



TANSY, AXEL & WILLUM

# THE NERD

## ACT I

*As the lights come up, we find ourselves in a large, friendly room, early evening. A large window and doorway afford us a view of a wooden porch/balcony, and of autumn trees — oaks and maples — beyond. Treetops, actually, since we are on the second floor. The feeling is one of adventurous rusticity, rather as if we were in a treetop ourselves while still possessing all the comforts. Crusoe, Crichton, or the Family Robinson would, we feel, have approved. We notice hand-fashioned bookshelves, and framed watercolors of buildings — some of them commissioned architect's renderings, others more fanciful — all inspired by past styles, and all quite good. There is also a fireplace, a sofa, an easy-chair and a coffee-table. On an end-table, Stage Center, is the telephone and an answering machine — a particularly gifted one, with remote and intercom capabilities. The room, we shall see, does service as dining room, workroom, saloon and club for the house's three inhabitants, though strictly speaking it is the living room of only one — our protagonist, Willum. After a moment, we hear the clatter of feet on the wooden stair outside. They belong to Willum, and we know by their heavy crescendo that he is grateful to return to his sanctuary. Willum enters tiredly, briefcase in hand, and switches on the lights.*

TANSY & AXEL. (*Leaping from behind the furniture.*) SURPRISE!

WILLUM. (*Not displeased to see them.*) Oh, hi.

AXEL. "Oh, hi." Terrific. (*To Tansy.*) Half an hour down there, I'll never be able to straighten this leg again, and for what? "Oh, hi."

TANSY. (*To Willum.*) All right, we didn't surprise you at all, right?

WILLUM. (*Affably.*) Well, you know, when a fella gets to be my age —

TANSY. Oh, right — thirty-four, now. There's no fooling you.

WILLUM. That's right.

AXEL. Jaded old bastard.

TANSY. Sit yourself down, what am I thinking of? Sit, I'll get a blanket for your legs.

AXEL. (*Proffering his gift—a bottle in a plain brown bag.*) Here.

WILLUM. Now, I said no presents.

AXEL. (*Starting to take it back.*) Well, if you insist—.

WILLUM. Gimme it! (*Admiringly, as he gingerly removes the brown paper.*) Where'd you get this *wrapping paper*? (*Decisively.*) This gets saved. (*Sees bottle.*) Ohhhhh? Axel—a bottle of whiskey—practically full.

AXEL. It's completely full! (*He can't help glancing at the bottle, however.*) You son of a bitch. "Practically full" . . .

WILLUM. (*Taking the bottle to the bar, he starts to sort through his mail.*) So why'd you come up so early? I gotta shower, and Waldgrave's coming over—.

AXEL. I've got an assignment tonight. Couldn't get out of it.

WILLUM. What's opening tonight?

AXEL. (*Consulting his notebook.*) At Theatre Now, the world premiere of *Drums Along the Wabash*.

WILLUM. Catchy title.

AXEL. *I'm* looking forward to it.

WILLUM. I'll watch for your review.

AXEL. You want to read it now?

TANSY. Here's your birthday card. (*She hands him an envelope and disappears into the kitchen, talking.*) We thought you'd be tired, we came up to get things started—you know, straighten up a little, make the salad—.

AXEL. Inflate all the whoopee cushions—.

WILLUM. All the niceties, right.

AXEL. That's right. (*Into the answering machine mike.*) Talking now to Will Cubbert, Terre Haute, Indiana's most promising young middle-aged architect; sir, how about telling our radio family your favorite sexual position?

WILLUM. (*Soberly, after a moment's contemplation.*) Third from the top, I guess.

AXEL. Uh-hunh.

TANSY. (*Entering with another large bowl.*) Did you read your card?

WILLUM. (*Referring to bowl.*) What's this?

TANSY. Three-bean salad.

WILLUM. Well, Tansy—?

