

a filmed story of how 20 million rats survive under the city— But first this message from Ultra-Brite toothpaste. (*The News Logo fades as the curtain rises.*)

## ACT TWO

## SCENE 2

*Two weeks later. Mid-afternoon.*

*At rise there are three women all in their late fifties and dressed quite well. Two are on a sofa, one sits in armchair. These are MEL'S sisters, PAULINE, PEARL and JESSIE. PAULINE is doing needlepoint. . . . Standing is MEL'S older brother, HARRY. He wears an expensive business suit. He is looking out the window. A pot of coffee and cups are in front of the women on table . . . At rise, they sit there silently.*

JESSIE. He was always nervous.

PEARL. Always.

JESSIE. As far back as I can remember, he was nervous. Never sat still for a minute, always jumping up and down. Am I lying, Pearl?

PEARL. We're his own sisters, who should know better? Up and down, up and down . . . You want some coffee, Harry? Take some coffee.

HARRY. I don't drink coffee.

JESSIE. He always used to fidget. Talked a mile a minute . . . He even chewed fast . . . remember how fast he used to chew?

PEARL. Wasn't I there? Didn't I see him chew? I remember . . . Harry, why don't you take some coffee?

HARRY. When did you ever see me drink coffee? You're my sister fifty-three years, you never saw me drink coffee. Why would I drink coffee now?

PEARL. What do I see you, two times a year? I thought maybe you took up coffee.

PAULINE. He wasn't nervous, he was high strung. Melvin was high strung.

PEARL. I call it nervous. As a baby he was nervous, as a boy he was nervous, in the Army he was nervous. How long did he last in the Army, anyway?

JESSIE. Two weeks.

PEARL. There you are. He was nervous.

PAULINE. Where do you think nerves come from? From being high strung.

PEARL. Then why weren't any of us high strung? We all had the same parents. He was nervous, he was fidgety, he chewed fast . . . I never saw him swallow.

JESSIE. No one could talk to him. Poppa could never talk to him, I remember.

PAULINE. How could Poppa talk to him? Mel was three years old when Poppa died.

PEARL. If he wasn't so nervous, Poppa could have talked to him.

HARRY. I never drank coffee in my life. It's poison. Goes right through the system. (*Looks towards bedroom.*) Who's she on the phone with in there anyway?

PEARL. He had the same thing in high school. A nervous breakdown. Remember when he had the nervous breakdown in high school?

HARRY. (*Turns to her.*) Who you talking about?

PEARL. Mel! He had a nervous breakdown in high school. You don't remember?

HARRY. What are you talking about? He didn't have a nervous breakdown, he had a broken arm. He fell in the gym and broke his arm.

PEARL. I'm not talking about that time.

HARRY. And once on his bicycle he broke his tooth.

PEARL. I'm not talking about that time.

HARRY. Then when are you talking about?

PEARL. I'm talking about the time he had a nervous breakdown in high school. I remember it like it was yesterday, don't tell me. Pauline, tell him.

PAULINE. Mel never had a nervous breakdown.

PEARL. Isn't that funny, I thought he had a nervous breakdown. Maybe I'm thinking of somebody else.

HARRY. You can't even remember that I don't drink coffee.

PAULINE. He must have had some terrible experiences in the army.

HARRY. In two weeks? He wasn't there long enough to get a uniform. None of you know what you're talking about. There was never anything wrong with Mel. Never. His trouble was you babyed him too much. All of you.

JESSIE. Why shouldn't we baby him? He was the baby, wasn't he?

HARRY. You babyed him, that's his trouble. He never had the responsibilities as a child like I did. That's why he can't handle problems. That's why he flares up. He's a child, an infant.

PEARL. What if I put some milk in the coffee?

HARRY. I DON'T WANT ANY COFFEE!!

JESSIE. He doesn't want any coffee, leave him alone.

PAULINE. Correct me if I'm wrong, but when Mel was a tiny baby, didn't you think his head was too large for his body?

PEARL. Mel? Mel had a beautiful head.

PAULINE. I didn't say his head wasn't beautiful. I said it was too large for his body. It always kept falling over to one side. (*She demonstrates.*)

PEARL. *All babies heads fall to one side. (She demonstrates.)*

PAULINE. I know that, but he had trouble getting his up again. (*She demonstrates.*)

HARRY. . . . I was never babyed. Poppa wouldn't allow it . . . I was never kissed from the time I was seven years old . . .

JESSIE. Certainly you were kissed.

HARRY. Never kissed . . . I didn't need kissing. The whole world kissed Mel, look where he is today. Who's she talking to in there all this time?

PEARL. . . . Remember the summer he ran away?

PAULINE. He didn't run away for the whole summer. He ran away for one night.

PEARL. Who said he ran away for the whole summer?

PAULINE. Who said it? You said it. You just said, "Remember the summer he ran away?"

PEARL. So? He ran away for *one night one* summer.

PAULINE. But you should say it that way. Say, "Remember the summer he ran away for one night?" . . . Don't make it sound like he ran away for a whole summer. That crazy he never was.

PEARL. Did I say Mel was crazy? Who heard me mention the word crazy? Jessie, did you hear "crazy" from me?

JESSIE. I heard "crazy" but I wasn't looking where it came.

PEARL. (*To PAULINE.*) If that's what you believe, *you're* the one that's crazy.

PAULINE. Alright, if it makes you happy, I'm crazy. Let me be the crazy one.

PEARL. Fine. Then it's settled. You're the crazy one.

