

SHOEBOX PICNIC ROAD SIDE: ROUTE ONE

A Outdoor Theatrical Installation

By Deneen Reynolds-Knott

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CHARACTERS

The Children of Mrs. Leila Zollicoffer Cooke of Littleton, North Carolina*

AL, Black Man, Mid-30's, The Oldest* ----- **ODETTE, Black Woman, Mid-30's Al's Wife**
DEDE, Black Girl, 14 years old, Al & Odette's Daughter
FAITH, Black Girl, 10 years old, Al & Odette's Daughter

GLADYS, Black Woman, Early 30's Second Born* - **SPENCER, Black Man, Mid-30s, Gladys's Husband**

ELLA, Black Woman, Late 20's, Middle Child* --- **JOHN, Black Man, Late 20's, Ella's Husband**
JOHN-JOHN, Black Boy, 8 years old, Ella & John's Son

WILLY, Black Man, Mid-20's, Forth Child* ----- **KAY, Black Woman, Mid-20's, Willy's Wife, Pregnant**

SYLVIA, Black Woman, Early 20's, The Youngest*

NOTE

In SHOEBOX PICNIC ROAD SIDE: ROUTE ONE, an outdoor theatrical experience, the audience and the actors will engage in a roadside picnic together. It is inspired by my mother's stories. Her parents grew up in Littleton, North Carolina, but moved to Harlem, New York as part of the Great Migration north. My grandmother's siblings were already settled in Harlem. A few times a year, the family would caravan down south to visit their mother, my great-grandmother, and the family farm. My mother remembers these trips down south as a girl. One detail always struck me. My grandmother and her siblings, knowing they were unlikely to be welcomed by eateries along the way (in the north or south, frankly) would cook a feast: fried chicken, biscuits, potato salad and chocolate cake. They would pack the food in shoeboxes lined with tin foil and place the boxes in the car. At some point, my family would pull over to the side of the highway and picnic on the road's shoulder.

Social Distancing: Can be adapted to meet social distancing protocols.

Vision for Indoor Performance: Perhaps actors and audience sit together in a black box with minimal set, some props and a rich immersive soundscape.

Outside. The Road. Concrete. Grass. Dirt.

It is 1955. On Route One.

The audience/picnickers sit on blankets resting on the grass at road side.

Car A pulls up onto the grass at the side of the highway. Car B pulls up behind it. They are full-size cars, like the 1951 Oldsmobile 88 and the 1952 Dodge Coronet, respectively.

Car A's ignition is cut off. Odette opens her car door. She fans herself and wiggles her skirt hoping to create a breeze across her legs. Al opens his driver's door. He stands, with his hand over his eyes, and looks up the road in the direction from where they came. He looks at car B and throws up his hands.

And Car B's ignition is cut off. John opens his driver's door and stands. He looks up the road too. He shakes his head.

JOHN
(calling to Al)

That's your brother.
Molasses.

AL

He said he's keeping up this time.
You heard him.

JOHN

Yessir.

AL

So I didn't dream it or nothin'.

JOHN

No.

Al stretches his arms. John stretches his back.

Odette gets up and opens the door behind her, revealing Gladys in the backseat. Spencer is slumped over next to her.

GLADYS

Oooo.
A breeze.

(poking Spencer)

Spencer.
Spencer.
Get up.
We gon' eat.

Spencer stirs.

SPENCER

I'm up.
I'm up.

ODETTE

Not boiling out here.

GLADYS

Uh-uh.

Gladys gets comfortable in her seat.

Spencer gets out of his side of the car.

SPENCER

Willy's missing again?

Spencer chuckles.

GLADYS

Y'all leave him alone.
He takes his time, is all.

The backdoor of Car B bursts open. John-John
and Faith run out. The front door swings open.

ELLA

(calling after children)

Not so fast, hear?

The kids still run.

ODETTE

Faith!
Faith!
Did you hear your Auntie?

Faith stops running, so John-John does as well.

FAITH

Yes, Mama.

(to John-John)

We have to slow down.

JOHN-JOHN

I'm gonna get you.

Faith forces a funny looking speed-walk. John-John gives chase. Odette, Gladys and Ella watch them and giggle.

ELLA

Wisecrackers.

Al gets a stack of 4 blankets out of his trunk.

Spencer takes two and joins Al unfolding blankets.

AL

Make sure you wipe all yo' drool off my seat.

Al chuckles.

SPENCER

You rocked me like a baby.

AL

That's what happens when you get off your shift and right into the car.

SPENCER

If I coulda' done it another way, I would've.
The trains gotta run some way.

AL

I know it.

The kids run under the blankets as Al and Spencer hold them. The men play along, raising the blankets in the air like hot air balloons.

They place the blankets on the ground. One is close to car A, for Gladys' sake.

John gets a cooler out of his trunk and carries it over to the blankets. He rests it besides one.

