

Family Fixin's

by

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Honors Project

Appalachian State University

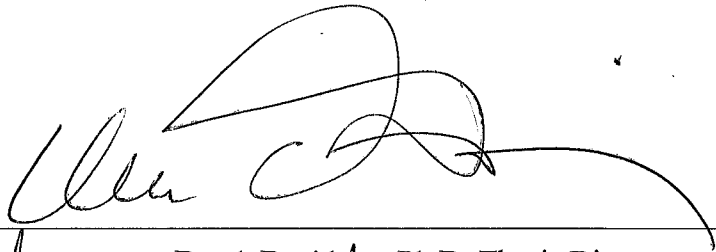
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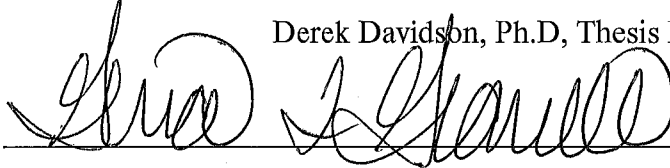
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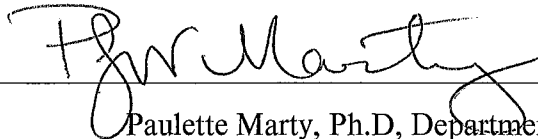
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The Genesis of *Family Fixin's*

In February of 2020, the second semester of my college career, I found myself on a pull-out couch in a hotel in Spartanburg, South Carolina. I was attending the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region IV and had worked the previous semester with a group of students to create a devised theatre piece for the festival. Our piece followed a through line of two sides of a family coming back together and the generational trauma we pass on. The night after the performance, my friends, Preston Hilliard, Emily Odum, and Andrea Dutton, sat in our room giggling and analyzing our childhoods. We discussed what it was like growing up in the South. We discussed the stories we heard, our traditions, family recipes, and what we were allowed to talk about growing up. Someone mentioned how we were taught to not talk about things, to not ask questions. We brought up how much pride our parents had about keeping up appearances. Preston told the story of her grandmother and grandfather's divorce. Her Loli told her dad that they were getting divorced, that "you will see him on weekends", and then asked if he had any questions. Her dad asked if he could go downstairs. Andrea told us the story of when her great grandfather died. Her great grandmother sat her mother and her siblings down and told him that he was dead. That she was going to be a single mother and that was the end of it. She didn't cry. She didn't accept questions.

It wasn't until Preston uttered the phrase Southern Avoidance that we realized we stumbled upon an idea that resonated. We gave it a loose definition that night. It was meant to mean how Southerners tend to avoid hard topics, provide comfort, and hold their secrets close. We discussed how this task of comfort often landed on women's shoulders, on the mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and grandmothers. Southern women hold the secrets, shame, and pride of their ancestors. We talked about how it was a generational problem and the way our

generation responds to the behaviors we see in those before us. We observed how the men must bottle up everything and keep their head down. Emily touched on how Southern families are full of pride, but with that pride comes a good amount of shame. We went to bed that night gleaming with bright ideas of a future devised piece and a plan to create it with what was left of the school year. Then, in March of 2020, we found ourselves sent home and quarantined. The idea seemed to just gather dust. But the next year, when I was accepted into the Theatre Honors Program in November of 2021, I instantly knew that I wanted to write a play or direct a devised piece about our idea of Southern Avoidance.

I did my first Honors Contract in Playwriting with Dr. Derek Davidson in the Spring of 2022. In this class I wrote *The Chili Spoon*, which would later become *Family Fixin's*. Dr. Davidson focused his course around how to develop realistic characters and plot, raise the stakes of the piece, and write characters who speak realistically. Dr. Davidson helped me focus in and fine tune these skills in our meetings. In our meetings, we discussed the characters of *The Chili Spoon* in depth, narrowed in on how to represent Western North Carolina people authentically, and tell the story I wanted to tackle with my Honors Project. I decided to make *The Chili Spoon* the first scene of what would later become the full-length script *Family Fixin's*. From the work done on the short play came recurring themes and images for *Family Fixin's*, like the mention of snakes, the recipes from different characters, and Uncle Lake's banjo.

These ideas have since grown and developed in ways I did not expect. At the end of the Spring semester, I submitted *The Chili Spoon* to the 2023 New Play Festival organized by Appalachian State Playcrafters. That summer, I received the news that it had been accepted as one of the scripts to produce for the festival. The inclusion of *The Chili Spoon* in the festival

gave me a boost of confidence to go with this particular set of characters and the story that was unfolding from them.

I'd like to say that all of this is the genesis of *Family Fixin's*. It was the genesis for making art centered around Southern Avoidance and was the genesis of the script, but I think the emotional genesis was found within my relationship with my own mother. Our relationship proved to be the meat and the driving force of my project. My mother and I have not always had the best relationship, but over time we have grown closer. It took a long time and a lot of learning to deconstruct our relationship and heal it together. We had to sit and talk with each other for hours to unpack and work towards a better relationship. My mother and I found common ground on our love for our culture and how we navigate the world as Southerners.

Throughout writing this piece, I have found myself deeply rooted in my culture, my family's history, and the future of the South. I have often encountered the thought that people see the South as a place that is unhealable, that these rural spaces will always be somewhere that is run-down, uneducated, and ignorant. There is a certain stereotype that follows rural Southern people, especially those within the Appalachian community. When I look at my mother, I see the exact opposite of these stereotypes. I see a story of building, healing, and tearing down. I think the heart of this project truly lies in her, in us.

Process

Initial ideas I explored in the genesis of this project included following a little girl through a life cycle. The play would have been a three scene play with the first being a funeral, the second a wedding, and the third a birthday party. I wanted to play with the idea of following one person through and observing how she has grown up through these events to understand her family. With the creation of *The Chili Spoon*, I moved away from the idea of a scene cycle and

towards a summer spent with Sharon Kay and her grandmother Maryworth. After writing *The Chili Spoon*, I knew I wanted the recipes to be a through line within the piece. They are meant to represent the stories and observations that Sharon Kay is collecting about her family.

The summer of 2022, I wrote the second scene and a few others that were not included in the final product. I wanted Natalie, Sharon Kay's mother, to leave the family home in the second scene due to the fight between her and her mother in the first. I wanted Sharon Kay to have the chance to learn about her family for herself, to collect her recipes on her own. This, however, proved to pose a big question that took me a good few months to crack: why does Natalie come back?

