

SCENE 2

Over the sound of the train, in the black, we hear EDDIE's voice.

EDDIE (*Voice-over*) "Dear Jay and Arty . . . I tried phoning you the other night, but I forgot the phone is in the candy store and you probably couldn't hear it . . . Well, I've been through Kentucky, Georgia, Tennessee, and West Virginia . . . Don't complain about Aunt Bella's cooking to me because I haven't eaten anything down here that wasn't fried, smoked, hashed, gritted, or poned . . . or wasn't caught in a swamp, a tree, or coming out of a hole in the ground . . . Right now I'd go into debt again just to eat an onion roll . . ."

(The lights come up and the letter continues to be read by JAY. They are both in bed, one lamp on. It is late at night)

JAY (*He reads*) "Although business is good, I've had one minor setback. I've developed what the doctor calls an irregular heartbeat. He says it's not serious, but doesn't think I should be traveling so much. But I can't afford to stop now." (*He looks at ARTY*) An irregular heartbeat doesn't sound too good . . . God, I wish there was some way we could make some money. Not "kid" money. I mean *real* money.

ARTY What if one night we cut off Grandma's braids and sold it to the army for barbed wire?

JAY I can't believe we're fighting a war to make this a better world for someone like you.

ACT ONE

(The front door opens and BELLA comes in, closing the door quietly. She looks at the boys and puts her finger to her lips to be quiet)

BELLA Is Grandma sleeping? Don't tell me, you'll wake her up . . . Arty! Jay! The most wonderful and exciting thing happened to me tonight. But don't ask me. I can't tell you. You're my good luck charms, both of you.

GRANDMA (*Appearing suddenly out of her room. To BELLA*) You tink I don't hear you coming up the stairs? You tink I don't know it's eleven o'clock? You tink I don't know where you've been?

BELLA Just to the movies, Ma.

GRANDMA Movies, movies, movies. You waste your money and your life in da movies. Und den you walk home by yourself. Do you know what kind of men are on the street at eleven o'clock?

BELLA I didn't see a soul, Ma.

GRANDMA Ya, ya, ya! Look for trouble, you'll find trouble.

BELLA No one bothers me, Ma.

GRANDMA Then you waste money on movie magazines? Fill your head with Hollywood and dreams that don't happen to people like us?

BELLA Sometimes they do.

GRANDMA Never. NEVER!! . . . *(Holding out her hand)*
Give it to me. I don't want trash in this house.

BELLA It's my magazine, Ma. I bought it with my own money.

GRANDMA No! *My* money. I pay for everything here. You don't have anything unless I give you. Give—me—the—magazine!

BELLA Please don't do this to me in front of the boys, Momma.

GRANDMA You bring it home in front of the boys, you'll give me the magazine in front of the boys. *(Holds her hand out)* Give it to me now, Bella. *(Bella looks at the boys, embarrassed, then gives her the magazine. GRANDMA looks at the magazine and nods in disgust)* When I'm dead, you can buy your own magazine.

BELLA No, I won't, Momma. Because you'll find a way to get them anyway.

(She rushes into her room. GRANDMA looks at the boys)

GRANDMA . . . You like to pay my electric bill? *(JAY quickly turns out the light. It is dark, except for the light from GRANDMA's room)* . . . And you try cutting my braids off, you'll get your fingers chopped off.

(She goes in and slams her door.)

The lights go to black and we hear the train again)

In the dark, we hear the voice of EDDIE again.

EDDIE *(Voice-over)* "Dear Boys . . . This'll just have to be a short one. I'm in Houston, Texas, and I just got plumb tuckered out. That's how they talk down here. I had to take a week off and rest. Nothing to worry about. I'll be on the road again real soon and I promise I'll make up the time . . . Love, Pop."

(The lights come up. It is Sunday afternoon, weeks later. ARTY stands on GRANDMA's chair, his hand upraised, and he is jubilant)

ARTY *(Yelling)* Alone at last!! Grandma's out! Aunt Bella's out! We have the house to ourselves. We're free! Ya ya ya ya ya!!!