He returns to his car, where Ella is digging in the back seat of the car.

He helps her carry shoeboxes to the blankets. Odette runs over to help as well.

ELLA
We're making good time?

JOHN
You in a hurry?

ODETTE
Please don't tell me Willy and Kay have the cups and plates.

ELLA
And the forks and the spoons.

ODETTE
Oh have mercy.
Why you let them take them things?
You know how they do.

ELLA
(referring to car B)
I couldn't fit nothing else in there.

GLADYS
What's the matter?

AL
You good, Gladie?
What you need?

GLADYS
I'm fine.

Al goes over to Gladys and lifts her up slightly to turn her, so her legs touch the ground.

Spencer runs over.

AL
I got her, Spencer.

Al adjusts her hips a little so she is facing the side.

Comfortable?
I don't want you all twisted up.

AL

Thank you, Al.

GLADYS

Spencer kneels and takes Gladys hand.

You want something?

SPENCER

A drink?

GLADYS

We don't have no cups yet.

SPENCER

Give me a bottle.
I ain't so fancy.

GLADYS

You kiddin'?
You the fanciest.
Coming up.

SPENCER

Spencer gets a soda bottle from the cooler. He pops off the cap and hands it to his wife. She drinks.

Faith and John-John are digging into the dirt with sticks.

Do you like worms?

JOHN-JOHN

No. You do?

FAITH

I don't wanna see no worm.

JOHN-JOHN

So stop diggin then.

FAITH

JOHN-JOHN
 No.
 I wanna dig to North Carolina.
 Jump right in.

John-John digs faster.

ELLA
 Don't y'all get all dirty.

GLADYS
 Let them play.

ELLA
 You know how much time I spent making his jumpsuit?

GLADYS
 Please.
 You can spit that thing out in no time.

ELLA
 So?
 Don't mean I want it caked in soot.

FAITH
 (to John-John)
 You got dirt on my shoe.

Faith brushes her shoe with her hand, moving away from John-John.

JOHN-JOHN
 You not gonna help me?

FAITH
 We driving down south already.
 We can't all fit in your hole.

Ella and Odette are setting the boxes down with some order.

GLADYS
 Leave some room for Kay.

ODETTE
 What for?
 She gonna be up under Willy anyway.

Odette. ELLA

It is true. ODETTE
And you know it.

That's cause we leave her out of things. GLADYS

Gladys gives Odette a knowing smirk.

So she says. ODETTE

Willy said that. ELLA
We don't know how she feel.

You know if Willy say it, she probably said much worse. ODETTE
Called us all kinds of witches and what not.

I wish I knew a spell to put on her. GLADYS

Now y'all being bad. ELLA
We can give a little more understanding.

Odette and Gladys stare at Ella. Al and John
get their maps out of their respective cars.

Especially now. ELLA
And I really want some of that cake.

Babygirl can bake a cake. GLADYS

Hallelujah! ODETTE

So we will act like we got some home training. ELLA

GLADYS

I thought we was real nice at Odette's party,
But Willy come with his "Can I talk to you? Kay had some hurt feelings?"
I bet she was about to give us a piece of her mind.

ODETTE

Oh, I wish she would.
She likes to put-on.
She does.

ELLA

She ain't perfect.
But she don't know no better, so I don't hold it against her.

GLADYS

Ella, you give too many chances and you always get hurt.

ELLA

Maybe so, but she's our sister now.
So I'll take the risks for family.

Al and John huddle with their maps.

AL

That road was clear today.

JOHN

Real smooth too.
They musta' repaved it.

AL

(pointing to map)

I think that road will be slower.

JOHN

Usually is.

AL

So we got four more hours.

JOHN

I was thinking more like five.
If that road is as slow as we think.

AL

You got a point.

JOHN

When your Mama expecting us.

AL

She wants us to take her into town later. Stop by Cousin Tillie's store. I want to pick up some country ham and the black rind cheese to take back. So we'd need to get there in enough time to go before dinner.

JOHN

Ella will be sore if she miss the 5 & 10.

ELLA

(overhearing)

Yes. I will.

JOHN

Before dinner is pushing it, but lets try.

Car C, a smaller economy model like the 1954 Chevrolet 150, pulls up onto the grass slowly. John gestures to Al, who looks over.

JOHN

Well, lookie here.

Almost everyone notices and those who don't get tapped by another to notice. Ignition off.

Willy gets out his drivers side.

Al and John feign staring at their maps and not noticing him. Willy approaches. They ignore him.

When Willy is close enough. Al and John in unison cross their arms and smirk at Willy.

WILLY

Aw man.

They all laugh.

Sylvia and DeDe get out of the backseat of car C.

AL

You promised.

WILLY

I'm transporting some precious cargo.

AL

Oh, here we go.

WILLY

I'll be right with y'all from here on out.

AL

Mmm-Hmm.