In the Fall of 2022, I started working on the project under the guidance of Dr. Derek Davidson as my thesis advisor. From where we left off that previous Spring, I still wanted to include the original plot ideas of a scene cycle. I built a plot out of Natalie returning for her best friend Sarah's wedding that summer. I had written two characters with this idea: Missy, who was to be Sarah's mother, and Cole, who was Sarah's son and Sharon Kay's newfound friend. I liked this idea so much because it would let me explore two family structures instead of one. I wrote a few scenes with this idea, but it never seemed to work. With the backstories I laid out, it didn't seem like a high enough stake for Natalie to come back home. Bringing her back because of a wedding also seemed to take the advocacy out of Sharon Kay's hands. I wanted the story to be largely Sharon Kay's. Of course, Natalie and Maryworth's healing is a crucial part of the plot, but it is told through Sharon Kay's eyes and what she discovers. By November of 2022, I was ready to ditch this idea and search for a new one.

After discussing with Dr. Davidson and others, I realized that the thing that had to bring Natalie back was her daughter. This is when the plot became more solidified and representative

of what is the final project. I decided to go with the idea of there being a family reunion. This turned the character Cole into Sharon Kay's cousin and Missy into her Great Aunt, rather than being a separate family tree for me to explore. I added into the script that Maryworth had consistently invited Natalie to the reunion, but she never showed. Shortly after Sharon Kay was born, Maryworth stopped trying to get her to come. This idea gave agency to Sharon Kay since she became the one to ask Natalie to come back up. After this, the only real thing that changed with this idea was turning the reunion into a Fourth of July barbecue celebration.

Another problem that came with the original plot was Uncle Lake's character. I always knew that Uncle Lake was a gay man with a husband named Frank. When I first started working with these characters, I knew I wanted to include a queer identity. When people think of rural Appalachian men, they often think of a very heteronormative type of man. With Uncle Lake, I really wanted to present a different story, one that is more representative of the diversity that I see in the South. I wanted to make his queerness a sort of taboo topic in the family, but not one that was rooted in homophobia from the family itself. I wanted it to be rooted to a stark reality of being queer in the South, especially in light of anti-LGBT legislation on the rise, the reality that you cannot always be out and loud about it. For this reason, the family does not speak openly about Uncle Lake's sexuality and marriage to protect him and his husband's jobs and livelihood. They keep it as a pseudo secret, one that they assume everyone close knows.

This becomes Sharon Kay's main plight with her family. I ran through several iterations of how this could happen. I originally wanted Frank to be a character within the story, but I found that having him included broke the tension of Sharon Kay not knowing. I also found problems within the way I decided to include Frank. The original idea was Sharon Kay walking in on them sharing a kiss and is shocked and runs off with Lake going after her. The idea ended

up feeling taboo and dirty. It felt like I was representing the couple as people who had to hide their affection from their family, but I didn't necessarily want that to be the case. The answer became clear to cut Frank's character and have multiple points where the family gets close to talking about him openly. Within the final three scenes, Sharon Kay discovers by a slip of tongue from Missy, then explodes at her family for keeping this from her.

This is where I ended the first draft of *Family Fixin's*, after Sharon Kay's outburst, with Uncle Lake showing Sharon Kay how to play clawhammer banjo and giving her his recipe. Uncle Lake and Sharon Kay ended up being sort of parallels of each other, both navigating peace and observing their family. They both take on the role of collecting the family's trauma: Uncle Lake does so with his banjo and Sharon Kay with her recipes. However, Sharon Kay realizes, after a summer of collecting these recipes and stories of her family, that she cannot collect forever; she has to do something with the information she is given. She has to take action to complete her arc as the protagonist. Without her taking action, the story does not have an end.

Most of the above I discovered in the Fall of 2022. During this semester, I submitted my script to the Women's + Inclusive Theatre Troupe script call. I found out in December of 2022 that they had chosen to produce it in the Spring 2023 semester. I will admit that when it was accepted, I had only about three or four scenes written for the final piece. This acceptance was a wake up call to how little time I had left to finish the piece and make it rehearsal ready. I wrote the missing scenes and got a draft to Dr. Davidson by December 31st.

There were a handful of major problems with this early draft, the first being the way that it ended. Ending with Sharon Kay and Uncle Lake didn't wrap it all up nicely. It felt as if something didn't conclude in a way that aligned with the purpose of the project. In scene ten, Sharon Kay yells at her grandmother for lying to her about Uncle Lake. Maryworth then sends

her outside until she is ready to come back in and apologize to them. This draft ended with Uncle Lake teaching Sharon Kay the banjo. However, I came to the conclusion that this ending robbed the audience of the main theme of the text. Ending here did not allow us to see the women of the family reconcile, therefore not allowing Sharon Kay or the other women to complete their character arc. To create a more satisfying ending to the piece, I added the final scene with Sharon Kay, Natalie, and Maryworth in the kitchen. Adding this scene allowed the plot to refocus itself back on the women of the family and give the audience hope for their story after the events of the play.

When I added this scene, I found another glaring problem within the script—Maryworth did not deserve Sharon Kay's rage. I had intended to write a strong-willed, stubborn, and mean character, but I ended up with someone who was only really mean in the first scene. She didn't deserve the anger Sharon Kay was directing at her. I ended up going through the script and editing her lines so she appears more aggressive and mean. I made her an angrier person, especially with Sharon Kay. Overall, I made Maryworth more tense and standoffish. She became more impatient and rough. The biggest problem, however, lay in scene 9. This became largely apparent during the read-through with the W+ITT cast of *Family Fixin's*. Maryworth and Natalie's dialogue in that scene was just too easy. Maryworth was too nice and Natalie was not mean enough. There was also the problem that the scene and the dialogue wasn't specific enough to the characters' stories. I added more details from Maryworth's backstory into the scene to make it more specific to her character.

From here, not many major edits were made to the script except line cuts and word changes. The production entered rehearsal by February of 2023. They had a completed script by March 29, 2023. After that point, I added nothing new to the plot and only did line cuts. Most of

these cuts were either Maryworth saying thank you, awkward wording, or cuts to improve pacing and impact of scene nine. By the time I was finished with the final draft, the script sat at 105 pages.

Performance and Audience Reaction

Watching *Family Fixin's* go from just a script to a full production was sincerely one of the most rewarding things I have done in my college career. As theatre artists, we often talk of the magic of theatre, the idea that it takes a village to raise a show and make a performance run effectively. I always knew this to be true, but watching this magic happen to a script I wrote truly made me realize the full power in the process. Designers worked diligently to represent this family's home and Piney Creek, NC. The actors put together pinterest boards, wrote journals from their characters perspective, and associated colors with their characters. The stage management team displayed meticulous planning and organizing in everything from the ridiculous amounts of food props to collecting enough set pieces to create a kitchen. The drive from the W+ITT executive board fundraiser and rally behind getting this story on the stage was something that I haven't seen matched.