JAY Will you shut up! She could walk back in any minute. You know what she'd do if she found you jumping on her chair?

ARTY *(With German accent)* Ya! She would chop off my legs . . . And Aunt Bella would cook dem for dinner.

(He jumps on the bed)

JAY *(Looks out the window)* Hey! Arty! There's that car again.

ARTY What car?

JAY The black Studebaker. It's the two guys who came looking for Uncle Louie. They look like killers to me . . . What do you think they want?

ARTY (*Looks out the window*) I don't know. Let's give 'em Grandma. Ya ya ya ya ya!

JAY (*Pulling him away*) Get out of there. (*He peeks again*) They just keep circling and circling. Aren't you afraid of guys like that?

ARTY No. I lived up here for a month. I can take anything.

(*The front door opens and BELLA comes in*)

BELLA Is Momma home?

JAY No. She's still at Aunt Gert's.

BELLA I don't want to cry. I don't want to cry. I don't want to cry.

JAY Is there anything we can do? . . . You can talk to us, Aunt Bella.

BELLA Do you think so? Do you think I can trust you? You're still so young.

JAY You don't have to be old to be trusting.

BELLA And you'd never tell Grandma what I tell you? Because if she ever found out, she'd put me in the Home . . . She would. For the rest of my life.

JAY I don't think she would do that. She just says that to scare you sometimes.

BELLA No. She would do it. Sometimes she'd take me on the trolley, and we'd go by the Home and she'd say, "That's where you'll live if you're not a good girl."

ARTY You said she wouldn't do that because she's afraid to be alone.

BELLA But she's not alone anymore. She's got you two here.

ARTY Oh, no. If you left, we'd go with you to the Home.

JAY Arty, knock it off . . . If you don't want to tell us, Aunt Bella, you don't have to. We're your friends.

BELLA No. I have to tell somebody . . . I wish Eddie was here. Eddie would know what to do.

JAY We're Eddie's sons. That's almost the same thing.

BELLA Yes. That's true . . . Alright . . . Come here. Sit down, both of you. (*She crosses to the sofa bed and sits. They sit on either side of her*) This is our secret now, alright? . . . A sacred secret. Say it, the both of you.

ARTY and JAY and BELLA This is a sacred secret.

BELLA Alright then . . . (*She smiles*) I'm going to get married . . . I'm going to be a wife and I'm going to have lots and lots of children and live in a place of my own . . . Isn't that wonderful news? (*The boys look at each other*) You're the only ones that know this . . . Jay! Arty! I'm going to get married.

(*They are, of course, dumbstruck*)

JAY Gee, that's swell, Aunt Bella.

ARTY Have you met anybody yet?

BELLA What do you mean, have I met anyone? . . . Of course I have . . . I met him ten days ago at the movies. At the Orpheum Theatre . . . I saw him there four times this week.

JAY You both went to the same movie four times?

BELLA I didn't mind. And he has to, because he works there. He's an usher . . . And he looks so wonderful in his uniform.

ARTY He's an usher?

BELLA And his name is Johnny. I always thought I would marry someone named Johnny.

ARTY What a great guess.

BELLA Anyway, we went out later for some coffee . . . And we went for walks in the park . . . and down near the river. And then today, just like in the movies, at exactly two o'clock . . . or two-fifteen . . . or two-thirty . . . he asked me to marry him . . . And I said I would have to think it over, but the answer was yes.

ARTY That was pretty quick thinking it over.

BELLA I know. I didn't want him to change his mind . . . Are you as happy about this as I am?

JAY Oh, sure . . . sure . . . sure . . . How old is he?

BELLA He's thirty . . . Maybe not. Maybe about forty . . . But he's so handsome. And so polite. And quiet. I had to do all of the talking. All he said was, "Would you marry me?"

JAY Was he ever married before?

BELLA Oh, no. I would never marry someone who was married before. I want it to be the first time for both of us.

JAY If he has no children, how come he's not in the army?

BELLA Oh, he wanted to go but they wouldn't take him because of his handicap.