WILLY

Al, if you keep tearing through like you did Pennsylvania, you 'gon get pulled over.

AL

(wide grin)

Good to see you, Willy.

Al and John chuckle. Willy frowns, heading back to the car. He helps Kay out of the car. Kay is visibly about six months pregnant.

Ella and Gladys wave Kay over.

ELLA

Y'all made it.
Over here, Kay.

ODETTE

You a bit much, Ella.

ELLA

Hush up, Odette.

Kay waves and walks cautiously holding onto Willy's arm, looking down at every step.

Sylvia and DeDe take containers from the back of car C.

SPENCER

(to Willy)

We need plates and things.

WILLY

I got 'em in the car.

Go get 'em, Slim.

SPENCER

Willy gets the plates and utensils from car C.
Ella and Odette help Kay sit on the blanket.

Kay, I do love that blouse on you.

ELLA

Why thank you, Ella, my favorite sister-in-law made it for me.

KAY

Kay and Ella giggle.

I'm so glad to be out that seat.
Hurts my back.
And I wanna stretch my legs.

KAY

We were worried about y'all.

ELLA

You know how Willy drive.
He says he don't wanna drive too fast cause I'm with child.
I don't say nothing.
Just smile like he doesn't drive slow all the time.
Poor man gets picked on enough.

KAY

They just teasing him.

GLADYS

Al has that hot foot anyhow.

KAY

We get there with time to spare.

ODETTE

He act like he racin'

ELLA

John just as bad.

ODETTE

John keeps up with him, but best believe he sweats up in that car.
"Your brother is pedal to the metal."

ELLA

He do?

ODETTE

Don't tell Al.
It'll give him too much satisfaction.

ELLA

DeDe and Sylvia carry the boxes from car C over.

ODETTE

What happened to your hair, DeDe?

DEDE

We opened our windows, Mama.
Aunt Sylvia and I were singing and shimmying.

ELLA

What do y'all know about a shimmy?
Y'all ain't got no hips.

SYLVIA

It's in the shoulders, Ella.
Where you want these?

GLADYS

Just give all the cake to me.
(gestures to her lap)

Right here.

ELLA
(pointing)

The blanket is good.

JOHN-JOHN

Cake? Cake is here.

FAITH

Cake! Cake! Cake!

John-John and Faith jump up and down in celebration.

ODETTE

After you eat your food.

KAY

So that's why y'all so happy to see me.

Sylvia and DeDe put the cake boxes down.

Odette finger combs DeDe's hair back in place.
DeDe sings Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" as her mother fixes her hair.

DEDE

(sings)

Maybellene, why can't you be true
Oh Maybellene, why can't you be true
You done started back doin' the things you used to do

ELLA

We eating or what?

AL

Time to eat!

Everyone sits among the audience/picnickers.

Al, Spencer and John sit together. John-John sits next to John.

Sylvia and DeDe sit together. Faith joins them.

Plates and forks are passed to family and the audience picnickers.

WILLY

Who's blessin' the food?

AL

(with a chuckle)

You.

ELLA

Go 'head, Willy.

A hush falls over the family as they all bow their heads and close their eyes.

WILLY

Lord, we thank you for the food we are about to receive.
We are thankful for this special time together as a family and for the bounty before us.
Be with us, Lord as we make our way home.
And bless our mother
And thank you for bringing us to her yet again.
In Jesus name, Amen.

EVERYONE

Amen.

The shoe boxes are passed to the family and making its way to the audience/picnickers. Perhaps shoeboxes with food for audience/picnickers will be a different color.

As the food is passed, the woman who prepared it addresses the group about its origin.

Fried Chicken.

ODETTE

I fried the chicken.
 When Ella is downtown, sometimes she stop by the butcher in Macys.
 I tell her Al's cuts beat whatever they got down there.
 Al work under Mr. Wilson across the way, a fine butcher.
 He lives over in the Rivington houses.
 Al brought the thighs, wings, legs, and breasts home, packed real nice.
 Last night, I let the chicken sit after taking it out the Frigidaire.
 Don't want it to be too cold when I get started.
 I take the chicken and dip it in some eggs I beat.
 You gotta beat them eggs real good.
 Then roll each piece o' chicken in flour.
 And you got to put salt and plenty pepper for flavor.
 Then I put it in the pot of hot oil.
 And it got to get a certain kinda brown.
 Not too dark, but gotta make sure the skin is nice and crisp.
 I know it when I see it.

Biscuits.

GLADYS

I fixed them biscuits.
 You can't torture the batter,
 not if you want fluffy biscuits.
 I squeeze the batter together with a lighter touch.
 Spencer sets the oven for me now to 350.
 But when they almost done,
 I rub a little bit of butter on each one.
 Mama made biscuits every morning when we was young.
 Shoot.
 I don't wanna eat any meal without some biscuits on that table.
 I make some good sausage gravy too,
 but it's too messy for a picnic.

