

Beyond the Horizon

Act Two, Scene One – Condensed for class

...ROBERT *reenters. Seeing no one about, he goes to the sideboard and selects a book. Coming back to his chair, he sits down and immediately becomes absorbed in reading. RUTH returns from the kitchen bringing his plate heaped with food, and a cup of tea. She sets those before him and sits down in her former place. ROBERT continues to read, oblivious to the food on the table.*]

RUTH: [After watching him irritably for a moment.] For heaven's sakes, put down that old book! Don't you see your dinner's getting cold?

ROBERT: [Closing his book.] Excuse me, Ruth. I didn't notice. [He picks up his knife and fork and begins to eat gingerly, without appetite.]

RUTH: I should think you might have some feeling for me, Rob, and not always be late for meals. If you think it's fun sweltering in that oven of a kitchen to keep things warm for you, you're mistaken.

ROBERT: I'm sorry, Ruth, really I am.

RUTH: That's what you always say; but you keep coming late just the same.

ROBERT: I know; and I can't seem to help it. Something crops up every day to delay me. I mean to be here on time.

RUTH: [With a sigh.] Mean-tos don't count.

ROBERT: [With a conciliating smile.] Then punish me, Ruth. Let the food get cold and don't bother about me. Just set it to one side. I won't mind.

RUTH: I'd have to wait just the same to wash up after you.

ROBERT: But I can wash up.

RUTH: A nice mess there'd be then!

ROBERT: [With an attempt at lightness.] The food is lucky to be able to get cold this weather. [As RUTH doesn't answer or smile he opens his book and resumes his reading, forcing himself to take a mouthful of food every now and then. RUTH stares at him in annoyance.]

RUTH: And besides, you've got your own work that's got to be done.

ROBERT: [Absent-mindedly, without taking his eyes from the book.] Yes, of course.

RUTH: [Spitefully.] Work you'll never get done by reading books all the time.

ROBERT: [*Shutting the book with a snap.*] Why do you persist in nagging at me for getting pleasure out of reading? Is it because— [*He checks himself abruptly.*]

RUTH: [*Coloring.*] Because I'm too stupid to understand them, I s'pose you were going to say.

ROBERT: [*Shame-facedly.*] No—no. [*In exasperation.*] Oh, Ruth, why do you want to pick quarrels like this? Why do you goad me into saying things I don't mean? Haven't I got my share of troubles trying to work this cursed farm without your adding to them? You know how hard I've tried to keep things going in spite of bad luck—

RUTH: [*Scornfully.*] Bad luck!

ROBERT: And my own very apparent unfitness for the job, I was going to add; but you can't deny there's been bad luck to it, too. You know how unsuited I am to the work and how I hate it; and I've managed to fight along somehow. Why don't you take things into consideration? Why can't we pull together? We used to. I know it's hard on you also. Then why can't we help each other instead of hindering? That's the only way we can make life bearable for each other.

RUTH: [*Sullenly.*] I do the best I know how.

ROBERT: [*Gets up and puts his hand on her shoulder.*] I know you do. But let's both of us try to do better. We can both improve. Say a word of encouragement once in a while when things go wrong, even if it is my fault. You know the odds I've been up against since Pa died. I'm not a farmer. I've never claimed to be one. But there's nothing else I can do under the circumstances, and I've got to pull things through somehow. With your help, I can do it. With you against me— [*He shrugs his shoulders. There is a pause. Then he bends down and kisses her hair—with an attempt at cheerfulness.*] So you promise that; and I'll promise to be here when the clock strikes—and anything else you tell me to. Is it a bargain?

RUTH: [*Dully.*] I s'pose so.

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[RUTH: [*After a pause, with a glance at ANDREW'S letter on the table.*] It's lucky Andy's coming back.]

ROBERT: [*Coming back and sitting down.*] Yes, Andy'll see the right thing to do in a jiffy. He has the knack of it; and he ought to be home any time now. The *Sunda's* overdue. Must have met with head winds all the way across.

RUTH: [*Anxiously.*] You don't think—anything's happened to the boat?

ROBERT: Trust Uncle Dick to bring her through all right! He's too good a sailor to be caught napping. Besides we'll never know the ship's here till Andy steps in the door. He'll want to surprise us. [*With an affectionate smile.*] I wonder if the old chump's changed much? He doesn't seem to from his letters, does he? Still the same practical hard-head. [*Shaking his head.*] But just the same I doubt if he'll want to settle down to a hum-drum farm life, after all he's been through.

RUTH: [*Resentfully.*] Andy's not like you. He likes the farm.

ROBERT: [*Immersed in his own thoughts—enthusiastically.*] Gad, the things he's seen and experienced! Think of the places he's been! Hong-Kong, Yokohama, Batavia, Singapore, Bangkok, Rangoon, Bombay—all the marvelous East! And Honolulu, Sydney, Buenos Aires! All the wonderful far places I used to dream about! God, how I envy him! What a trip! [*He springs to his feet and instinctively goes to the window and stares out at the horizon.*]

RUTH: [*Bitterly.*] I s'pose you're sorry now you didn't go?

ROBERT: [*Too occupied with his own thoughts to hear her—vindictively.*] Oh, those cursed hills out there that I used to think promised me so much! How I've grown to hate the sight of them! They're like the walls of a narrow prison yard shutting me in from all the freedom and wonder of life! [*He turns back to the room with a gesture of loathing.*] Sometimes I think if it wasn't for you, Ruth, and—[*his voice softening*—little Mary, I'd chuck everything up and walk down the road with just one desire in my heart—to put the whole rim of the world between me and those hills, and be able to breathe freely once more! [*He sinks down into his chair and smiles with bitter self-scorn.*] There I go dreaming again—my old fool dreams.