I was especially impressed by Preston Hilliard and her dedication to the story. She approached this piece with determination, a mastery in pacing, and tightly focused character focused directing. On top of this, she worked hard to ensure her cast was safe, healthy, and loved throughout the process.

I will admit that I didn't have much to do with the rehearsal process. I gave a presentation at one of the first rehearsals on Piney Creek, NC and its surrounding areas. During this rehearsal, I also co-led an exercise with Hilliard to help actors imagine their surroundings and the setting of

the play. From there, I sat in at a couple of rehearsals and sat in at a designer run. At that point, I was mostly attending to watch for minor line cuts to make and edits to make in the future.

One of my other responsibilities for the production was creating a dramaturgy display. For this display, I wanted to focus on the elements that I believed made the story unique and helped build the world of these characters. Something that Hilliard decided to block into the show was that Uncle Lake had a journal he wrote in while he wasn't playing the banjo. I decided to create informational sheets that looked as if they were pulled from this journal. I did a sheet that displayed a family tree, a sheet on Southern Avoidance, and sheets describing Piney Creek, NC and the banjo and music featured in the show. I displayed outside of the I G Greer Studio Theatre on a clothesline. I wanted to include the imagery of the clothesline into the display because it was a part of the original scenic design (although this detail was later cut). Under the clothesline was a display that featured the recipes that served as inspiration for the recipe monologues in the show. We also supplied a basket into which audience members could insert their own family recipes. A total of ten recipes were added to the basket during the three show dates. On the first night of the show, Hilliard put in a recipe for popovers that they created with her grandmother when she was a child. On the last performance, her grandmother put in their recipe for apple pie. We even received a recipe for imperial rice from Cuba.

The reaction from the audience during and after the performance proved to be overwhelmingly positive. I was present for two out of the three shows, and the energy in the theatre was so alive. People were reacting, laughing, sighing; and I even saw a few tears. Many audience members told me that it reminded them of their home and they saw their own families within the characters. Emily Odum's mother told me it was one of the best things she has ever seen. A friend that I hold very dear thanked me with tears in his eyes for depicting rural queer

men. The cast received praise for their brilliant acting and timing and Hilliard for her careful direction and handling of the piece. In the week after, I received countless compliments from my peers in the hallway. One of my peers, Madisyn Fleming, asked to interview me for a paper she is writing on the future of Southern theatre. We discussed representation of Southern people on stage, the work that has to be done, and the future of theatre.

Moving Forward

I have a lot of hope and see a lot of potential in this project moving forward. I do think there are a few places the script needs to be tweaked. I want to rewrite scene nine. I plan to raise the stakes in the scene by having Natalie give Maryworth an ultimatum. I want Maryworth to not give in until she is backed into a corner. I want Natalie to tell her that if she doesn't talk to her and put effort in to improve her behavior and open the floor for conversations about the past she will take Sharon Kay and not allow Maryworth to see her again. I don't believe that Maryworth is the type of person to give in unless she absolutely has to; therefore, I think including this into a final iteration of the piece will mirror Sharon Kay having to ask Natalie to come to the barbecue and will improve the overall pacing of the scene.

One of the other major problems I want to fix in the script is the frequency at which Uncle Lake plays the banjo. I believe I can hone these stage directions to emphasize certain beats and moments differently. For example, within the first scene he plays almost the whole scene. When this scene existed as *The Chili Spoon*, it made more sense for him to play as frequently as he did, but in a full length version it seemed overbearing. There are other minor edits I want to make to improve pacing and tighten certain moments.

Moving forward, I plan to submit the script to Barter Theaters 2025 Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights after making the edits I wish to make. In the meantime, I want to search

for other theaters to send my script to and look into getting it published. Before this project, my biggest dream in the theatre world was to teach the art in public high schools. I did not see myself as someone who could achieve more than that. Throughout the process of creating this piece, I started to see myself differently. I built the confidence within myself as a theatre artist and started to imagine a different future for myself. The completion and the production of *Family Fixin's* proved to me that this future was possible. I have since decided to not pursue student teaching in the Fall of 2023 and take the theatre capstone course instead. I made this decision because I would like to pursue a career in playwriting and as a theatre artist. I have begun looking at graduate programs that align with this vision of my future. I hope to be a playwright that writes for a modern and diverse South. It has proven to me that I should never doubt myself and that I have the drive to make it in a highly competitive industry.

More importantly, this project has taught me countless lessons. It has taught me that I have a support system that I can trust to work through plot points and dialogue. It has taught me how to write full and realistic characters that represent a region I hold dear to my heart. It has shown me how to do my research and trust my gut. I hope to take these lessons into my future and use them to continue to create good art.

FAMILY FIXIN'S

By Michael Sousa

Characters

MARYWORTH - 67, a grandmother and mother

NATALIE - 42, a mother

SHARON KAY - 13, a daughter

UNCLE LAKE - 47, an uncle

MISSY - 59, a grandmother

COLE - 14, a grandson

Time and Place

Summer of 2022. Mid-June to July 4th. Piney Creek, NC off of
Bakers Ridge.

Scene 1

The kitchen of Maryworth's home and the porch connected. Both spaces should be visible to the audience. The kitchen is a family space full of history; antique kitchenware lines the walls, family photographs dating back, a family heirloom of a table. It is enough to make your heart sing home. MARYWORTH and NATALIE sit at the kitchen table in silence. UNCLE LAKE is playing a banjo on the porch. He watches and reacts to the women. They are listening. MARYWORTH is tapping her fingers against the wood in beat.

NATALIE

Mama, can you please stop that tapping? You're gonna drive me up the wall with it. (*MARYWORTH stops tapping on the table. She starts tapping her foot.*) You can't just go from one thing to another.

MARYWORTH

I can't help it. When Lake gets goin' on that thing!

NATALIE

I guess. He's gotten a lot better. Been a long time since I've heard him play.

MARYWORTH

Well, you could be out there playin' with him.

NATALIE

I know. I know.

MARYWORTH

Well, do you? Because you were supposed to come back, and you sure didn't.

NATALIE

It didn't work out that way. You know that.

MARYWORTH

(A second of silence.) When is that kid comin' back in from the crick?

NATALIE

Tired of talkin' to me then?

MARYWORTH

Yeah, that's about it.

NATALIE

(Sarcastically.) Mama!

MARYWORTH

Did I tell her I was gonna ring that bell on the porch?

NATALIE

I don't remember. I wasn't in here.