TANSY. I thought we'd eat in here by the fire, and then if it gets crowded we can spill out onto the porch. (*She returns to the kitchen.*)

WILLUM. (*To Axel.*) Did you do any of this?

AXEL. Me prepare food? Right, babe. You eat my food, you'll spill out onto the porch. Spill out onto the carpet.

WILLUM. (*Opening Tansy's envelope and reading the contents.*)

"Happy Birthday, 8-year-old"! Pretty cruel, Tansy!

TANSY. (*Offstage.*) Keep reading!

WILLUM. (*Reading a second card from the same envelope.*) "Now that you are ten"! All right, I get it. "Hi, Mister Six-year-old!" (*He quickly looks through the others.*) "Two", "Five"—"Three". Okay.

TANSY. (*Entering with an enormous tray of macaroni salad, which she places on the coffee table.*) I couldn't find one that said "thirty-four", so I got six that added up.

WILLUM. (*Almost simultaneously.*) —that added up. Sure. (*Studying cards.*) God! I'm six little kids. (*He discovers a folded piece of stationery, and begins reading it to himself.*)

AXEL. (*Seeing salad.*) Christ, Tansy, you think you made enough macaroni salad?

TANSY. (*The tough cookie.*) Hey—button it, meathead.

AXEL. Now I know why there's a nationwide macaroni shortage. Terrible thing. I passed two little Brownie Scouts outside, crying their eyes out because they didn't have anything to make their necklaces out of.

WILLUM. (*Still looking at note.*) Aw, Tansy. (*Rereads it.*) Tansy, this really is nice.

TANSY. (*A little too busy and cheerful.*) Isn't that a nice little poem? I just came across that, and it made me think of you.

WILLUM. Oh, me. C'm'ere. (*They hug.*) Thank you, sweetie.

TANSY. (*Quietly.*) Perfectly all right.

WILLUM. (*Still hugging, he sighs.*) Oh. . . . Hell. (*Another moment, then he hastens to the bedroom, pulling off his tie.*)

AXEL. (*Brightly.*) Well! I guess you cheered him up!

TANSY. (*Watching after Willum, concerned.*) All right, I'm doing my best, okay?

AXEL. (*Referring to the note.*) So what have we here?

TANSY. Never mind.

AXEL. One more little endearment to make it that much

tougher on him when you're gone?

TANSY. That wasn't my intention.

AXEL. Come on. You know you're not doing the guy any favors with that kind of stuff. I'm gonna hate watching a perfectly good landlord walking around with his guts scrambled because some little brown-eyed patootie decided to toss him an extra couple of macaroons before she hit the road.

TANSY. Axel—

AXEL. The guy used to be a pretty good laugher, I don't know if you remember.

TANSY. It's his birthday.

AXEL. So give him a tie. (*Pause. She turns away.*) Or else give him what he really wants. (*Tansy shakes her head.*) The guy's thirty-four, for God's sake—he needs somebody to look after him in his dotage.

TANSY. Not me.

AXEL. Come on. Does Washington really need one more weather girl?

TANSY. Ax—I am leaving here one week from tomorrow, and nothing, but *nothing*—

AXEL. Hey. Hey.

TANSY. Look—oh, I know how I must look to you—like a parody of the New Woman, casting off her chains to go be the Washington Weather Girl—

AXEL. I didn't say that. You put it awfully well, but I didn't say that—

TANSY. And all right, so maybe it's not the loftiest goal ever pursued by womankind, or anything, but to me it happens to be that damn thing—that one chance that comes along in your life that you just gotta grab, 'cause if you don't, then before you know it, your eyes glaze over—and whatever or whoever you gave it up for, you start to resent. And I'm not gonna do that to Willum.

AXEL. Some favor you're doing him. "Willum—there's something bigger than us—a wonderful something called—meteorology."

TANSY. Willum will be all right.

AXEL. Think so?

TANSY. He's told me so.

AXEL. What does he know? Does he know you sneak up here