JAY What handicap?

BELLA He has a reading handicap.

JAY You mean he has bad eyes?

BELLA No. He just has trouble learning things. The way I did. He went to a special school when he was a boy. The one near the Home. He was there once, in the Home, for about six months, and he said it was terrible . . . So his parents took him out . . . And now he's much happier.

ARTY Oh, I get it . . . Do you get it, Jay?

JAY I can tell why you're not anxious to tell Grandma . . . I mean, because it's so sudden like.

BELLA And he doesn't want to be an usher forever . . . He wants to open up a restaurant. Because he said the one thing people always have to do is eat. Don't you agree? (*ARTY and JAY nod together*) . . . I would be the cook and he would be the manager. I would love that more than anything in the whole world.

JAY Could he do that? Manage a restaurant? If he couldn't read the menus?

BELLA Well, I would do all that. I would help him . . . The only thing is, his parents are poor and he doesn't make much money and we'd need about five thousand dollars to open a restaurant . . . And I don't know if Momma would give it to me.

JAY Your mother has five thousand dollars?

BELLA Oh, more. Ten or fifteen thousand. I'm not supposed to tell anyone.

JAY Where does she keep it? In the bank?

BELLA No. It's here in the house somewhere. She changes the hiding place every year. No one knows she has it . . . Not Eddie or Gert or Louie. No one . . . So my problem is, I have to get her to say yes to marrying Johnny, and yes to opening the restaurant and moving away, and yes to giving me the five thousand dollars. But I don't think she's going to say yes, do you?

JAY I don't think she's going to let you go to the movies much anymore.

BELLA She won't know if you don't tell her. You won't tell her, will you, Jay?

JAY I swear.

BELLA Arty?

ARTY She and I have very short conversations.

BELLA I have to go inside now and think this out. I'm not good at thinking things out. I'm much better with my hands . . . But you're smart. Both of you. Maybe you'll think it out for me . . . Please do. I'd be grateful to you for the rest of my life. (*She starts to go, then stops*) Oh. I thought of a name for the restaurant, too . . . "La Bella Johnnie."

JAY That's nice.

BELLA Yeah. I just hope he can read it. (*She goes into her bedroom*)

ARTY Wait'll he meets Grandma. He'll be back in the Home in a week.

JAY Fifteen thousand!! Wow! You think she would have loaned some of it to Pop. (*Looking around*) Where would be the safest place to hide it? Where no one would think of looking?

ARTY You're not really thinking of stealing it, are you?

JAY No, but what if we just borrowed it? I would just love to send Pop an envelope with nine thousand dollars in it.

ARTY And who would he think sent it to him? *God???*

JAY He had an uncle in Poland who died. He left the money in his will for Pop.

ARTY You think the Germans would let some Jew in Poland send nine thousand dollars to some Jew in Alabama?

Blackout

SCENE 4

We hear the train . . . then EDDIE's voice . . .

EDDIE (*Voice-over*) “. . . Dear Boys . . . Traveling through the South has been a whole new education for me. Some people are very warm and polite and educated and very well spoken. And then there are some on the train who spit tobacco juice on the windows . . . A lot of people have trouble with my New York accent. I didn't even know I had one till I got here . . . I met a nice Jewish family in Atlanta, but I couldn't understand them either. This woman, Mrs. Schneider, said to me, 'You all come over to the synagogue this Shabuss and you'll meet some mighty fine folks.' I didn't want to hurt her feelings so I said, 'Sho nuff.' And she just looked at me and said, 'Who's Shonuff?' . . . I guess it takes a while to learn the dialect. Love, Pop.”

(The lights come up. It is one week later, about twelve o'clock at night. The room is dark except for the full moon that shines brightly in through the window.)

The boys' bed is open; Neither of them is in it. ARTY, in pajamas, is standing near the door that leads downstairs)

ARTY Jay! Hurry up! What if Grandma wakes up? . . . This is crazy. Why would she hide money in the store?