MARYWORTH

LAKE! *(The clawhammer ceases ringing.)* LAKE!

UNCLE LAKE

What?

MARYWORTH

Ring that bell for Sharon Kay! *(The sound of a dinner bell can be heard from the porch.)* Thank ya!

UNCLE LAKE

Loud enough?

MARYWORTH

Yes sir! Thank ya!

NATALIE

I'm surprised you let her go by herself. You've always been worried about us getting bit by copperheads out there.

MARYWORTH

I am not! She is big enough to know a damn snake.

NATALIE

Mmhm.

(They sit in silence for a few seconds. Footsteps are heard running up the porch. SHARON KAY runs in with wet shoes.)

SHARON KAY

Sorry if I'm late! I was just playing in the creek Oh, oh guess what I saw? Guess!

MARYWORTH

Kay your shoes are soakin' wet! Who do you think you are-

SHARON KAY

I saw a snake, Malmaw! It was sitting on a rock-

MARYWORTH

Aw, come on now take your shoes off, kid!

SHARON KAY

(Loudly while taking off her shoes.) He was sitting on a big ol rock in the sunlight. Oh! He was so-

NATALIE

Honey, honey, quiet down, you're gonna shake the roof down.

SHARON KAY

Oh, sorry, he was sooooo pretty.

NATALIE

Wasn't a copperhead, was it?

SHARON KAY

No. They look like they got fall leaves on their back. This one was just a black snake. Malmaw said to stay away from them. *(NATALIE chuckles and looks at MARYWORTH. UNCLE LAKE resumes the banjo.)* And that the nearest hospital was miles from here so if a snake gets me, they'll have to cut my leg off!

MARYWORTH

Oh, leave me be!

SHARON KAY

What?

NATALIE

I didn't say anything!

MARYWORTH

It's the way you look at me! Like you're tryin' to prove something. The nearest hospital is almost 20 miles away.

MARYWORTH
Remember when you were bit
out in the McConnell's field?

NATALIE
Yes, The time I was bit...

NATALIE
I didn't say nothing!

MARYWORTH
Well, you don't have to say it. I can see it all ov-

SHARON KAY
We gonna make chili? Uncle Lake said he was hungry when I came
in.

MARYWORTH
Of course, darlin, but he is gonna have to wait awhile on it
because it has gotta simmer.

SHARON KAY
Okay.

NATALIE
Better watch out, she is gonna make you run all around the
kitchen like a chicken with its head cut off. (*NATALIE reaches
to SHARON KAY and tickles her.*)

SHARON KAY
Quit it! I'm too old for that now.

NATALIE
Aw, come on. Who peed in your cornflakes this morning?

MARYWORTH
Oh, shush. It's not that bad. Come on, help me outta this chair,
kid. (*SHARON KAY runs to her grandmother to pull her up out of
the chair. The banjo stops.*)

SHARON KAY
I am so excited. Mama's been going on and on about how fun it is
to cook with you!

MARYWORTH
Like she ever liked cooking with me.

NATALIE
Mama, stop it, please.

MARYWORTH

When she was just older than you, she would yell from her bedroom that she didn't want to till she was blue in the face.

NATALIE

(NATALIE shoots a look at MARYWORTH. They hold eye contact. The banjo starts again.) Please don't tell her that.

MARYWORTH

Hasn't always been the cool collected city girl she is now.

NATALIE

You know what the problem was...

(MARYWORTH holds up her hand to silence NATALIE.)

MARYWORTH

Come on now, Sharon. Let's get cookin'!

SHARON KAY

All right!

(While the lines below are being said, MARYWORTH and SHARON KAY make their way to the counter. MARYWORTH starts messing about in the kitchen pulling out knives, cutting boards, and a large blue pot. NATALIE stays at the table and watches for a moment.)

NATALIE

(Under her breath.) You know why I left, mama.

MARYWORTH

What? Why you mumblin' over there girl? Speak up if you're tryna' say somethin'.

NATALIE

I said - *(She looks at her daughter. The banjo slows like UNCLE LAKE forgot the tune.)* I said do you need anything from the garden?

MARYWORTH

OH! *(The banjo stops.)* Yeah, actually, can you go grab one of those jalapeño peppers from the garden?

NATALIE

When did you start growing jalapenos?

MARYWORTH

Couple of years ago. Are you gonna go get it or keep interrogating me?

NATALIE

Okay, fine. I'm going!

SHARON KAY

Hurry! (*NATALIE smiles at her daughter and exits. MARYWORTH pulls an onion to the cutting board. She pulls forward a homemade can of ground beef.*) What's that?

MARYWORTH

It's ground beef, honey.

SHARON KAY

In a jar?

MARYWORTH

Canned it myself last spring. Now, you'll wanna write this down on that recipe card. You ready?

SHARON KAY

Yes ma'am.

MARYWORTH

Before you start you wanna brown your ground beef and season it.

SHARON KAY

With what?

MARYWORTH

Let me see. (*MARYWORTH takes the card and writes the seasonings on it. NATALIE enters.*)

NATALIE

This look good?

MARYWORTH

(*Not looking up.*) Yeah.

SHARON KAY

Mama, why don't we can stuff?

NATALIE

Well, since we live down in Charlotte, we don't need to can things. We just have to drive five minutes down the road to pick it up from the Food Lion.

MARYWORTH

Your mama decided to leave her roots so now you don't get to learn the traditions. *(The banjo picks up.)* Gosh, to have you home in August when we can tomatoes! You'd just love it! Now dice up that onion.

SHARON KAY

Okay. *(She starts to cut the onion.)*

MARYWORTH

Why are you doing it like that? Do it like this. *(MARYWORTH takes the knife and shows her what to do.)*

NATALIE

That's just how I taught her to do it. My friend who works in professional kitchens taught me to cut it like that to make it faster and even.

MARYWORTH

This isn't a professional kitchen. It is mine. I'm teachin' her. Not some yuppy know-it-all from Charlotte. *(She places the knife on the cutting board.)* Keep cuttin' Sharon. Get the jalapeno and bell peppers to cut next. Write it down on the recipe card.

SHARON KAY

How do you want me to-

MARYWORTH

Just do as I say kid.

SHARON KAY

(Quietly.) Yes ma'am.

NATALIE

You don't need to talk to her like that.

MARYWORTH

Natalie, stay out of it.

NATALIE

She's my daughter.

MARYWORTH

And she is m- (*SHARON KAY winces and steps away from the cutting board with tears in her eyes.*) Did you cut yourself? Let me see!

SHARON KAY

No, it's the onion. (*The banjo speeds up.*) It hurts my eyes.

