

Seize the Day Summary

Writer: Saul Bellow | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Summary

"Seize the Day" is a novella by Saul Bellow (1915–2005). It tells the story of a middle-aged man, Tommy Wilhelm. He is facing financial troubles, family problems, and personal failure. The whole story happens within one single day in New York City. It shows a man's struggle with despair and loneliness. As Tommy loses everything, he finally experiences an emotional breakdown that leads him to face the truth of life. The novella explores human suffering, failure, and the search for meaning in a modern, cruel world.

Morning: Tommy's Problems Start: The story begins in New York City, inside the Hotel Gloriana. Tommy Wilhelm, a forty-four-year-old man, rides down the elevator. He feels very worried and tired. His life is full of problems. He has no job, no peace, and no happiness. Tommy once had big dreams, but now he feels like a failure. Years ago, he left college to become a movie actor. A man named Maurice Venice promised him success. But Tommy failed in the screen test and lost his chance. After that, he returned home feeling defeated and ashamed. Later, he worked as a salesman at the Rojax Corporation, but he lost that job too.

Tommy's wife, Margaret, lives apart from him. She will not give him a divorce, but still demands money. She does not care about his pain. His two sons also live away from him. Tommy feels lonely and unwanted. His heart is full of regret. In the same hotel lives his father, Dr. Adler. He is a retired doctor, a rich and respected person. He lives comfortably and enjoys his life. Tommy loves his father but also feels jealous and hurt. Dr. Adler never shows care or affection for his son. Tommy plans to meet him that morning for breakfast. He wants to ask for money and advice. But he already fears that his father will reject him again. His mind is full of fear, sadness, and confusion.

Breakfast: Rejection from His Father: Tommy meets his father, Dr. Adler, in the hotel dining room. Mr. Perls, an old salesman, is also there. Tommy feels uneasy because he wants to talk alone with his father. After Mr. Perls leaves, Tommy begins to speak from his heart. He tells his father that he feels lost and helpless. Dr. Adler listens but does not care. He speaks calmly but without emotion. He says that Tommy should not depend on others. He tells him to stand on his own feet. He also blames him for leaving his wife and losing his job. His words are full of logic but no love.

Tommy tries to explain his pain. He says he feels “suffocated” and cannot bear life anymore. He asks for sympathy and a little help. But his father refuses to give him money or comfort. Dr. Adler says he will not carry his grown son like a child. Tommy feels deeply hurt. His father’s coldness breaks his heart. He realizes that his father does not understand him. The breakfast ends in silence and sadness. Tommy leaves the table feeling lonely, helpless, and ashamed. The rejection from his father makes his pain even greater. It becomes the start of his emotional downfall.

Betrayal by Dr. Tamkin: After breakfast, Tommy meets Dr. Tamkin, a strange man who also lives in the Hotel Gloriana. Tamkin says that he is a doctor, poet, and psychologist. He also says he knows how to make money in the stock market. Tommy is not sure if he should trust him, but he has no one else to depend on. Tamkin talks in a friendly and wise way. He tells Tommy that life is short and he should “Seize the Day,” which means to live fully in the present.

Tamkin says there are two kinds of souls in people — the true soul and the pretender soul. He says Tommy’s true soul must wake up. His words make Tommy hopeful, even though he is still afraid. Tamkin convinces him to invest his last \$700 in the commodities market. He says that if they buy lard futures, they will make a lot of profit. Tommy believes him because he wants to change his life. He dreams that this investment will bring him success and peace. Tamkin gives him more advice and promises that he will take care of everything. Tommy finally agrees and gives him the money. But deep inside, he still feels worried and confused.

The Market Crash: Tommy Loses Everything: Later that day, Tommy and Tamkin go to the commodities exchange. The room is noisy and full of shouting traders. Tommy feels lost in the crowd. At first, he believes that Tamkin knows what he is doing. But soon, the prices of lard begin to fall. Tommy becomes nervous and asks Tamkin what is happening. Tamkin tells him to stay calm and wait. The price continues to drop. Tommy’s fear grows. He watches helplessly as all his money disappears. His dream of success turns into a nightmare. In a few minutes, he loses everything he has. When he looks for Tamkin, he finds that the man has disappeared. Tommy realizes that Tamkin has cheated him. He feels shocked, helpless, and betrayed. Now, he has no money, no job, and no friends. His last hope is gone.

Final Rejections: No Help from His Father and Wife: After losing everything, Tommy rushes to find his father. He hopes that Dr. Adler will finally understand him and give him support. But his father again rejects him coldly. He says that Tommy must take responsibility for his own life. Dr. Adler tells him not to disturb him anymore. His father’s words hurt more than ever. Tommy also gets a phone call from his wife, Margaret. At first, he thinks she is

calling to show care, but she only asks about a post-dated check. She talks about money and ignores his feelings. When Tommy tries to explain his problems, she cuts the call. Tommy now feels completely alone. He has lost his money to Tamkin, his father has no sympathy, and his wife only wants money. His heart is heavy with pain. He walks out of the hotel in despair. He feels like a man who has lost everything in life: hope, love, and dignity.

The Emotional Breakdown: Tommy walks through the streets of New York City. He feels dizzy, tired, and hopeless. His mind is full of fear and sadness. He has no money, no friends, and no one to care for him. His heart feels empty, and his body feels weak. The world around him looks cold and strange. He walks aimlessly, thinking of his life and his failures. As he moves with the crowd, Tommy suddenly notices a funeral procession. Without knowing why, he follows the people into a funeral chapel. Inside, he sees the body of a dead man lying quietly in a coffin. The people around him are silent and serious. Tommy slowly walks forward and stands beside the coffin. He looks at the dead man's face and begins to cry.

At first, his tears are quiet, but soon he cannot control himself. He cries loudly and deeply. His tears come from all his pain, loss, and disappointment. He cries for his broken marriage, for his lost money, and for his wasted life. He cries for himself and for every person who suffers in the world. The people in the chapel look at him with surprise, but Tommy does not care. His crying becomes a moment of release. After holding his pain for so long, he finally lets it out. It is the most powerful and emotional moment of the story. Thus, the novel ends.