(Suddenly, we see the flashlight coming from downstairs. ARTY rushes back into bed. JAY comes in with the flashlight)

JAY I looked everywhere. There's no money down there. *(He shivers)* God, I'm freezing. I was looking under the ice cream cartons. *(He gets into bed)* I think I got frostbite.

ARTY Why would she keep money under ice cream? We use those cartons up every week.

JAY Not the boysenberry. Boysenberry sits there for months. Nobody's ever going to look under boysenberry.

ARTY I can't believe we're stealing money from our own grandmother.

(They put out the flashlight and turn to go to sleep . . . A moment passes . . . Then the front door opens. We see a man in a hat enter, closing the door, then slowly, quietly cross toward the window. He carries a small black bag)

JAY Who's that?

(Turning the flashlight on the man)

LOUIE Get that light outa my face and go back to sleep, kid.

JAY There's nothing here to steal, mister. I swear.

LOUIE Is that you, Jay?

JAY Yeah. Who are you?

LOUIE It's Uncle Louie.

JAY Uncle Louie? No kidding? . . . Arty! It's Uncle Louie.

ARTY Uncle Louie? . . . Really? Hi, Uncle Louie.

LOUIE Is that Arty?

ARTY Yeah. It's Arty . . . Hi, Uncle Louie.

LOUIE Wait a second. *(LOUIE turns on the lamp. LOUIE KURNITZ is about thirty-six years old. He wears a double-breasted suit with a banky in the breast pocket, black pointy shoes, a dark blue shirt, and a loud tie. He also wears a fedora hat and carries a small black satchel, not unlike a doctor's bag)* Whaddya know? Look at you! Couple a big guys now, ain't you? . . . You don't come around for a while and you grow up on me . . . Come here. Come on. I want a hug. You heard me. Move it. *(The boys look at each other, not thinking LOUIE was the bugging type. They quickly climb out of bed and go to him. He puts his arms around both their shoulders and pulls them in to him. He looks at JAY)* Picture of your mother. Pretty woman, your mother . . . *(To ARTY)* And you. You look like a little bull terrier. Is that what you are, a bull terrier? *(He musses ARTY's hair)*

ARTY Yeah, I guess so.

LOUIE *(Fakes a punch at JAY's midsection)* Hey, watch it! What are you now, a middleweight or what? Who's been beefin' you up?

JAY Aunt Bella. She's a good cook.

LOUIE (*Taking off his hat*) And a couple a midnight trips down to the ice cream freezer, heh? Diggin' into the boysenberry with your flashlight? . . . That's breakin' and enterin', kid. Two to five years.

JAY You saw me?

LOUIE (*Crosses to GRANDMA's door and listens*) I been down there since Ma closed the store.

JAY Sitting in the dark?

LOUIE Yeah. Waitin' for her to go to sleep. I wasn't in no mood for long conversations.

JAY (*Looks at ARTY, then at LOUIE*) I just took a fingerful, that's all. I love boysenberry.

LOUIE Big mistake, kid. Mom reads fingerprints. She'll nail you in the morning.

JAY Are you serious?

LOUIE Get outa here. What are you? A couple a push-overs? Like your old man . . . What'd he bring up for you, Arty? A thumbful of pistachio?

ARTY No. Nothing. I wasn't hungry.

LOUIE You think your pop and I didn't do that when we were kids? That was the beauty part. Never took nothin' durin' the day. A ton a ice cream, a store full a candy, anything we wanted. Never took nothin' . . . But as soon as Ma let her braids down and turned

out the lights, we were down there lappin' up the cream and meowin' like cats . . . Ain't that the way? It's only fun when there's a chance a gettin' caught. Nothin' sweeter than danger, boys, am I right?

JAY I guess so.

LOUIE Damn right.

ARTY I didn't know Pop was like that.