NATALIE

Here, let me finish it, baby. You did so good to start! Start cuttin' up those peppers like grandma said and I-.

SHARON KAY

Yes mama.

MARYWORTH

Oh, bull. Grow up and cut the damn onion.

NATALIE

Do not talk to my daughter like that!

MARYWORTH

Well, back when I was a kid-

NATALIE

Oh, dear lord. Can't you just drop it?

MARYWORTH

-you didn't cry and give up. Your mama didn't take over for you. There weren't no-

NATALIE

It is not that big of a deal, mama! She is just a kid.

MARYWORTH

Kids need to be taught discipline or they grow up and walk all over you. Got a clear example of that over here.

NATALIE

Jesus Christ! She does not walk all over me! She is a good kid!

MARYWORTH

Sure, a kid who can't even cut onions.

NATALIE

Just because everyone can't be as tough as you, doesn't mean that you-

MARYWORTH

What did you say, girl?

NATALIE

I can't take this anymore. I need some fresh air. Sharon, just do what your grandmother says.

SHARON KAY

All right...

(NATALIE exits stage left to the porch. There is a moment of silence. The banjo stops. MARYWORTH wipes her hands on her apron. The banjo starts.)

SHARON KAY

(Slowly.) Do we put the vegetables in the pot now?

MARYWORTH

Yeah, go ahead. I already put some butter in the bottom.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

MARYWORTH

You know, this is just what your mama does. Lets her emotions get the best of her. Hand me that can of beef. We're gonna put that in first. Brown it up a little more. Are you writing this stuff on that recipe card?

SHARON KAY

Yes ma'am. I am.

MARYWORTH

Okay, now come mix it up. She used to be so disrespectful growin' up and I can see that ain't ever gonna change. She gets mean, just like them copperheads.

SHARON KAY

I don't know. She just has her moments sometimes, everyone does.

MARYWORTH

You don't know the half of it, kid. That girl is venomous if you put her in the right mood for it.

SHARON KAY

Are you talking about when she went to college?

MARYWORTH

She was supposed to come back and teach in Ashe County.

SHARON KAY

She told me she just wanted to teach in the city.

MARYWORTH

Listen, she promised me she would come back and settle down in Great Aunt Katherine's old house. She didn't do that.

SHARON KAY

Well Dad had a job in-

MARYWORTH

Now that beautiful house sits empty on that hill.

SHARON KAY

It's not-

NATALIE

(From off stage coming in. The banjo slows to UNCLE LAKE plucking out a tune.) Sorry y'all. I just had to collect myself. Got a bit anxious. Let's make this chili.

MARYWORTH

It'd do you good to not talk to your mama like that honey. It's all right. We were just 'bout to add the tomatoes in.

NATALIE

(NATALIE steps beside SHARON KAY.) Need help stirring while you dump them in?

SHARON KAY

Yeah!

MARYWORTH

Here darlin'. Got them open for you and everything. Next is the black beans and kidney beans.

(They form a line of passing jars, dumping them, and stirring. They work together for a moment. UNCLE LAKE plays in time with them. He stops when they do.)

SHARON KAY

Is that all we have to do? Is it done?

MARYWORTH

I've got a little secret for you kid. How we get it to taste so good Uncle Lake out there eats five bowls.

UNCLE LAKE

Did you say something about me?

MARYWORTH

Oh, stay out there, Lake.

UNCLE LAKE

Is supper almost ready? I'm bout starving.

MARYWORTH

It's got a bit longer. Leave us be.

(SHARON KAY and NATALIE giggle at the pair.)

MARYWORTH

He's been impatient his whole damn life.

SHARON KAY

What's the secret? *(MARYWORTH pulls open a drawer and pulls out a packet of chili seasoning. She places it on the counter and slides it over to SHARON KAY.)* This is it?

MARYWORTH

Well, yeah.

SHARON KAY

Really? This is just the stuff they sell at Walmart. *(UNCLE LAKE starts playing again.)* Me and mama make our own spice mixes.

MARYWORTH

What?

SHARON KAY

You know, for tacos and stuff. We made one for fried chicken last week. Mama says these have too much salt in them.

NATALIE

(Quick and pointed. Like MARYWORTH.) Sharon Kay, stop it.

SHARON KAY

What? You said they're bad for your heart.

MARYWORTH

Is that what you really think of me?

NATALIE

Mama, it don't mean nothin'.

MARYWORTH

Oh, I don't believe you for one second. Sharon Kay, what does she tell you about me when I'm not around?

SHARON KAY

She don't-

NATALIE

Stay out of it.

MARYWORTH

Now what happened to letting the kid speak? Being kind to her?

NATALIE

Mama, please, calm down. Just listen to me.

MARYWORTH

Like you know shit about kindness. You see the opportunity and you bite. You sink your teeth in before even thinkn' about the damage you do. Now, not only am I stupid, but you think I'm unhealthy too.

NATALIE

I never said any of that about you. Not once in my whole life.

MARYWORTH

BULLSHIT! All you have ever done your whole life is look down your nose at the rest of this family. Mind you we are hard workers, Natalie. We are good people. We-

NATALIE

I never-

MARYWORTH

Maybe you don't have to say it, but I seen it in your face-

NATALIE

That's not true.

MARYWORTH

Yes, it is! Yes, it is!

SHARON KAY

Please- please just stop it. Stop fighting

NATALIE

(Yelling.) Sharon Kay, just go in the other room.

MARYWORTH

And you know what the worst part of all of this is? You brought your own daughter into all of it. You filled her head with lies! You poisoned her.

NATALIE

Please, just calm down.

MARYWORTH

You will not tell me what to do! I am your mother!

NATALIE

Mama!

MARYWORTH

Just like always I'm the villain! I'm the devil sent from hell to ruin your plans.

NATALIE

You're making something out of nothing! I didn't even say anything.

MARYWORTH

The tone! The tone you take with me!

NATALIE

If you don't stop yelling at me, I will walk out of the front door.

MARYWORTH

I knew you'd do this! You're just a snake! That's all you've ever been.

(UNCLE LAKE plays as intensely as ever. SHARON KAY takes a deep breath and grabs her recipe card. She steps away from her kin. Slowly she walks to the edge of the stage. She looks into the audience. MARYWORTH and NATALIE continue to argue.)