Potato Salad.

ELLA

I made the potato salad.
 John-John likes to peel the potatoes.
 After I boil them in the big pot, I let them cool off.
 He peels them with me.
 I cut the potatoes into cubes and put 'em in the bowl.
 I add a big spoon of mayonnaise,
 some mustard.
 I like relish in it,
 so I add that too.
 I add chopped celery for a little bit of crunch.
 You gotta have crunch or it will be mushy in your mouth,
 and ya'll don't want that no way.
 John-John gets the first bite.
 I don't even need to wait for him to chew.
 His eyes get all big and he gives a little happy shake.
 So I know my foot is in it.

Everyone partakes from the floating buffet,
 taking what they want and putting it on their
 plates.

Spencer makes Gladys' plate and gives it to her
 with utensils.

They eat.

Ella comes over taking John-John's chicken
 apart for him.

ELLA

You can eat it, honey?

JOHN-JOHN

Yes, Mama.

JOHN

He got them big ole teeth now.

AL

(to John-John)

Your baby teeth all gone?

JOHN-JOHN

Yessir.

JOHN

They been out.

AL

Well, look at that.
You gonna be an old man soon enough.

JOHN-JOHN

So, can I climb on the roof with you?

AL

You ain't that old.

JOHN-JOHN

I can help you fix it.

JOHN

He's a good little helper.

Ella overhears the exchange.

ELLA

John-John ain't going near no ladder.

JOHN

Woman.

ELLA

(giving it right back)

Man

JOHN-JOHN

Please.

JOHN

He got a hard ole' head.

ELLA

No, baby.

JOHN-JOHN

I'll be careful. Promise.

ELLA

I know you will, but accidents happen.
There's no doctors nearby no more, so we can't have you cracking your skull.

SPENCER

Where'd Dr. Watson go?

AL

He moved to Baltimore.

Who does Ms. Leila see now?
 SPENCER

Fella about 20 miles out.
 AL

Ain' that something.
 SPENCER

Mmm-Hmm.
 It's a distance, but she like him.
 AL

Can I feed the chickens?
 JOHN-JOHN

I'm feeding the chickens.
 FAITH

You feed the pigs.
 JOHN-JOHN

Nah-Uh.
 FAITH

I'm feeding the pigs.
 They are the cutest animals.
 Y'all don't know what you're missing.
 Melba is my sweet little pig.
 SYLVIA

Can I feed the pigs with you Aunt Sylvia?
 FAITH

You just said "nah-uh."
 SYLVIA

I didn't mean it.
 FAITH

I'm helping Aunt Sylvia.
 DEDE

I need all the help I can get.
 I'd be happy to have both my nieces workin' with me.
 And my nephew.
 SYLVIA

Faith smiles. DeDe frowns.

JOHN-JOHN

Sorry, Aunt Sylvia.
Pigs smell.
I'm feeding the chickens.

WILLY

Everyone's ready to work.
Good, cause there's plenty tabacca to wrap and cucumbers to pick.

SPENCER

Who's helping me milk the cow?

No response.

SPENCER

Thanks a whole lot, y'all.

ODETTE

DeDe used to love milking.

DEDE

(dreading, to Sylvia)

Can we go home now?

SYLVIA

You hush, city girl.
We are going home.

GLADYS

I'm with DeDe.

SYLVIA

No you ain't.

GLADYS

I love seeing everybody down there, but I'm just as happy to get back in this here car.

FAITH

Can we stop at Howard Johnson's on the way home?

Quiet. Everyone eats.

FAITH

Like on television.

ODETTE

Ella. This potato salad is good.

ELLA

Your chicken is so crispy and tender.

FAITH

(to Odette)

Can we go to Howard Johnson?

DEDE

We can't eat there, dumb-dumb.

AL

DeDe.

What'd you just say to your sister?

DEDE

Sorry Daddy.

AL

You know better.

ODETTE

I don't think they'd let us in the door.

SYLVIA

None of 'em would.

AL

They may let us in, but bet we wouldn't see a crumb.
But Faith, you ain't gonna eat this good at no restaurant.

KAY

Ms. Lanford ate at a Howard Johnson.

AL

Where at?

KAY

I don't know which.
But they served her.
She told me.

WILLY

She passes.

KAY

No, she don't.

WILLY

Not to you or me or any of us, but to white folk.
They think she one of them.

ELLA

Only catching me in a restaurant for some chop suey.

JOHN

(rolls eyes)

Don't I know it.

ELLA

Like you don't be hogging the egg rolls.

SPENCER

Pass the chicken back.

Odette sends the chicken back over to
Spencer. The men attack the box, each taking a
piece.

GLADYS

Syl, you better get over here.

Sylvia laughs and sits near Gladys. DeDe
follows.

GLADYS

I see you got a little shadow with you.