RUTH: [*In a low, repressed voice—her eyes smoldering.*] You're not the only one!

ROBERT: [*Buried in his own thoughts—bitterly.*] And Andy, who's had the chance—what has he got out of it? His letters read like the diary of a—of a farmer! "We're in Singapore now. It's a dirty hole of a place and hotter than hell. Two of the crew are down with fever and we're short-handed on the work. I'll be damn glad when we sail again, although tacking back and forth in these blistering seas is a rotten job too!" [*Scornfully.*] That's about the way he summed up his impressions of the East. Every port they touched at he found the same silly fault with. God! The only place he appeared to like was Buenos Aires—and that only because he saw the business opportunities in a booming country like Argentine.

RUTH: [*Her repressed voice trembling.*] You needn't make fun of Andy.

ROBERT: Perhaps I am too hard on him; but when I think—but what's the use? You know I wasn't making fun of Andy personally. No one loves him better

than I do, the old chump! But his attitude toward things is—is rank, in my estimation.

RUTH: [*Her eyes flashing—bursting into uncontrollable rage.*] You was too making fun of him! And I ain't going to stand for it! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! A fine one you be! [ROBERT *stares at her in amazement. She continues furiously.*] A fine one to talk about anyone else—after the way you've ruined everything with your lazy loafing!—and the stupid way you do things!

ROBERT: [*Angrily.*] Stop that kind of talk, do you hear?

RUTH: You findin' fault—with your own brother who's ten times the man you ever was or ever will be—a thing like you to be talking. You're jealous, that's what! Jealous because he's made a man of himself, while you're nothing but a—but a— [*She stutters incoherently, overcome by rage.*]

ROBERT: Ruth! Ruth! Don't you dare—! You'll be sorry for talking like that.

RUTH: I won't! I won't never be sorry! I'm only saying what I've been thinking for years.

ROBERT: [*Aghast.*] Ruth! You can't mean that!

RUTH: What do you think—living with a man like you—having to suffer all the time because you've never been man enough to work and do things like other people. But no! You never own up to that. You think you're so much better than other folks, with your college education, where you never learned a thing, and always reading your stupid books instead of working. I s'pose you think I ought to be *proud* to be your wife—a poor, ignorant thing like me! [*Fiercely.*] But I'm not. I hate it! I hate the sight of you! Oh, if I'd only known! If I hadn't been such a fool to listen to your cheap, silly, poetry talk that you learned out of books! If I could have seen how you were in your true self—like you are now—I'd have killed myself before I'd have married you! I was sorry for it before we'd been together a month. I knew what you were really like—when it was too late.

ROBERT: [*His voice raised loudly.*] And now—I'm finding out what you're really like—what a—a creature I've been living with. [*With a harsh laugh.*] God! It wasn't that I haven't guessed how mean and small you are—but I've kept on telling myself that I must be wrong—like a fool!—like a damned fool!

RUTH: You were saying you'd go out on the road if it wasn't for me. Well, you can go, and the sooner the better! I don't care! I'll be glad to get rid of you! The farm'll be better off too. There's been a curse on it ever since you took hold. So go! Go and be a tramp like you've always wanted. It's all you're good for. I can get along without you, don't you worry. I'll get some peace. [*Exulting fiercely.*] And Andy's coming back, don't forget that! He'll attend

to things like they should be. He'll show what a man can do! I don't need you. Andy's coming!

ROBERT: *[They are both standing. ROBERT grabs her by the shoulders and glares into her eyes.]* What do you mean? *[He shakes her violently.]* What are you thinking of? What's in your evil mind, you—you— *[His voice is a harsh shout.]*

RUTH: *[In a defiant scream.]* Yes I do mean it! I'd say it if you was to kill me! I do love Andy. I do! I do! I always loved him. *[Exultantly.]* And he loves me! He loves me! I know he does. He always did! And you know he did, too! So go! Go if you want to!

ROBERT: *[Throwing her away from him. She staggers back against the table—thickly.]* You—you slut! *[He stands glaring at her as she leans back, supporting herself by the table, gasping for breath. A loud frightened whimper sounds from the awakened child in the bedroom. It continues. The man and woman stand looking at one another in horror, the extent of their terrible quarrel suddenly brought home to them. A pause. The noise of a horse and carriage comes from the road before the house. The two, suddenly struck by the same premonition, listen to it breathlessly, as to a sound heard in a dream. It stops. They hear ANDY'S voice from the road shouting a long hail—"Ahoy there!"]*

RUTH: *[With a strangled cry of joy.]* Andy! Andy! *[She rushes and grabs the knob of the screen door, about to fling it open.]*

ROBERT: *[In a voice of command that forces obedience.]* Stop! *[He goes to the door and gently pushes the trembling RUTH away from it. The child's crying rises to a louder pitch.]* I'll meet Andy. You better go in to Mary, Ruth. *[She looks at him defiantly for a moment, but there is something in his eyes that makes her turn and walk slowly into the bedroom.]*

ANDY'S VOICE—*[In a louder shout.]* Ahoy there, Rob!

ROBERT: *[In an answering shout of forced cheeriness.]* Hello, Andy! *[He opens the door and walks out as*