LOUIE Yeah, well, he was no good at it anyway. Ma knew what was goin' on. She could tell if there was salt missin' from a pretzel . . . But she wouldn't say nothin'. She'd come up from the store with the milk, siddown for breakfast, knowin' that two scoops of everything was missin', and she'd just stare at you . . . right into your eyeballs, pupil to pupil . . . never blinkin' . . . Her eyes looked like two district attorneys . . . and Eddie couldn't take the pressure. He'd always crack. Tears would start rollin' down his cheeks like a wet confession . . . and Whack, he'd get that big German hand right across the head . . . But not me. I'd stare her right back until her eyelids started to weigh ten pounds each . . . And she'd turn away from me, down for the count . . . And you know what? She loved it . . . because I knew how to take care of myself . . . Yeah, me and Ma loved to put on the gloves and go the distance.

(He takes off his jacket and puts it on the back of the chair)

JAY Nobody told us you were coming over tonight.

LOUIE Nobody knew. It was even a surprise for me. I gotta stay here a couple days, maybe a week. They're paintin' my apartment.

ARTY You didn't know they were going to paint your apartment?

LOUIE They just found the right color paint tonight. Hard to find with the war on. *(He takes off his jacket, revealing a holster with a pistol in it)* So, you kids been keepin' your nose outa trouble?

(The boys look at the gun, mesmerized)

JAY Huh?

LOUIE How's Pop? Ma tells me he's in the junk business. Is that right, Arty?

ARTY *(Looking at the gun)* Huh?

LOUIE Sellin' scrap iron or somethin', ain't that it?

BOTH BOYS Huh?

LOUIE Whatsamatter? *(He looks at the gun)* This? *(He smiles)* Hey, don't worry about it. *(He takes it out of its holster)* I'm holdin' it for a friend. This policeman I know went on vacation, he didn't want to lose it. They have to pay for it when they lose it . . . *(He puts it in his pants, under the belt, just over the fly)* Also, the ladies like it. You dance with 'em close, gives 'em a thrill.

(He winks at them)

JAY Is it . . . is it loaded?

LOUIE Gee, I hope not. If it went off, I'd have to become a ballerina. *(He winks at the boys. He bangs the gun and holster on a chair, comes back, and resumes getting undressed)* Does your pop ever send you some loose change once in a while?

JAY Oh, yeah. Whenever he can.

LOUIE Like never, right? You think I don't know what's goin' 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. Sometimes bein' on the up and up just gets you down and down, know what I mean, Jay?

JAY Yeah . . . I never knew a policeman could lend his gun to someone.

LOUIE *(Looks at him, then at ARTY)* You got a smart brother there, Arty, you know that? You're right, Jay. It's my gun. I'm a bodyguard for a very prominent and distinguished political figure. It's sort of like an FBI man, only they call it something else.

ARTY You mean a henchman?

LOUIE *(Glaring at him)* Who's been telling you stories like that? Jay?

ARTY No. I swear.

LOUIE Don't ever repeat that word around to anyone again, you understand?

ARTY I didn't mean to say it. I was thinking of hunch-back.

LOUIE A couple of jokers here, heh? Don't pull my leg, Arty, it might come off in your hands . . . So, we got a little business to discuss. You boys got any problem with makin' a little after-school money?

JAY You mean a job? I've been looking, but Grandma wants us in the store after school. To help pay our expenses.

LOUIE Tell you what. How'd you like to work for me? Five bucks a week, split between you, cash on the barrel. Only first you gotta guess what number I'm thinkin' of. Make a mistake and the deal's off . . . Take a guess, boys.

ARTY Three.

JAY Seven.

LOUIE Thirty-seven. That's right. Good guess. You're on Louie's payroll now. *(He takes a five-dollar bill out of his garter and hands it to JAY)* . . . Now, Arty, can you drive a car?

ARTY Me? I'm only thirteen and a half.

LOUIE Too bad. I need someone who can drive a car.

ARTY I'm a pretty good roller skater.

LOUIE *(He smiles)* That's good, 'cause I'm spinnin' your wheels, kid. Now your leg's bein' pulled. Wake up and live. It's a fast world out there.

JAY Uncle Louie . . . This five-dollar bill . . . It has your picture on it.

LOUIE *(To ARTY)* He ain't no faster than you. Look in your pocket, Arty.

