. Bella comes home, and after prodding from the two boys, tells Jay and Arty that she is going to get married to a learning-impaired movie usher and have lots of children with him. She says that the usher, Johnny, wants to open a restaurant but that he does not have enough money. She also lets the boys know that Grandma Kurnitz has ten or fifteen thousand dollars that she keeps hidden somewhere in the house and that she changes the hiding place every year. Jay explores the possibility of finding the money, borrowing it, and sending it to their father.

Act 1, Scene 4

A week later, the boys receive another letter from Eddie that says he is having a hard time learning the southern dialect. It is late at night and everybody is sleeping. Jay comes up from the store where he has been searching for Grandma Kurnitz's hidden money. The boys' Uncle Louie comes into their bedroom and remarks that he saw Jay looking for the money. Louie is wearing a holstered gun and lies at first, saying it is not his. However, they suspect that he is a henchman for the mob. He pays them five dollars and then says he will give them money each week if they agree to tell the men that are after him that they have not seen him.

Act 2, Scene 1

The boys receive another letter from Eddie that says he was in the hospital, temporarily for exhaustion. Arty is sick, so Grandma Kurnitz has Jay bring him her infamous mustard soup. Jay notes that the men looking for Louie called and left a message with Jay. The boys realize that Louie is double-crossing the mob. Grandma Kurnitz comes into the room, scolding Jay for taking too long to deliver the soup. Arty refuses to drink the horrid soup until Grandma Kurnitz threatens him with force. She leaves, and Louie comes in, fresh from a nap. He says that Arty has moxie for standing up to Grandma Kurnitz. Louie says he is going to leave that night, before the men looking for him come to get him, and then he goes to take a shower. Jay comes up, fuming that Grandma Kurnitz made him pay for three pretzels that she says some kids stole. Jay says he is going to ask Louie to take Jay with him when he goes so that Jay can make money and help out their father.

Bella comes up and says that she is going to announce to the family tonight that she is getting married. She leaves, and Louie comes back into the room. Jay asks Louie if he can go with him when Louie leaves, but Louie refuses and gets mad when Jay says that he does not want to rob anybody, implying that this is what Louie does for a living. When Jay offers to carry Louie's mysterious black bag, Louie is furious, thinking that the boys have been snooping around. He tries to force Arty to open the bag and see what is in there, but Jay saves a terrified Arty by standing up to Louie. Louie is impressed at Jay's moxie but says that there is no work for Jay, since Louie himself is closing up shop and fleeing town. Grandma Kurnitz comes in and tells Louie that he has to stay there for dinner that evening upon Bella's request. Grandma Kurnitz returns some money that Louie left on her dresser, refusing to take it because she does not approve of the way that Louie earned it.

Act 2, Scene 2

Eddie sends a letter to Grandma Kurnitz and money to cover the boys' food and Arty's medicine. After dinner that night, Louie tries to leave, anxious to get out of town, but Bella keeps stalling, trying to find the right moment to spring the news about her intended marriage. Louie gets more anxious and refuses to sit until Grandma Kurnitz yells at him. Bella still does not know how to start, so Jay helps her out by asking her questions. When the line of questions reveals that Bella has been dating the head usher at the movie theater, Louie forgets about leaving and starts to get concerned. Bella finally manages to say that she plans to marry the usher, Johnny, who has a learning impairment, and that they plan on opening a restaurant together. When Louie pesters Bella, she admits that they need five thousand dollars to open their restaurant and that Johnny has lived in a home for the mentally impaired in the past. Everybody is shocked, and Grandma Kurnitz tells Bella to stop talking. However, Bella launches into a speech about how she wants to have her own babies and that they will be happier than the Kurnitz children were because she will not be as rough on them. Grandma Kurnitz gets up and leaves the room.

Act 2, Scene 3

Arty writes a letter to Eddie, letting him know that things have gotten bad around the house. Jay and Arty note that Bella has been gone for two nights. Aunt Gert comes out of Grandma

Kurnitz's room and says that Bella has been staying at Gert's house but that Grandma Kurnitz does not know this. Gert leaves, and Grandma Kurnitz comes out of her room, obviously shaken by the week's events. Bella walks in, but Grandma Kurnitz tells her to leave. The boys leave, and Bella confronts her mother, who tries to say that Bella's mental state makes her nothing but a child. However, Bella says she has womanly needs and talks about the sexual affairs she has had with men in an attempt to find the warmth that has been missing from her home life. Bella reveals that Louie gave her the five thousand dollars to open her restaurant, but Bella says she is not going to do that. Bella also mentions Grandma Kurnitz's two children who died, the event that caused her to close herself off emotionally from her other children. Bella goes to put her things away, moving back in for good, and Grandma Kurnitz tries to hide her emotion.

