**The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton**

**By: Thornton Wilder**

The action of The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden is as mundane as anything in Wilder’s famous play Our Town: a family car trip occurs on a bare stage. Yet the ordinary is only the setting for an investigation of extraordinary existential issues. The Stage Manager, although never directly addressing the audience as do the Stage Manager characters of Our Town and Pullman Car Hiawatha, performs the roles of minor characters, reading directly from the script and “with little attempt at characterization.”1 Ma (Kate) Kirby is tying up all the loose ends before she and her family depart from their home in Newark, New Jersey, to visit her daughter Beulah (age 22) in Camden, New Jersey. Ma asks the Stage Manager (as Mrs. Schwartz) to give the cat milk while the Kirbys are away and divulges the reason for their trip: “My married daughter was downright sick a while ago […] I just want to go down and see the child.”2 Elmer, the father, returns from having the car checked for the trip. Caroline Kirby (age 15) and Arthur Kirby (age 13) follow their parents through their invisible house toward the car. “The STAGE MANAGER has moved forward four chairs and a low platform. This is the automobile. It is in the center of the stage and faces the audience.”3 As Elmer pantomimes driving the car, the rest of the Kirbys “break out into a tremendous chorus of goodbyes” to their neighbors.4

As the family drives, they appreciate getting out of the city. “The air’s getting better already. Take deep breaths, children.”5 In Elizabeth, New Jersey, they stop for a funeral procession to pass by. Here, it is revealed that there was a sixth member of the Kirby family, Harold, who “gave his life for his country.”6

The Kirbys pass through New Brunswick, and the children’s attention is drawn to various billboard ads which provoke laughter, questions, and lessons. The discussion shifts to Ma Kirby’s cooking. She has cooked every day for twenty-five years except for the few times they went out. Arthur asks if he can take a newspaper route; after Ma says no because he needs the sleep God intended him to get, he gives a sarcastic reply. Ma tells Elmer to give Arthur a dollar so he can go back to Newark alone because she does not want to be on a journey with anyone who talks in such a manner about God. Elmer says he will talk to him later. The family rides in silence.

Elmer decides to stop to put water in the car. The Stage Manager plays the role of the gas attendant without the script in his hand. Ma strikes up a conversation with him, volunteering where they are from, where they are going, and why. As in an earlier episode, Caroline takes issue with her mother’s candor, saying, “you oughtn’t to tell’m all everything about yourself,”7 but Ma remains generous: “He looked kinda thin to me. I’d like to feed him up a few days.”8

Talking about food makes the rest of the family hungry, so Elmer pulls off the road and sends Arthur to get hot dogs. Ma picks a flower for Beulah despite Caroline telling her it is a weed. She then takes a moment to reflect on the scenery. “My, look at the sky, wouldya! I’m glad I was Born in New Jersey. I’ve always said it was the best state in the Union.”9 Arthur returns holding imaginary hot dogs and apologizes to Ma about his previous wisecrack for which she forgives him. The children start crying, and Ma becomes “joyously alive and happy.”10 They get back into the car and she sits next to Arthur.

They quickly pass through Lawrenceville and Trenton. The family discusses the population of the United States (126 million according to Elmer). Arthur starts singing and the family follows until Ma sees the sign for Camden. She briefs the children on how they should behave because Beulah “just got out of bed after a big sorta operation, and we must all move around kinda quiet.”11 Ma instructs Elmer and Arthur to drop Caroline and her off then return for dinner. The family is impressed by Camden. Ma claims how Beulah’s current street is nicer than the one she and her husband Horace previously lived on, and Caroline is under the impression that her sister is richer than they are, but Ma’s self-worth is not based on money. “[Ma Kirby:] I live in the best street in the world because my husband and children live there.”12 After they all greet Beulah, Pa and Arthur drive to the Y.M.C.A where they will be spending the night, and Caroline runs off to see a surprise for her in the back yard. Ma is finally alone with her adult daughter.

Soon after, the dialogue quickly reveals to the audience the real reason Ma Kirby needed to see her child:

BEULAH (Puts her head on her mother’s shoulder and weeps): It was awful, mama. It was awful. She didn’t even live a few minutes, mama. It was awful.

MA (looking far away): God thought best, dear. God thought best. We don’t understand why. We just go on, honey, doin’ our business.13

Their conversation turns from the death of Beulah’s baby to what they will have for dinner. Beulah is still her mother’s little girl as she does not want Ma to leave her side. Ma tells Beulah to rest and walks down the “stairs” singing the first verse of “The Ninety and Nine” by Elizabeth C. Clephane.14 The play ends with a curtain fall.