(to DeDe)

I wanna have a grown woman's chat with my sister.

DEDE

Please.
Can I hear?

GLADYS

Fetch me another biscuit and you can.

DeDe searches for the biscuits.

GLADYS

Did you have a date last night?

Sylvia nods.

GLADYS

Where did y'all go?

SYLVIA

We didn't go nowhere really.
 I still had to pack.
 He met me at the shop after closing and walked me home.
 The other day he took me to a picture and his friends party.

GLADYS

And you had a good time?

SYLVIA

Very much.

GLADYS

Tell me his name again.

SYLVIA

Randall.

GLADYS

(mimicking)

Randall.

Gladys and Sylvia snicker. John and Faith
 resume playing. DeDe returns with a biscuit
 for Gladys.

GLADYS

Thank you, sweetie.

(to Sylvia)

You like him?

SYLVIA

He's real nice.

KAY

And easy on the eyes.
 Polite.
 Better than that other fella.

SYLVIA

Who?

GLADYS

(laughing)

She got so many callers, she has to ask who.
 Go 'head, girl.

KAY

The tall one.

Lionel. SYLVIA

Yes. KAY

Why don't you like Lionel? SYLVIA

He's alright.
But you can't trust a man that handsome. KAY

Don't matter if he don't know it. GLADYS

Oh. He know it. KAY

I want to see this Lionel. ELLA

Randall is nice looking too. SYLVIA

Ooooo.
I think Sylvia like her some Randall.
What you think DeDe? GLADYS

DeDe nods.

So when will we meet him. ELLA

I don't know. SYLVIA
(embarrassed)

How do you know when a boy wants to come calling? DEDE

When there's a knock at the door, honey. GLADYS

Odette slides closer to the conversation.

Here comes Mama. GLADYS

ODETTE

Don't you worry about none of that.
I don't wanna see no boys on our welcome mat.
Cause they ain't.

AL

(calling across)

What happened?

ODETTE

DeDe talking about callers.

DEDE

Mama.

FAITH

Like that boy on the 3rd floor.

DeDe smacks Faith on the leg.

FAITH

Ouch.

AL

What boy?
Lil' Luther?
Maybe he'll come over to Mama's and say hi.

DEDE

(buries her face in hands)

Daddy!

SPENCER

Lil' Luther be lovin' him some DeDe.

DEDE

Don't he know he my cousin.

ELLA

Of course, he know.

SPENCER

He don't care.

The men have a hearty laugh. DeDe is mortified.

ODETTE

Nothin' Lil' about him no more.
And y'all betta keep that Luther away or I'll swat him like a mosquita,

SPENCER

We was teasin'.

ODETTE

I don't go for all that.

AL

Yes, Ma'am.

ODETTE

(to Dede)

Boy on the 3rd floor?
Who?
The Simmons boy?

DEDE

He's in my school, is all.
He has a girl.

FAITH

DeDe show all her teeth to him.

DEDE

You so noseey.

AL

See?
She hear you listening to those Dinah Washington records.
I told you.

ODETTE

You got some nerve.
You gave 'em to me.

AL

No more of that lovely dovey nonsense.

ODETTE

(to Al)

You love it.

AL

If we slow dancing to it.

ELLA

Ooo, he's gettin' fresh.

ODETTE

(singing "Teach Me Tonight")

One thing isn't very clear, my love
Should the teacher stand so near my love?

Odette stands up and playfully sways. Ella and Gladys chime in.

ODETTE, GLADYS & ELLA

(singing)

Graduation's almost here, my love
Come on and teach me tonight!

Sound of a CAR HORN BEEPING rapidly from the road. The group becomes quiet and still. Odette sits back down.

ELLA

(to children, loud, but hushed)

You two come here now and sit.

Faith and John-John run to Ella and sit. She gives them each a biscuit.

Al and John stand. They look up and down the road. Then they walk to the other side of the cars, facing the road.

John returns to the group and sits. Al waits a few beats, then follows. He nods to the group. Everyone resumes eating.

SPENCER

(to John)

John.
Your Dodgers were looking real good last time,
but my Giants will show them where it's at.

JOHN

You think so.

SPENCER

Mays is looking good.

JOHN

Jackie didn't even play last game and we still won.

SPENCER

He gettin' long in the tooth.

JOHN

He still strong though.

I wanna know when they putting Newcombe back on the mound.

SPENCER

You got anything down on the season?

JOHN

A little bit.

SPENCER

(a smile)

What a little bit?

JOHN

You doing something?

SPENCER

I got a few things going.

Let me know if you want in.

You feel like your team can do it this year?

JOHN

I'm hopin'.

I need to get down to Ebbets soon.

Haven't been in a long time.

AL

When the last time you been to Brooklyn?

JOHN

A long time.

If I can go down to North Carolina, I can find my way to Atlantic Avenue soon.