Act 2, Scene 4

Ten months after Eddie left Arty and Jay with his mother, he returns to pick them up. While Eddie is in talking with his mother, the boys learn that Louie is fighting in the war, in Guadalcanal. Bella comes in and gives a football to Jay and a basketball to Arty. Jay and Arty say their awkward good-byes to Grandma Kurnitz and leave. Bella starts preparing dinner for her mother and herself, saying that she has met a new girlfriend and that this girl has a brother whom Bella would like to have over for dinner sometime. Grandma Kurnitz quietly accepts Bella's new assertiveness.

CHARACTERS

Arty Kurnitz

Arty Kurnitz, a thirteen-year-old boy, is Eddie's youngest boy. Arty is forced to live with his grandma Kurnitz for ten months while his father works off a debt to a loan shark. Arty prefers to go by "Arty," but his grandma calls him "Arthur," so he reluctantly accepts this name. Arty gets sick during the play and is forced by his grandma to drink her horrid mustard soup. Arty is afraid of his Uncle Louie, a mob henchman, especially when Louie tries to force Arty to open his mysterious satchel. Jay sticks up for Arty in this instance. By the end of the play, however, Arty misses his Uncle Louie, who has enlisted in the military to avoid some other mob henchmen. Bella confides in Arty and Jay about her marriage plans when she cannot find anybody else to talk to.

Aunt Bella Kurnitz

Aunt Bella is Grandma Kurnitz's mentally impaired daughter and the aunt of Jay and Arty Kurnitz. Bella is the most dynamic character in the play. In the beginning, much emphasis is placed on Bella's mental condition. Bella tends to walk around in a daze, which the audience eventually learns is one of the ways she copes with her dysfunctional home life. Bella is a daydreamer and likes to spend her time at the movie theater. Here, Bella meets an illiterate usher that she wants to marry. She also hopes to start a business with him but needs five thousand dollars to do this. Bella is nervous about bringing this topic up with her family, especially her mother. As a result, Bella invites the whole family to a dinner during which she attempts to

spring the news on them. However, she is unable to figure out a way to do this and so must rely on Jay to help her reveal her news, by prompting her with questions.

Despite her fear of her mother, Bella stands up to Grandma Kurnitz three times in the play. In the beginning, when Grandma Kurnitz refuses to let Jay and Arty stay with her, Bella threatens to leave her mother if the boys cannot stay. During the dinner, she launches into a speech, asserting her independence and causing her mother to leave the room without saying a word. Finally, at the end of the play, Bella digs up her mother's painful past—when her mother lost two children. Bella says that she is going to raise her children differently, showering them with love instead of withholding it for fear of losing them and having to deal with heartbreak. At the end of the play, Bella is totally transformed. She has a new friend and a potential date. She talks to her mother very boldly and acts strong and independent.

Eddie Kurnitz

Eddie Kurnitz is the son of Grandma Kurnitz and the father of Jay and Arty Kurnitz. He is forced to leave his boys with his mother so that he can go south, take advantage of the need for workers during the war and ultimately pay off a debt that he owes to a loan shark. Eddie gained this debt when he paid for his deceased wife's hospital bills. Eddie feels that the only way to repay the debt is to work hard, and he works so hard that he makes himself sick. Throughout the play, Eddie sends periodic letters to his boys and his mother, which are read to the audience in voice-over. These letters set the tone for each scene and make Eddie a major character, despite the fact that he is only physically present in the first and last scenes.

Gert Kurnitz

Gert is Grandma Kurnitz's daughter and Arty's and Jay's aunt. As the result of her mother's harsh love, Gert has developed a breathing problem that causes her to start each sentence breathing out and to end the sentence sucking in. This problem is more pronounced when she is visiting her mother. When Bella runs away, Gert houses her for a couple of days without telling her mother.

Grandma Kurnitz

Grandma Kurnitz is the mother of Eddie, Bella, Louie, and Gert, and she is the grandmother of Jay and Arty Kurnitz. Grandma Kurnitz is characterized by her tough attitude, which is underscored by her harsh German accent. All of the characters think that Grandma Kurnitz is too tough on them, but it is revealed at the end of the play that she is tough because she lost two of her children. Ever since that day, she has closed herself off emotionally from her children and others. As a result, she has been very harsh when raising her children, trying above all else to teach them how to survive. In the process, however, each child has developed a defense mechanism to survive, some of which are debilitating, such as Gert's breathing problems.

When Jay and Arty come to live with Grandma Kurnitz, she is hard on them, too. As she has done with her own children, Grandma Kurnitz charges Jay for any items that are missing from her candy store, even when she has taken them herself. Several characters stand up to Grandma Kurnitz, including Arty, but all of them inevitably back down—except for Bella. Grandma

Kurnitz tries above all else to protect Bella, who is mentally impaired. She treats Bella like a child and has a hard time accepting the fact that Bella has become a woman and is seeking a mature life with a husband and children. Grandma Kurnitz also has difficulty admitting that she needs others, even though she relies on Bella. By the end of the play, Grandma Kurnitz has reluctantly accepted the fact that Bella is growing up.