SHARON KAY

Ingredients: two bell peppers, red and green, a mother, one large onion, one jalapeño, a grandmother, ground beef, two cans of diced tomatoes, one can of black beans, *(She pauses. Acknowledging herself.)* one young girl I suppose, one can of kidney beans, seasonings... *(MARYWORTH slaps NATALIE. SHARON KAY flinches. They continue arguing.)* They passed this recipe down. Since my "great great great grandmother." Step one. Dice your

SHARON KAY (contd.)

vegetables. "It's our best kept family secret, you know." Then you brown your ground beef. Store bought or canned, it doesn't matter, either work. But "canned is better". Season it with paprika, a pinch of spite, salt, a dash of misunderstandin', pepper, cumin, and never endin' need for your mother's approval and love. Step two. Add your vegetables to sauté. Add garlic; it helps balance the spite. Step Three. Add your canned goods. Step four. Simmer, for years and years and years. Step five. Hand it off, share it, eat till you're full of it.

(The banjo and arguing silences. MARYWORTH and NATALIE look at SHARON KAY. The lights cut to black.)

SCENE 2

The next morning. NATALIE sits at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee in front of her. SHARON KAY enters.

SHARON KAY

Good mornin'.

NATALIE

Hey honey, how'd you sleep?

SHARON KAY

Good. Malmaw up yet?

NATALIE

Not quite. I heard her moving around in there. Everything all right?

SHARON KAY

(Shyly.) Yeah, it's all right.

NATALIE

You know you don't have to stay.

SHARON KAY

I know. I wanna. I told you I did.

NATALIE

Well, it don't have to be for the whole summer, ya know? You can come home anytime you want to.

SHARON KAY

I know mama. You don't gotta keep tellin' me.

NATALIE

I just want you to know-

SHARON KAY

(Rolling her eyes.) I know! I can come home anytime I want. All I gotta do is call and you'll be trailing fire up the mountain.

NATALIE

All right then. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry about yesterday. *(SHARON KAY gives a strained smile.)* She jus- I'm sorry I'm not staying with you anymore.

SHARON KAY

I'm gonna go brush my teeth.

(SHARON KAY exits. MARYWORTH enters quietly with her head down. NATALIE notices. MARYWORTH moves to the kitchen and starts pulling out ingredients to make breakfast. After all the ingredients are out, she speaks.)

MARYWORTH

Mornin'.

NATALIE

The coffee in the pot should still be fresh.

MARYWORTH

Thank you. *(She starts pouring herself a cup.)* Did you sleep well in the guest room?

NATALIE

Mhmm. Slept with the window open.

MARYWORTH

Me too. That breeze was nice.

NATALIE

That's definitely what I miss the most. Charlotte is like sitting in a crockpot.

MARYWORTH

(She starts to make breakfast. Toast and eggs.) It's all them buildings. Stops the wind from coming in. *(NATALIE laughs. It is genuine.)* You know I'm right!

NATALIE

Your guess is as good as mine, mama. *(Beat.)* Kind of funny Sharon is staying in my old room.

MARYWORTH

Best view in the house.

NATALIE

Lake stayed jealous. Mama, I wanted to talk-

(MARYWORTH chuckles in agreement. SHARON KAY enters.)

MARYWORTH

Mornin' kiddo.

SHARON KAY

Can I have coffee?

MARYWORTH

Sure, go on ahead.

NATALIE

No, you cannot.

(MARYWORTH and NATALIE make eye contact.)

NATALIE

I guess it won't hurt her.

SHARON KAY

(Pouring herself a cup, smugly.) Guess I'm a big kid now.

MARYWORTH

Keep thinking that kid. How was that room?

SHARON KAY

Good. I slept with the window open. I hope that's okay?

MARYWORTH

I don't mind.

(MARYWORTH prepares the plates of breakfast. She lays out plates of eggs and toast. She places jam on the table. The conversation happens while the three eat.)

NATALIE

Thank you for breakfast mama.

SHARON KAY

Yeah, thank you! *(She digs into the jam and her food.)*

MARYWORTH

Lake brought the jam over last week from Missy.

NATALIE

I'm still trying to get that recipe from her.

SHARON KAY

Are y'all talkin' about Great Aunt Missy?

\

NATALIE

Yeah, your Aunt Missy.

MARYWORTH

Yes, Sharon, Aunt Missy

SHARON KAY

(Egg in her mouth.) Oh!

MARYWORTH

She said Cole is shooting up like a bean sprout. I wish you could have seen him before you had to head home.

NATALIE

Oh, really? I don't think I've seen him since he was about this high.

SHAORN KAY

Who's Cole?

MARYWORTH

Honey, he's your cousin. Well second cousin, I think. Is that right, Natalie?

NATALIE

Yes Mama. He's her second cousin.

SHARON KAY

He's Missy's kid, right?

MARYWORTH

Missy's daughters' kid.

SHARON KAY

Do I know her?

MARYWORTH

I don't know. Well anyway, you've met him at least.

SHARON KAY

Have I? I don't remember no one named Cole, Malmaw

MARYWORTH

No, you did. At your Uncle Lake's wedding, remember?

SHARON KAY

I don't know if I- Uncle Lake is married?

NATALIE

Oh, we didn't come to the wedding, remember? He was here that one Christmas we came to visit.

SHARON KAY

Wait, was Cole the one that started the Nerf war in the barn?

MARYWORTH

Is that what y'all were doin'?

SHARON KAY

Yeah. I haven't ever had that much fun.

MARYWORTH

Well, you'll get to see him more this summer.

NATALIE

Well, I guess I better get going. I wanted to stop at the Food City over in Independence and grab a few bags of that Big Spring seasoned flour.

MARYWORTH

Oh, they don't make that stuff anymore. They shut the mill down.

NATALIE

Really?

MARYWORTH

Mhmm, they shut down in August. They were open for 172 years, did you know that?

NATALIE

Wow. *(Finishes her plate.)* Well, I've already put all my stuff in the car.

MARYWORTH

You don't gotta leave so soon, Natalie.

NATALIE

I've got some errands to run.

MARYWORTH

I wish you could stay.

NATALIE

I told you, mama. Something came up and they need me for summer camp.

(SHARON KAY shoots NATALIE a look. She knows this is a lie.)

MARYWORTH

Are you sure you can't stay? I was looking forward to having my girls for the summer.

NATALIE

Mama, I was only going to stay for a few weeks anyways.

MARYWORTH

I know, but-

NATALIE

I gotta get going.

MARYWORTH

Well, all right. If you insist. You grab some of them leftovers from last night before you head out. I put some in a tubber ware for you.

NATALIE

All right, I will. *(Going to the fridge.)* Thank you for letting me stay last night.

MARYWORTH

Least I could do.

NATALIE

Sharon Kay, you be good for your Malmaw, okay. I don't want to have to come back up here to give you a talkin' to.

SHARON KAY

I'll be good. I promise.