HARRY. Listen, I've got to get back to the office, Jessie's going back to Lakewood tonight, let's try to settle things now. What are we going to do?

PAULINE. About what?

HARRY. (*Looks at her as though she's deranged.*) About *what?* About the Suez Canal. What do you mean, about what? What are we here for? What did Jessie come all the way from Lakewood for? What are we doing in that woman's house— (*Points to bedroom.*) —where none of us have been invited for nine years? Our brother. Our sick brother who's had a nervous breakdown, for God's sakes.

JESSIE. (*Sniffles, wipes eyes with a handkerchief.*) Every time I hear it . . .

HARRY. What are you crying *now* for? You didn't just hear. You've known for a week.

JESSIE. You think I haven't been crying the whole week? He's my brother, it hurts me.

HARRY. It hurts all of us. That's why we're here. To try to do something.

PAULINE. Harry, let her cry if she wants. She came all the way from Lakewood . . . Go on Harry.

HARRY. Fact number one, Mel has had a nervous breakdown. Fact number two, besides a nervous breakdown, Mel doesn't have a job. The man is totally unemployed.

JESSIE. (*Sniffles again.*) You think that doesn't hurt me too?

PAULINE. Jessie, let him finish, you can cry on the way home.

HARRY. Fact . . .

PAULINE. Go on with the facts, Harry.

HARRY. Fact number three, besides a nervous breakdown and not having a job, the man is practically penniless . . . I don't want to pass any comments on how a man and a woman mishandled their money for twenty-seven years, it's none of my business how a man squandered a life's savings on bad investments for which he never asked my advice once, the kind of advice which has given me solvency, security and a beautiful summer place in the country, thank God, *I'll* never have a nervous breakdown . . . none of that is my business. My business is what are we going to do for Mel? How much are we going to give? Somebody make a suggestion. (*The silence is deafening. No one speaks. No one looks at each other. There is a lot of coffee drinking, but no offers of how much they're going to give . . . After an hour of silence, HARRY speaks again.*) . . . Well?

PEARL. You're a businessman, Harry. You make a suggestion. You tell us how much we should all give.

HARRY. (*Thinks a moment.*) . . . Let me have some coffee. (*PEARL pours him a cup of coffee.*) So let's face the facts . . . The man needs help. Who else can he turn to but us. This is my suggestion . . . We make Mel a loan. We all chip in X number of dollars a week, and then when he gets back on his feet, when he gets

straightened out, gets a job again, then he can pay us all back. That's my suggestion. What do you all think? *(There is a moment's silence. PAULINE whispers to PEARL. PEARL nods.)*

PEARL. Pauline has a question.

HARRY. What's the question?

PAULINE. How much is X number of dollars?

HARRY. X is X. We have to figure out what X is. We'll talk and we'll decide.

PAULINE. I mean is it a Big X or a little x?

HARRY. It's not even an X. It's a blank until we fill X in with a figure.

PAULINE. I'm not complaining. We have to do the right thing. But when you say it like that, X number of dollars, it sounds like a lot of money . . . I have limited capital, you know.

JESSIE. Everybody has limited capital. Nobody has *un-*limited capital. Pearl, do you have unlimited capital?

PEARL. I wish I did. I'd give Mel X number of dollars in a minute.

PAULINE. All I'm asking is, how much is X. I can't figure with letters, I have to know numbers.

JESSIE. Harry, don't say X anymore. We're not businesswomen, we don't know about X. Say a number that we can understand.

HARRY. . . . I can't say a number until I figure out A, how much does Mel need a week and B, how much are we willing to give. I can't even guess what X is until we figure out how much A and B comes to.

PEARL. Alright, suppose we figure out what A is and what B is. And if we know that, then we'll figure what X is, right?

HARRY. Right.

PEARL. And now suppose everyone here agrees except one person. She thinks it's too much. She doesn't want to give X. She wants to give M or W, whatever. What do we do then?

HARRY. Forget X. Forget I ever said X . . . *(He rubs*

*head, drinks more coffee.*) . . . Let's figure what Mel needs to get over his nervous breakdown . . . His biggest expense is the doctor, right? Edna says he's the best and he has to go five times a week.

PAULINE. Five times a week to the best doctor? I'm beginning to see what X is going to come to.

JESSIE. Maybe it's not even a nervous breakdown. Doctors can be wrong, too. Remember your pains last year, Pearl?

PEARL. It's true. They took out all my top teeth, then found out it was kidney stones.

HARRY. . . . I can't believe what I'm listening to . . . You're a hundred and sixty years old between the three of you and not one of you makes any sense . . . If you'll all be quiet for a minute, I'll settle this thing.

PEARL. Alright, we're quiet. Settle it, Harry.

HARRY. The most important thing is that Mel gets well, agreed?

ALL THREE. Agreed!

HARRY. And that the only way he's going to get well is to see a doctor. Agreed?

ALL THREE. Agreed.

HARRY. And it is our obligation, as his only living relatives, not counting his wife, no disrespect intended, to bear the financial responsibility of that burden. Agreed?

ALL THREE. Agreed.

HARRY. And we'll all see this thing through to the end whether it takes a week or a month or a year or even five years. Agreed? (*There is stony silence.*) . . . Okay. Our first disagreement.

PAULINE. No one's disagreeing. We're all in agreement. Except when you mention things like five years. I don't see any sense in curing Mel and ending up in the poor-house. If God forbid that happened, would he be in any position to help us? He's not too able to begin with.

JESSIE. So what should we do, Harry? You know how to figure these things. What should we do?