Jay Kurnitz

Jay Kurnitz, a fifteen-year-old boy, is Eddie's oldest boy. Jay is forced to live with his Grandma Kurnitz for ten months while his father works off a debt to a loan shark. Jay prefers to go by "Jay," but his grandma calls him "Yakob," so he reluctantly accepts this name. Although both Jay and Arty work in their grandma's store, Jay seems to get harassed more by his grandma. When any pretzels or other items are missing from the store—even if Grandma Kurnitz herself took them—Jay is forced to pay for the missing items. It is Jay's idea to look for their grandma's stashed fortune, which Jay hopes to send to their father, Eddie, so that Eddie does not have to work himself into the ground anymore. Jay gets another moneymaking idea, namely going with his uncle Louie into the mob business. However, when he approaches Louie about this idea, Louie is not receptive. In fact, when Louie thinks the boys have been snooping around his mysterious black satchel, he tries to force a frightened Arty to open up the bag, but Jay sticks up for his brother. Bella confides in Jay and Arty about her marriage plans when she cannot find anybody else to talk to. When Aunt Bella gets nervous during the family dinner and cannot figure out how to break the news of her impending marriage, Jay helps her out by prompting her with questions.

Louie Kurnitz

Louie Kurnitz is the son of Grandma Kurnitz and the uncle of Jay and Arty Kurnitz. Louie is the toughest of Grandma Kurnitz's children and has adopted a career as a henchman for the mob. His whole character, including his dialogue, style of dress, and actions are defined by this role. Louie operates on emotional extremes. He can be very ferocious, as when he suspects that Jay and Arty have been snooping in his mysterious black bag. On these occasions, he explodes. However, he can also be jovial and fun to be around. Throughout the play, Louie prepares to leave town, since he is wanted by the mob. At the end of the play, the audience finds out that Louie enlisted in the army to escape the mob and is fighting in the Battle of Guadalcanal. Louie has earned a lot of money in his illicit dealings, and he tries to share this money with his mother, but she refuses to take it. Also, although he does not approve of Bella's initial plan to marry an illiterate and open a restaurant, he gives her five thousand dollars to pursue her dream.

Yakob

See Jay Kurnitz

THEMES

Survival

Everybody in the play is trying hard to survive, each in his or her own way. Grandma Kurnitz is the character in the play that influences all of the other characters and forces them to adopt their survival tactics. When Grandma Kurnitz lost two of her children, she closed off the rest of her family emotionally—her way of coping with the loss and surviving. This emotional restriction, as well as Grandma Kurnitz's harsh ways, is intended to toughen up her children so that they will learn how to survive. Her children have adapted to Grandma Kurnitz's tough guidance in various ways. For Eddie, survival equates to hard, backbreaking work. He has done what he feels is the right thing by going into debt to ease his wife's hospital stay. Now, he feels that the only way to make up this debt is to work as hard as possible, sacrificing his own health, if necessary, to make sure that his boys survive. The boys see how hard their father is pushing himself, through his letters. One letter says, *"Dear Boys ... Sorry I haven't kept up my letter writing. The truth is, I was in the hospital a few days. Nothing serious. The doctor said it was just exhaustion."*

For Louie, survival means engaging in lucrative, illegal work that is very dangerous. Louie is constantly on the run because this kind of work has gotten him in trouble with the mob. He is a loner and does not require the approval of others, as Bella and other characters do. Grandma Kurnitz notes Louie's strength at one point but also notes that she does not approve of his methods. "You were always the strongest one. The survivor ... *Live*—at any cost I taught you, yes. But not when someone else has to pay the price." Bella survives by remaining in a daze most of the time. As Jay and Arty note, Bella seems to wander through life, not knowing where she is going. For example, when Bella first arrives at the apartment, she walks right by it, until Jay calls down to her. "I walked right by the house, didn't I? Sometimes I daydream so much, I think I should carry an alarm clock." As the play slowly reveals, Bella's daze is not due entirely to her mental impairment. Living life in a daze helps her to survive living with her mother. However, by the end of the play, she has decided to survive by fighting, instead of by hiding in a daze. She is strong and independent, and the difference shows in her intelligent comments to her mother.