MARYWORTH

And if she's not I can handle it myself. *(She winks at SHARON KAY and nudges her elbow. SHARON KAY giggles.)*

NATALIE

(Kisses the top of SHARON KAY'S head.) I'll miss you.

SHARON KAY

I'll miss you too, mama.

NATALIE

All right then. Bye. Thank you again for letting her stay.

MARYWORTH

I wouldn't want it any other way.

NATALIE

I'll see y'all later. *(Exits.)*

MARYWORTH

Well, run on upstairs and get out of your pajamas. You're gonna help me in the garden today.

SHARON KAY

(Chugs the rest of her coffee.) Okay!

(SHARON KAY exits. MARYWORTH leans back in her chair and smiles. All is well.)

Scene 3

SHARON KAY sits at the kitchen table with MARYWORTH across from her clipping coupons out of the newspaper. UNCLE LAKE sits on the porch with his banjo. He tunes and plays cheerfully.

MARYWORTH

Oooo, look at this one! Buy one get one on Doritos. You like those, don't ya?

SHARON KAY

Yeah, do you?

MARYWORTH

Mmmmm, not really.

SHARON KAY

Why?

MARYWORTH

They're spicy.

SHARON KAY

(Giggling.) I mean not really.

MARYWORTH

Well, one time I got them cause they were out of corn chips, bout felt like my tongue was going to fall off.

SHARON KAY

You must of got the spicy ones then.

MARYWORTH

I got the ones that said sweet chili!

SHARON KAY

Sweet SPICY chili. See. *(Pointing to the ad.)*

MARYWORTH

Well, I'll be.

SHARON KAY

That's okay. Mama gets the wrong flavor too.

(UNCLE LAKE stops playing.)

MARYWORTH

Does she?

SHARON KAY

Mmhmm, one time she go-

UNCLE LAKE

(Hollerin' from the porch.) MAMA! Missy is coming up the drive. Did you know she was comin'?

MARYWORTH

No, I did not!

UNCLE LAKE

Well, looks like she's got Cole with her too.

MARYWORTH

Did she tell you?

UNCLE LAKE

No.

MARYWORTH

I swear, she never calls when she is about to visit. Most people like a warnin' first. Don't you think, Sharon?

SHARON KAY

I have a friend that lives next door and sometimes he just walks into the backyard.

MARYWORTH

Sounds like he needs to learn some manners.

(MISSY and COLE enter onto the porch.)

MISSY

Well, hey there, Lake.

UNCLE LAKE

Hey Missy. Cole.

COLE

Howdy sir. How you been?

(MISSY continues into the house. COLE stays on the porch with UNCLE LAKE.)

MISSY

MARYWORTH! Hey there, honey!

MARYWORTH

Now look what the cat done dragged in. You didn't call again.

MISSY

Could have sworn I called you yesterday to tell you.. Well, well, well, is that Sharon Kay? You don't remember me, do ya?

SHARON KAY

No! I do!

MISSY

How's your mama been? I don't think I've seen either of you in years now.

SHARON KAY

Good. She's working on-

MISSY

And your daddy?

SHARON KAY

He's all right. Mama sai-

MISSY

And have you been enjoying staying with your grandma?

SHARON KAY

Yes ma'am. Yesterday she show-

MISSY

Good. Good. Well, you are welcome by anytime. Your grandma ain't the only good cook in this family, you know.

MARYWORTH

Missy! I'm a better one than you. You couldn't even boil water till I told you how.

MISSY

Now, just because you did all the cookin' when we were young does not mean you're the best.

MARYWORTH

Well, Daddy always liked my roast more.

MISSY

And my chicken and dumplings are the biggest hit at the church's potluck.

MARYWORTH

That recipe is mine! I showed you how to ma-

MISSY

Now, I'm just messin'. Calm down. Did you hear me Sharon, come by anytime, okay?

SHARON KAY

Yes, ma'am.

MISSY

You'll learn secrets from me Maryworth ain't even heard.

MARYWORTH

Sure, she will. Did you see this week's paper? Food Lion's got some good deals on produce.

MISSY

Well, don't buy any green beans or squash. My garden did real well this year.

MARYWORTH

I'll just have to give you some tomatoes 'round September. I just know that patch is about to burst with 'em.

(SHARON KAY leaves the table and goes to the porch. MARYWORTH and MISSY go through the paper cutting out coupons and circling deals.)

UNCLE LAKE

I heard Terry and Susan were looking for help at Riverside Canoe over in Crumpler. You could probably ask them.

COLE

I just don't know how'd I get out there-

SHARON KAY

Please tell me y'all ain't talking about beans?

COLE

Nah.

UNCLE LAKE

Cole here has been looking for a summer job. You could get out there and make some money too, Sharon. Wouldn't hurt ya' to get some muscles and a nice farmer's tan.

SHARON KAY

I'm not old enough to work yet.

COLE

You could find somethin'. Lots of people are willin' to pay under the table for odd jobs.

SHARON KAY

You're Cole, right?

COLE

Yeah. I reckon so.

SHARON KAY

You reckon?

COLE

It's a joke.

SHARON KAY

Oh. Funny. I'm Sharon Kay.

COLE

I know who you are. I remember. You shot up like a bean pole though.

SHARON KAY

Oh! Well-

(UNCLE LAKE picks up his banjo and plays nonchalantly.)

COLE

Where are you from again?

SHARON KAY

Charlotte. You live here, right?

COLE

Born and raised in little old Sparta.

SHARON KAY

That must be cool.

COLE

Kind of borin'.

SHARON KAY

It's prettier up here than down there.

COLE

Guess so, Granny always says the mountains are just "something nice to look at". (Beat.) Hey, you seen the creek yet?

SHARON KAY

Yeah, I went yesterday. Saw a snake and everything.

COLE

You never seen a snake before?

SHARON KAY

Not like that.

COLE

What do you mean?

SHARON KAY

It was all curled up on this big rock in the sun.

COLE

They're pretty when they aren't comin' after you.

SHARON KAY

Trust me, I've been warned.

COLE

Let me guess, Maryworth gave you the copperhead lecture?

SHARON KAY

Yeah.

COLE

I get it every spring. It's her most practiced one.

UNCLE LAKE

(Pauses playing.) Mamas always been scared of snakes. She told me one slithered out from under her bed when she was little and she ran screamin' out the house. Missy said you could hear her yellin' all the way by the creek.

SHARON KAY

What happened to the snake?

UNCLE LAKE

Your great grandma handled it.

COLE

Someone always ends up telling that story too. I think I've heard it three different ways now.

UNCLE LAKE

Oh yeah. Uncle Ray always tries to say the snake came out of the closet instead of under the bed.

SHARON KAY

Was he there?

