

## SCENE 2

*The interior of a train compartment. NICK and NORA CHARLES are sitting across from each other. NORA is eating a sandwich. NICK is hidden behind a newspaper, pretending to read.*

NORA

Sandwich, Nicky?

*(He ignores her)*

Bellini?

*(offers him a bottle)*

Tarkun?

*(grabs his paper away)*

Oh, for goodness sake, Nicky. Stop sulking.

NICK

*(grabs paper back)*

I am not sulking! I just don't happen to like mysterious brown meat and onions. It doesn't become you, either.

*NORA takes a drink, gargles a bit, then comes over and kisses him.*

NORA

Is this better?

NICK

*(kisses her back for a moment)*

Hmmm... reminds me that I miss our dog!

NORA

Oh, Nicky! You know we couldn't possibly bring Asta. He would have to be quarantined for months.

NICK

So instead, I'm quarantined. I really don't see why we needed to make this ridiculous journey. The plane was insufferable. Watered down drinks and ugly stewardesses, and now... three days on this Godforsaken train... sleeping in those bunks... I feel like the china plates we only use when your mother visits.

NORA

We needed to get far away, Nicky. You almost got killed back there.

NICK

I was merely pushing the envelope, my dear Mrs. Charles.

NORA

You were lucky. If I hadn't hit that man on the head with my tray of canapés, you might have been pushing up daisies! Honestly, Nicky, the people you invite for dinner!

NICK

He's been sent up the river for 20 years, darling. Out of sight, out of mind. I don't know why we needed to be exiled to Siberia as well...

NORA

I haven't seen my cousin Simon since we were children.

NICK

If he's like the rest of your family, that might be fortuitous.

NORA

Well, I remember him as being pleasant. Humble. I always say, "Never judge a book by its mother." Simon never had the disadvantage of being spoiled by wealth... like some people. I wish we didn't have to travel all the way to Russia for a little R and R, but at least we won't risk running into any of your nefarious adversaries.

NICK

I can't help it if I am sought after, my dear. Lucky for you, you reeled me in.

NORA

And I don't intend to cut you loose again.

*(kisses him)*

A couple of weeks in the middle of nowhere will be good for us. No doorbells ringing in the middle of the night. No mysterious women from your past popping up, desperate for help. Just you and me, quiet moonlit nights, nothing more exciting than a game of Scrabble.

NICK

Last time you hit me with your shoe when I got 300 points for "QUETZALS." You realize, Russian Scrabble has 104 alphabet tiles. We won't even know what we are spelling. But I do like the idea of you in the moonlight, Mrs. Charles.

NORA

Simon has been making his own brand of cherry vodka for years. I bet if you behave yourself, he'll let you sample some.

NICK

Why didn't you say that in the first place, darling?

*(takes out his flask)*

To you, my dark-haired enchantress, who always makes the very best decisions. Onward Ho!

*Train whistle sounds as the lights slowly fade.*

**BLACKOUT**

## SCENE 3

*Early morning in Cherry Manor. Everything is bright and sunny in contrast to last night. The picture window now shows the barren cherry orchard and the edge of a swimming pool that has not been in use for some time.*

*At the opening, PETER is standing by the table, which has a samovar filled with hot coffee. Fixings, cups, plates, and saucers are on the table as is an assortment of baked goods. SIMON is arranging the table.*

PETER  
*(eating)*

The bread's a little stale, Simon.

SIMON

Well, with everything going on, I didn't exactly have time to bake, now did I? Put some jam on it, and for God's sake, don't say anything to Madame Liubov.

PETER

Maybe you can take a drive into town later. I need a new typewriter ribbon. And it's pretty chilly in the guesthouse, perhaps I should move into the main house.

SIMON

Oh, sure. You and everyone else. Anything else I can do for you? Change the scenery? Wallpaper the outhouse? Fill the tub with champagne?

*MME. LIUBOV enters, grandly clutching her head.*

MME. LIUBOV

No champagne! Coffee. Just coffee. My head is splitting.

SIMON

Right away, Madame Liubov.

*(Pours coffee, lots of sugar)*

PETER

Madame Liubov.

*(goes to kiss her hand)*

MME. LIUBOV  
Peter. You look...

PETER  
Older?  
*(laughs)*

MME. LIUBOV  
No. I was going to say... different... You cleaned yourself up a bit.

PETER  
I've been studying in Paris. Spinozist Elements in Jean Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness."

*Mme. Liubov gets her coffee from SIMON.*

MME. LIUBOV  
*(Sarcastically)*  
Riveting.

*ANYA enters.*

ANYA  
Do I smell coffee?  
*(Pause. Coldly)*  
Hello, Peter.

PETER  
Anya!  
*(Runs to her)*  
You look beautiful. You have blossomed like a flower.

ANYA  
You never leave your room. How would you even know what a flower looks like?

PETER  
I deserve that. I've been a monster. You deserved better. I felt my writing was the only weapon I had against the scourge of society. But now...

ANYA  
You're eating your words?

PETER  
The last time we saw each other I was filled with intolerable despair. There was nothing to live by and nothing to live for. I felt like I was going to vanish. My thoughts, my very soul, dust scattered to the winds.

ANYA

Forever the poet. But even Alexander Pushkin found time for love. Actions speak louder than words, Peter. Your only action was silence. How long was I supposed to wait? What was I even waiting for?

PETER

Pushkin was a hack! He was the bourgeois! What did he know about human suffering? I suffered for my art.