The Importance of Family

Despite the problems caused by the Kurnitz family dysfunctionality, the play still reinforces the idea that everybody needs the love of family to survive. Louie, one of the toughest characters in the play and certainly one of the most independent, still listens to his mother. During the cataclysmic dinner scene when Bella tells them about her boyfriend, Louie refuses to sit because he wants to leave quickly before the mob catches him. He says, "Louie sit! Louie stand! Louie eat! ... You don't scare me anymore, Ma. Maybe everyone else here, but not me. You understand?" Despite this independent speech, Louie sits down a few seconds later when his mother asks him to. He still loves his mother, even if the love she gave him was a tough love. Earlier in the play, when Louie first arrives, he remarks on the importance of family to Jay and Arty: **"There's nothing like family, boys. The one place in the world you're safe, is with your family.... Right?"**

Eddie agrees. When he is forced to leave his boys with Grandma Kurnitz, it is his only choice. However, as he relates in a letter, he is very comfortable with his decision and writes, "Dear Boys.... The one thing that keeps me going is knowing you're with my family. Thank God you're in good hands. Love, Pop." Even the hardest character in the story, Grandma Kurnitz, cannot survive without her family. She acts like she does not need anybody or anything, but Bella knows better. In the beginning, Grandma Kurnitz refuses to let Arty and Jay live with them, but Bella steps in, threatening to leave her mother if she does not let the boys stay. Bella says to her mother, "And if I go, you'll be all alone.... And you're afraid to be alone, Momma.... Nobody else knows that but me."

Acceptance

Despite each character's attempt to survive, each of them also comes to a point in the play where they have to accept something that they do not want to. For Louie, this means accepting the fact that his lifestyle is not healthy and pursuing a normal line of work—in this case, enlisting in the military. Arty and Jay discuss the fate of their uncle when they talk about how Louie finally escaped the two men from the mob: "You think he's safer fighting in the South Pacific?" Jay asks Arty. For Bella, she must accept the fact that the movie usher does not want to get married and have children. Bella says, "He wants to live with his parents because he knows that they love him.... And that's enough for him." However, through Bella's journey in discovering this, she has awakened her mature side and realizes that she can never go back to living in a daze. Bella says, "It's too late to go back for me.... Maybe I'm still a child but now there's just enough woman in me to make me miserable." As Bella remarks to her mother, "We have to learn how to deal with that somehow, you and me." This is the hard fact that Grandma Kurnitz has to accept: Bella has grown up and now wants new things. At the end of the play, Bella casually mentions that she would like to invite a new man over for dinner, and the play ends on Grandma Kurnitz's quiet gesture of reluctant acceptance: "GRANDMA watches BELLA, then nods her head as if to say, 'So it's come to this ...'").

STYLE

Setting

The play depends heavily upon its World War II setting. The whole premise of the play, that Eddie is able to find work that will get him out of his debt to the loan shark, would not work as well if it were set during peacetime. Eddie says, "I hate this war, and God forgive me for saying this, but it's going to save my life.... There are jobs I can get now that I could never get before." In addition, the war setting provides a believable escape for Uncle Louie at the end of the play when he enlists in the military to escape the mob. As Arty remarks, "You know who I miss? Uncle Louie.... I'm glad those two guys never caught him." Says Jay, "No, but maybe the Japs will." The war also provides a violent backdrop for the volatile emotions that are displayed in the play. In a similar way, the sweltering heat of Yonkers, at least in the beginning of the play, underscores the negative feelings that Jay and Arty associate with their grandma Kurnitz. In fact, when Arty and Jay are talking about their aunt Bella, after going into a lengthy dialogue about why they hate coming to their grandma's house, Arty says that Bella is "Nicer than 'hot house' Grandma."

Dialogue

Dialogue plays an important part in any play, since most of the information is communicated to the audience through dialogue. Unlike short stories and novels, which have the ability to let the reader inside the characters' thoughts, most plays must dramatize thoughts and feelings through dialogue and actions. In *Lost in Yonkers*, the style of dialogue is particularly important. Grandma Kurnitz has the most distinctive dialogue. Her German accent, which makes her seem even tougher, separates her from the rest of the characters. Grandma Kurnitz's accent and stilted speech are apparent from her first lines in the play. When she meets Arty, she asks, "Diss iss the little one?" As she launches into her first long speech, her accent gets even thicker: "So now Grandma vill tell you vy she doesn't tink you should live vit her." The fact that Simon makes Grandma Kurnitz's accent German is significant, given the fact that the Germans were one of America's strongest enemies during the war. This helps to make her seem even more ruthless. Grandma Kurnitz's style of speech is not the only distinctive dialogue in the play. Uncle Louie, the mob henchman, speaks in a tough, fast style that reflects his gangster status and knowledge of street life. When he is discussing Eddie's debt problem with the loan sharks, Louie says, "You think I don't know what's going on? The sharks are puttin' the bite on him, right? He shoulda come to me. There's lotsa ways of borrowin' money. Your pop don't unnerstand that."