ELLA

Puh-Leez. I can't even get you to go down to 125th street.

The Apollo?

JOHN

Alright.

ELLA

He made me miss Bo Diddley.

WILLY

Bo Diddly played the Apollo? When?

ODETTE

Spring. Ladies were rushing me all day for new hairdos. Just for him.

ELLA

I heard he was real good. Some of the other seamstresses at work got to go.

GLADYS

The Gospel Caravan coming to the Apollo. I want to see them.

ODETTE

Lets go. You want to, Ella?

ELLA

It ain't Bo Diddley. But maybe I will.

JOHN

We'll go.

ELLA

Who invited you?

JOHN

C'mon now.

ELLA

I'll think about it.

KAY

I don't know about holy music in an unholy place.

Beat. Exchanged looks.

ODETTE

Kay gonna watch our chil'ren while we at the Apollo.

AL

Mighty nice of you, Kay.

John grabs the cooler, sliding it closer to the men. They grab bottles, pouring soda in their cups.

Ella slides next to John. She takes her flask out of her purse. She pours a little into their cups before pouring some into her own. They drink.

ELLA

Al.

What is this about Mama and a smoke house?

AL

(looks at Odette)

How did you hear about that?

ELLA

Your wife.

ODETTE

Was it a secret?

AL

Mama only wrote about it in one letter.

ELLA

Why are the cousins making business suggestions to our mother?

WILLY

They the ones working with her everyday, Ella.

Ella sucks her teeth.

SPENCER

What does Ms. Leila have in mind?

AL

She didn't get too much into it.
 Something like a general store with a counter.
 Sell smoked meat and other things.
 John, you know your smokers.?

JOHN

Sure do.
 What kind she got?

AL

Haven't seen it yet, but maybe you can take a good look at it.

GLADYS

What space she using?
 The shack?

SYLVIA

That thing about to tip to the ground.

ELLA

What about the little room off the porch?

WILLY

Too small.

AL

Maybe not.
 She don't need much.
 I can build a counter that fits in good.

WILLY

How's Mama gonna make sure the money is right?

ELLA

She'll make sure.
 Nobody's gonna get nothing over on her.

SPENCER

Mr. Nance been running his business for awhile.
 He can tell her some things.

Al and Willy look at Spencer.

SPENCER

Why y'all looking at me like that?
 That man fixin' to be your stepdaddy, if Ms. Leila ever pay him any mind.

AL

Mama ain't marrying nobody.

ELLA

How you know?

WILLY

Nance a good man.

SPENCER

He real quiet.

ELLA

That's why she like him.

JOHN

I don't know what to do when someone don't talk. Makes me jittery.

AL

He's good with business.
 I suppose he can give advice.
 But this is Mama's farm and it'll be her store.

ELLA

He's not after her things, Al.
 He got his own way.

AL

(smiling)

I know he do and I plan on drinkin' plenty of his way this evening.

SPENCER

How his wine taste so good?

AL

I'm gonna get him to teach me.

JOHN-JOHN

Can we have the cake now?

Pretty please.

ELLA

We ready for some cake?

GLADYS

Pass it on.

The cake.

More shoeboxes passed to family and audience/picnickers. Everyone takes a piece for their plate.

Kay's turn to address the group.

KAY

I baked the cake.

I love me some golden cake.

Ever since I was a little girl.

I'll make almost any kind of icing or filling to go with it,

vanilla,

strawberry,

whatever you can think of.

But I start with that golden cake.

A little bit spongy.

A little bit sweet.

Then I put on this chocolate I melted outta semi-sweet chips.

I put a little extra frostin' between each layer.

Makes the cake stand a little taller.

Gotta be careful not to put too much, now.

Or the layers will slide off.

I learned that the hard way.

A lop-sided cake will almost taste the same,

but it loses the magic.

Sylvia helped checking on it in the oven.

Sometimes I feel a little sick when I bend over.

KAY (CONT'D)

Next summer they'll be a little baby in my arms.
My. My.
I can hardly believe it.

ELLA

How you feeling, Kay?
You feeling good?

KAY

I am.
Warm, I suppose.

ELLA

When I was carrying John-John, I couldn't get cool for nothin'.

KAY

That's how I feel.
It's terrible at night.
Sometimes I can't sleep at all.
I go in the other room, so Willy can sleep.

ODETTE

I had to do the same thing with both of 'em, cause Al snores.
And I had some extra hearing when I was pregnant.
I'm telling you, I could hear things a mile away.
So his snoring hurt my ears.
He don't think he snore cause he can't hear himself.

GLADYS

Has since we was little.
Like a chainsaw.

ODETTE

A chainsaw.
Can you imagine being in a deep sleep and that wakes you up?
It is terrible.

GLADYS

And he won't see anyone about it.

ODETTE

Like who?
Like a Doctor?
Never.