SIMON

And now it's our turn.

PETER

Things will be different from here on in. Anya, you will see. Now I see doors where I used to see walls.

ANYA

Some doors might be slammed in your face and on your foot! Repeatedly.

PETER

Closed, but hopefully not locked. I remember a time when you felt differently...

*He goes to kiss her. She resists for a second but yields to him. Then pulls away. She is conflicted. The front doorbell rings.*

MME. LIUBOV

It's too early in the day for this nonsense. Especially on an empty stomach. Anya, Come eat your breakfast. Simon, the door!

*SIMON opens the front door. NICK and NORA CHARLES enter with suitcases.*

NICK

Good heavens. I thought we'd never get here alive.

PETER

*(pouring a quick drink from the bar)*

Have a drink.

NICK

I thought you'd never ask.

NORA  
Simon, darling!  
*(hugs him)*

Oh, It's been so long.

SIMON  
I would never have recognized you.

NICK  
Yes. The plastic surgeon did a magnificent job. Last week she looked like Eleanor Roosevelt.

NORA  
Oh Nicky! Don't be ridiculous. Simon, my husband. Mr. Nick Charles.

PETER  
*THE* Nick Charles? The detective?

NICK  
The one and only.

PETER  
Peter Trovimov. I read about your case in Paris. It made page 6.

NICK  
Imagine that darling... Did you hear?

NORA  
I heard. But he's not doing any more detecting, are you, dear?

NICK  
No, that avenue of pleasure has been shut down. Presently, my main pursuit is taking care of my wife's money.

NORA  
And he is rather expert in that field.

MME. LIUBOV  
This bread is stale... FIRS!!!!  
*(silence)*

ANYA  
Mama! Firs has been gone for some time now. Don't you remember?  
*(turns to NORA apologetically)*  
Firs was our servant.

SIMON

Firs is still with us, Madame.

PETER

I thought I smelled something.

SIMON

No. He's literally still with us. I buried him in the back yard.

ANYA

Oh, my God! Poor Firs...

SIMON

Poor *me!* I was the one who found him. Sitting in that chair. Staring at the cherry orchard. He had been there for days. His arm literally adhered to the chair. When I lifted him up, his skin came off like a glove. You'll notice I had it reupholstered. Worse than that, the ground was frozen solid. I had to wait until spring for the ground to thaw. He spent the winter in the tool shed.

NORA

How awful. You couldn't call someone?

SIMON

Firs spent his life here. He had no family. He'd been forgotten by everyone. I figured he wouldn't want to be anywhere else. So he's there. I planted one cherry tree right by the pool. It just began to flower last spring... Good fertilizer.

MME. LIUBOV

Pool? There's a pool?

*(Runs to the window)*

Oh, how could you?

SIMON

I had to do something to appease the summer tenants. Once they put the highway in, it was impossible to get to the river.

MME. LIUBOV

This is a pool? It looks like a swamp.

SIMON

It hasn't been in use since the last tenants left. That was two years ago. I should have drained it, but toads began breeding there and I liked the sound.

MME. LIUBOV

Oh, I can't bear it. I am not going to look at that foul bog for another minute. After what happened to my boy...

ANYA

*(to NICK)*

My brother Grisha drowned in the river, many years ago. I don't think Mama's ever gotten over it.

NICK

I can't imagine anyone would. Come, have a drink, Madame Liubov.

*(pours her one)*

MME. LIUBOV

I never drink before 4.

NICK

Pity.

*(Downs the drink himself)*

SIMON

I'll cover the pool immediately, Madame. We'll drain it later. Can I get some assistance, gentlemen?

PETER

What about all the toads?

SIMON

We'll leave one corner untied. I am sure they'll find their way out. I spotted a Siberian salamander last week. Fascinating creatures. Their bodies are filled with something resembling anti-freeze to combat the cold. Some have been frozen for years and just walk off once they thaw.

PETER

Madame Liubov does not appear to have thawed much, despite all the coffee she drinks. Ice water in her veins. Coming, Mr. Charles?

NICK

I have an aversion to reptiles and assorted slimy things.

NORA

That's odd considering the company you have been keeping lately. I'll help.

NICK

Coming, dear. I'll just put away this liquor.

*(takes another drink)*

*The men and NORA exit.*

MME. LIUBOV

Finish your breakfast, Anya. What is keeping Varya? Did that phlegmatic Mr. Yepikov make an appearance yet? He certainly has some explaining to do.

ANYA

I don't think she slept well last night Mama. I heard her pacing about. I'm sure she's anxious about seeing Mr. Yepikov. You don't suppose she still carries a torch, do you?

MME. LIUBOV

Only to set him on fire! He's a swine. And your Peter isn't much better. Still a ubiquitous loafer.

ANYA

There seems to be something different about him. He seems transformed somehow.

MME. LIUBOV

Yes, but into what? Ah, here comes the late Varya Liubov now.

*(to VARYA)*

Hurry dear, before the coffee gets cold.

*VARYA enters in a flurry. She has her hair done and looks like she has done herself up well intentionally.*

VARYA

Sorry I'm late, mama. Where is everyone?

MME. LIUBOV

*HE* has not materialized yet. Everyone else is out by the pool.

VARYA

*(grabbing some bread and a cup of coffee)*

The pool?

*(she runs out)*

*ANYA and MME. LIUBOV exchange a knowing glance and then proceed to pour themselves more coffee and eat their breakfast.*