

The Happy Journey

This is a short play by Thornton Wilder, fourteen pages long. There is no scenery: just four chairs, two in front and two in back representing the inside of an old car. The car serves a family of four: Ma Kirby, her husband the driver Elmer and two teenagers, Arthur and Caroline. It's about this family's travelling (around 1930) from Newark to Camden, New Jersey to visit and console Beulah, a married daughter, age 22, who has just lost a baby girl in childbirth. An additional actor mimes all the support roles along the way (for instance Ma Kirby's neighbor, a service station attendant) reading from a script. In other words, the stage is bare of everything that might distract from the Kirby family and their discourse along their way to Camden. Why so sparse? To highlight out of the ordinariness of an event the power latent in things ordinary – of a simple goodness, a humanity, of **history more real** than you will find recorded in the headlines of the day or the archives of great institutions.

Listen to the exchanges. Ma Kirby wonders what's holding up pa. She tells Arthur where to look for his hat. Wonders where Caroline is. Well Arthur can't leave Newark without a hat. Ma doesn't go on *no journeys with a hoodlum*. She asks a neighbor to insure the Kirby cat has milk over the three days they will be away. *My married daughter was downright sick a while ago – I just won't rest easy in my mind without I see her . . . What can be keeping pa? . . . I can't find my hat . . . Caroline Kirby, what you done to your cheeks? I just rubbed them to make 'm red. All the girls do that . . . Such silliness I never saw . . . Now we can start. Arthur, put those marbles away. . . Oh, goodbye, Mrs. Adler! . . . just three days to see my daughter in Camden.* They are slowed up by a funeral procession near the town of Elizabeth. *Take off your hat, Arthur. Look at you father. . . Well, we haven't forgotten our good Harold (an older son). He gave his life for his country, we mustn't forget that . . .*

They start enjoying the billboards: *Fit-Rite Suspenders . . . Mueller's Spaghetti: The Family's Favorite Dish . . . I don't know whether I'm a good cook or not, but I know I've had practice. At least I've cooked three meals a day for twenty-five years . . . Goodness, smell that air, will you! It's got the whole ocean in it . . . drive careful over that bridge . . . What's that flower over there? – I'll take some to Beulah. It's just a weed, ma. Look at the sky, wouldya! I'm glad I was born in New Jersey.* They stop for hot dogs . . . *Now chew them fine, everybody . . . All right, Elmer, forward march - Papa. It was near here that George Washington crossed the Delaware . . . first in war and first in peace . . .* Ma says: *Well, the thing I liked about him best was that he never told a lie . . .* They finally arrive at the daughter's house in Camden where Ma becomes the solace her bereaved daughter needed. *She didn't even live a few minutes, mamma. It was awful.*

The play ends with Ma relieving her daughter of making dinner . . . *Well, now, you shut your eyes for ten minutes . . .* And Ma descends to the kitchen singing: *There were ninety and nine that safely lay / In the shelter of the fold / But one was out on the hills away / Far off from the gates of gold // . . . This of mine has wandered away . . . / And though the road be rough and steep / I go to the desert to find my sheep / I go to the desert to find my sheep.* When read with even minimal sensibility so much of what's good about human beings comes through – even on a trip from Newark to Camden, New Jersey!