(ARTY feels in his pajama pocket and takes out a five-dollar bill, unfolded)

ARTY It's five dollars. A real one. How'd you do that?

LOUIE These fingers were touched by genius. I could have been a concert violinist, but the handkerchief kept fallin' off my neck.

JAY What do we have to do for the money?

LOUIE Nothin'. Like if anyone comes around here lookin' for me, you don't know nothin', you ain't seen nothin', you ain't heard nothin'. You think you can handle that?

ARTY There were two men here the other day looking for you.

LOUIE Yeah? What'd they look like?

ARTY One had a broken nose and the other one had—

LOUIE —a Betty Grable tie.

ARTY Right.

LOUIE Hollywood Harry. Got all the stars hand-painted on silk. He's got a Gypsy Rose Lee tie you can see

when you get a little older . . . So if they show up here again askin' questions, what do you say to 'em?

BOTH Nothing.

LOUIE Smart boys. Look in Jay's pocket, Arty.

(ARTY looks in JAY's pocket, takes out a bill)

ARTY Another five dollars.

LOUIE I could have played Carnegie Hall.

JAY We wouldn't be doing anything wrong, would we?

LOUIE You're my brother's kids, you think I'm gonna get you involved with somethin' stupid? Don't be stupid. There's a couple of guys who don't like me 'cause I've been seein' a lady I shouldn't a been seeing. A minor neighborhood problem . . . Okay. It's late. I'm gonna wash up. We'll bunk up together tonight, okay?

ARTY Sure. There's plenty of room.

LOUIE Oh. One last thing. *(Pointing to his black satchel)* Don't touch this. I got my valuables in there. My draft card. My driver's license . . . My good cuff links. I'll put it somewhere you won't have to worry about it. *(He starts for the bathroom with the bag, then stops)* Oh, Arty. See if there's anything else in your pajama bottoms.

ARTY *(Looks)* No. There's nothing there.

LOUIE Well, don't worry. You're young yet.

(He buckles and goes into the bathroom)

ARTY He's incredible. It's like having a James Cagney movie in your own house.

JAY We're not taking that money. They're not painting his apartment at midnight. He's a bagman and he's got a bag and a gun and Pop wouldn't want us to get paid for saying "Nothin'" to Hollywood Harry in the Betty Grable tie. Forget it.

(BELLA's door opens and she comes out quietly)

BELLA Jay? Arty? Have you thought of anything yet? About how I should tell Grandma about you-know-who?

JAY Gee. No. We've been very busy ourselves.

BELLA Sure. I understand. But if you *do* think of something, I'm going to give you each a dollar. I know you could use it. I'll let you go back to sleep. I was having such a good dream. I'm gonna go back and finish it.

(She goes back in her room and closes the door)

JAY You know, we could make a great living just from this family.

(The bathroom door opens and LOUIE comes out carrying his black bag. He puts it where he can see it from the bed, then sits, takes off his garters and socks, and gets into bed)

LOUIE You guys have to go to the bathroom?

JAY No. Why?

LOUIE I don't like anybody getting up while I'm sleeping.

ARTY Sure . . . How late do you sleep?

LOUIE Until I see something I don't like.

JAY You can see while you're sleeping?

LOUIE (*Smiles*) Don't try me, kid. I wake up grouchy. (*He looks around contentedly*) Yeah, it's good to be home. In my own bed.

ARTY Is this where *you* slept?

LOUIE Yeah. Me and Eddie. And Gert slept with Bella. And Ma slept with her cane . . . There's nothing like family, boys. The one place in the world you're safe, is with your family . . . Right?

JAY Right.

ARTY Right.

LOUIE Right. So unless something unforeseen goes wrong, I'll see you in the morning, pals . . . (*He turns out the lamp*) Sleep tight.

(He turns on his side, away from them. There is a silence . . . then:)

ARTY Jay?

JAY What?

ARTY I have to go to the bathroom.

LOUIE (*Without moving*) Save it.

(In the dark we hear:)

EDDIE (*Voice-over*) "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."

Curtain