KAY

If Willy had a problem that was bothering me, he'd go to whoever could help.
He wants me to be happy.

It's all Odette can do to keep from rolling her eyes.

Ella gives Odette a look. Odette bites her tongue.

ODETTE

Kay. You're a real lucky lady.

Kay smiles.

John-John is scarfing down the cake.

ELLA

Don't eat so fast, you'll choke yourself.

JOHN-JOHN

It's so good, Mama.

ELLA

It sure is.

JOHN-JOHN

Can I have some more?

ELLA

No.

John-John has a silent tantrum.

ELLA

You gonna act like that?
Why don't you go give Auntie Kay some sugar?

John-John goes to Kay.

JOHN-JOHN

Thank you for the cake, Aunt Kay.

John-John kisses her on the cheek.

KAY

You're very welcome John-John.
And guess what?
The other half of the cake is still in the car for when we get to Littleton.
So don't you worry.

John-John smiles.

Gimme sugar, too.

ODETTE

John-John kisses Odette on the cheek.

Chile, give me some.
Don't leave me out of it.

GLADYS

John-John kisses Gladys.

Y'all let the boy breathe.
Go on and play, John-John.

SYLVIA

John-John whispers in her ear..

Ella.
John-John gotta go.

SYLVIA

John.
Take the boy to the brush.

ELLA

Can you hold it?

JOHN

John-John shakes his head. John gets up.

C'mon, son.

JOHN

John and John-John walk off to the brush
behind some trees.

When you gonna go see your kin, Odette?

GLADYS

My uncle, Perch, gonna come by before church.
Take me and the girls to see my folks.
You remembered the fabric, Ella?

ODETTE

Course I did. It's in the car. Wanna take a look?

ELLA

If you don't mind.

ODETTE

Ella goes to car B and takes a sack out the trunk.

WILLY

Al. Al. You gonna hide? Odette's Uncle Perch used to chase Al down the road.

AL

He sure did. Almost shot me once.

ODETTE

That rifle wasn't loaded.

AL

Could've fooled me.

DEDE

Why was he chasing you, Daddy?

Odette glares at Al.

AL

Nevermind that. Years ago.

Ella returns with the sack. Odette pulls fabric halfway out the bag.

GLADYS

Who is it for?

ODETTE

My niece. She a real young lady now. She been complaining 'bout the clothes my sister making her. Not a lot of fabric there. Like we have.

GLADYS

Oh, how pretty.

ODETTE

Betty will make lovely outfits with these. You like these, Dede?

Dede nods.

DEDE

Ella made me a dress with that one, Mama.

ODETTE

I hope Niecey like it. You know how they be at that age.

GLADYS

It's from New York.
You could give her burlap, and she'd tell everyone "This is New York burlap."

ELLA

And she'd be the rage.

SYLVIA

That's why they be lookin' at ya'll wrong cause you think you cute.
Showing out.

GLADYS

Ain't no one showing out in they own clothes, driving they own car.

John and John-John return to the picnic.

SYLVIA

DeDe, when your Mama, Gladys and Ella use'ta come down to visit and I was a girl,
I thought they was Queens.
The prettiest dresses and Gladys had this big ole' hat.

ODETTE

The yellow hat.

SYLVIA

That very one and she would glide through town and everyone would greet her.

GLADYS

Saw my old school love and he was eating his heart.

ODETTE

You know he was.

SPENCER

He shook my hand so hard, my arm almost left the socket.

GLADYS

And you gave him such a grin.

SYLVIA

All those visits made me dream of Harlem. I wanted to be just like them.
And your Mama, Gladys and Ella would head back up north and my friends would say
my sisters think they better than everyone.
And they was mad about it too.

DEDE

Your friends were jealous, Aunt Sylvia.

GLADYS

Thank you.
That's all that was.
And I can't worry 'bout how someone else feel about they-self.

Ella takes the sack of fabric and puts it back in
car B, before returning to group.

WILLY

The fellas down there talked about Al too.
Reckon' they got some things to say about me now.

AL

Don't worry, Willy. They don't know nothin' about your driving.

The men laugh.

SYLVIA

Which church having service tomorrow?

GLADYS

Fidelity.

ELLA

Y'all fishin' after church?

AL

(to the men)

We fishin'?

The men look at one another and shrug.

AL

(to Ella)

Why?

ELLA

I wanna fry fish tomorrow.

SYLVIA

We can have some fish and make cornbread.
Unless y'all gonna hunt some rabbits instead.

AL

Nah, we ain't huntin'.
We can fish.
We got our secret weapon.

Al slaps Spencer on the back. Spencer smiles.

Why is he the secret weapon?
 I caught the most last time.

WILLY

That don't count.

AL

Why not?

WILLY

My arm was in a sling.

SPENCER

Okay.
 We'll see tomorrow.

WILLY
 (competitive)

Oh yes, we will.

SPENCER

We better get back on the road.
 Ya'll ready?

AL

Let's go!

JOHN

I'm ready.
 When we gonna run up on that fillin' station?

WILLY

In about an hour.

JOHN

Y'all outdone yourselves with that meal.

AL

We did, didn't we.

ELLA

The women laugh proudly.

Packing up to drive off. Ella and Odette begin
 to collect the boxes.

ELLA

Five minutes from now,
 Al and them will take off down the interstate.

ELLA (CONT'D)

And Willy's car will disappear from the rearview mirror,
as he falls behind again.

John and Spencer are putting the garbage in
bags. Al collects the bottles.

JOHN

Five hours from now.
After arriving to the farm,
Al and Spencer set off to chop wood for the stove before nightfall.
We'll eat brunsie stew and Ms. Leila's famous coconut cake.
I'll make a trip with Willy to the water pump,
and carry back a few buckets, so we can wash up before bedtime.

Everyone is packing their cars.

The young people fold the blankets.

Willy and Ella help Kay back to car C. When
Kay gets there, she'll sit in the passenger's seat
but keep the door open.

ODETTE

Five years from now,
four cars will make our way down the interstate.
Sylvia's husband, Randall will drive with her and their two little ones.
Randall can actually keep up with Al,
so he is steady right behind us.
He real citified and ain't never seen an outhouse until he come down with us.
I gotta remind him his mouth hanging open the whole time.
No matter how many times he go,
he always seem like a fish just plucked from water.

John and Ella get in car B.

AL

Fifteen years from now,
We don't caravan much anymore.
We go on our own time.
But you best believe we ask each other
"How long it took you?"
No one's ever faster than me.
Willy and Kay take their time.
They and they 3 kids stop at Howard Johnson for those fried clams.
They tease us about sitting in the dirt eating, when we could be on nice pleather chairs.
You ain't never catching me in nobody's Howard Johnson.

GLADYS

Twenty-five years from now,
 we talk Al into stopping at Cracker Barrel with us.
 We're in a big caravan that time.
 Probably our longest.
 6 or 7 cars deep.
 DeDe and her family.
 John-John's clan.
 It's Mama's 80th birthday, and she cries at the sight of all our cars coming up the road.
 My hands don't do what I want them to much anymore.
 So I can't give that biscuit batter the soft squeeze.
 But we got all the little one's runnin' around,
 so I teach 'em how,
 they laugh, play, tease, until they tossing flour at each other.
 I love all that noise.

Al and Spencer help Gladys turn back into the
 car. Al, Spencer and Odette get in car A.

WILLY

Thirty-five years from now,
 Al, Ella, Sylvia and I make our way down in one car.
 I drive, cause Al can't drive like all that no more.
 I can hear him sighing and groaning at my driving.
 I ignore him and maybe chuckle to myself
 cause Al don't change much.
 We sign the final papers selling the farm.
 It's years after Mama passed and we held out as long as we could.
 When Gladys passed,
 we realized we gotta set our business straight.
 All our kids argue with us and protest.
 They want to keep the land in the family.
 But how would we split it between all them people?
 They want they name on it but ain't no one want to take care of it.
 None of them talked about moving to Littleton.
 So we sell it cause that's what makes sense.
 Doesn't mean I didn't have a good boo-hoo that day.

Willy gets into car C. Car A revs up.

Faith and John-John run and play.

DEDE

Forty-five years from now,
 we take Daddy home.
 He wanted to be buried in the old Zollicoffer family graveyard,
 next to Mama.
 And near Grandma.
 So we fulfilled his wishes.

DEDE (CONT'D)

We all split up, staying with different cousins.
 My kids played with their kids.
 Faith managed well.
 We thought she'd need her wheelchair, but she did well with her walker.
 She reminded me so much of Aunt Gladys.
 It wasn't until Faith got sick,
 we realized Aunt Gladys musta had Multiple Sclerosis too.

DeDe gets in Car C. Car B revs up.

FAITH

Wait for us.

JOHN-JOHN

Don't leave us Daddy.

ELLA

Ya'll better hurry.

Faith and John-John run to the car and Ella
 opens the door for them to climb in.

SYLVIA

Fifty-five years from now,
 John-John's oldest tells us he can't afford New York anymore.
 Robert couldn't pay off his house or keep up with them taxes.
 The expense of every little thing.
 So he up and took his family down to North Carolina.
 To live in a town still full of family.
 We rent a little comfortable bus to go down and visit.
 Everyone comes out.
 My cousin, Mabel, who I used to play with when we was girls traveled 7 towns over
 'cause she heard I was around.
 It was like a reunion.
 And it felt real good.

Car C revs up.

Sylvia hurries back and climbs into the
 backseat of Car C.

One by one Cars A, B, and C peel off the
 highway shoulder making their way down the
 Interstate.

And out of sight.

THE END