COLE

Apparently.

(MARYWORTH crosses to the porch with MISSY.)

MARYWORTH

And Ray's version is malarkey. Bastard came out from under the bed.

MISSY

Language! There are children.

MARYWORTH

(Snorting.) They've heard worse. Sharon, me and Missy are gonna go shopping. You want to come?

SHARON KAY

Is it okay if I stay here?

MARYWORTH

Well, Uncle Lake don't want to get stuck babysit-

UNCLE LAKE

I don't mind, Mama.

MARYWORTH

Well, are you sure you don't wanna go honey? I might get the wrong flavor of those Doritos if you don't come.

SHARON KAY

No, you won't. It's okay if you do too. I like them all.

MARYWORTH

All right then. We'll be back before supper time.

MISSY

Cole, be good. Lake, try not go crazy honey. See you soon, Miss Sharon.

(As MARYWORTH and MISSY exit, UNCLE LAKE resumes playing his banjo.)

COLE

Hey, you wanna go fishin'?

SHARON KAY

I ain't ever been fishin'.

COLE

I'll teach ya, don't worry. Lake, we're gonna go to the creek.

(UNCLE LAKE nods in acknowledgement, playing the children off the stage and the scene to an end.)

SCENE 4

MARYWORTH stands at the kitchen counter elbows deep in dishes. SHARON KAY stands at the counter mixing cornbread batter in a bowl. UNCLE LAKE resumes his usual spot on the porch. He is asleep with his banjo on his lap.

MARYWORTH

How's it lookin' sweetheart? Coming together?

SHARON KAY

Mhmmm. Looks like it. You said it's okay if there are lumps?

MARYWORTH

Yeah, that's all right! Helps give it that texture we're going for.

SHARON KAY

Really?

MARYWORTH

If you think it's ready, we can put it in the skillet, honey.

SHARON KAY

I think it is. You come look at it.

MARYWORTH

(MARYWORTH takes the bowl and mixes it a few more times.) Looks good to me! The skillet is in the stove preheating. We have t-

SHARON KAY

Why do we have to preheat it?

MARYWORTH

It's cast-iron honey.

SHARON KAY

What's that?

MARYWORTH

It just means it's made from pig iron. So, it's really thick and heavy. The pan needs to heat up first, just like the oven, or it won't cook. Did your mama not teach you that?

SHARON KAY

No.

MARYWORTH

That's what you got your malmaw for then. Now, if you don't have any more questions, open the oven for me.

SHARON KAY

All right. (*SHARON KAY pours the batter into the skillet. Scraping the sides down. MARYWORTH moves to slide it into the oven.*) Can I put it in?

MARYWORTH

It's heavy and very hot.

SHARON KAY

I can do it.

MARYWORTH

Okay. (*She hands her the oven mitts.*) Be careful. Sharon Kay, be careful, you hear me?

SHARON KAY

Yes. I do.

MARYWORTH

Okay, good. Now it bakes for 25 minutes.

SHARON KAY

That's it?

MARYWORTH

Mmhmm.

SHARON KAY

I always thought it took more to make bread.

MARYWORTH

Well, this is cornbread. Some bread you gotta let rise for hours.

SHARON KAY

Oh, so the yeast works!

MARYWORTH

Who told you that?

SHARON KAY

Mama. We make your sourdough all the time.

MARYWORTH

Oh.

SHARON KAY

What's wrong?

MARYWORTH

Can I tell you a secret?

SHARON KAY

Yeah.

MARYWORTH

That recipe ain't really mine.

SHARON KAY

It's not?

MARYWORTH

Nah. It's my mama's great grandmother's. When did your mama teach you that?

SHARON KAY

I think I was seven when we first made it.

MARYWORTH

That's about the time I learned to make it. But by the time I was your age I knew how to make every dish in that recipe book. Almost by heart. I did all the cooking in the house.

SHARON KAY

Why did you have to do all the cooking?

MARYWORTH

My Mama, your Great Grandma, died when I was young. Eleven. I was the oldest. Had to take care of Missy and Charles. Myself too. And Daddy.

SHARON KAY

I'm sorry.

MARYWORTH

Now, I don't need pity honey.

SHARON KAY

I, well, you were just a kid. I couldn't do that.

MARYWORTH

You do what you gotta do. Run tell Lake dinner will be ready soon. All we got left to do is to put the dumplings in and make the creamed spinach. Okay?

SHARON KAY

Okay. (*SHARON KAY crosses to the porch.*) Uncle Lake. Uncle Lake. Uncle Lake? Hey, Uncle Lake. Wake up.

UNCLE LAKE

Hmmm. What?! What is it?

SHARON KAY

Nothin'. Nothin'. Malmaw said to wake you up. Dinner is almost ready?

UNCLE LAKE

How long I asleep for?

SHARON KAY

I don't know.

UNCLE LAKE

Dear lord, it's five o'clock. Frank should be here soon.

SHARON KAY

Who's Frank?

UNCLE LAKE

We live together. Don't you remember?

SHARON KAY

Oh, yeah. He's your roommate?

UNCLE LAKE

Uh. (*Beat.*) I guess, sure.

SHARON KAY

Malmaw taught me how to make corn bread.

UNCLE LAKE

She did? Old ass recipe.

SHARON KAY

How old?

UNCLE LAKE

It's from your great great great granddaddy. No, great great great great. Four times. Right? I think, yeah.

SHARON KAY

How'd he get it?

UNCLE LAKE

Apparently, it came from the wife of the man who owned the mill. One lady gave it to another and we ain't found a better one yet.

SHARON KAY

Wouldn't that make it her recipe? (*UNCLE LAKE shrugs and starts plucking a tune across the strings of his banjo.*) When did you start playing that?

UNCLE LAKE

Huh? Well, I was just a kid.

SHARON KAY

Who taught you?

UNCLE LAKE

Your great granddaddy. He played.

SHARON KAY

Did you always want to learn?

UNCLE LAKE

Good Lord, kid. You've got a lot of questions flying around up in there.

SHARON KAY

Oh, sorry.

UNCLE LAKE

No, no, it's good to be curious about things. I guess I didn't always want to learn.

SHARON KAY

Really? Why do you still do it then?

UNCLE LAKE

It just became second nature. Got close to my grandfather too. He would tell me stories about him and grandma loading everyone up and going to the fiddlers' convention in Galax.

SHARON KAY

Oh, great grandma died when Malmaw was young, right?

UNCLE LAKE

Yeah. She passed before I was even thought up, but I remember the stories about her.

SHARON KAY

What stories?

UNCLE LAKE

Oh, Mama is better at telling them than I am. Go in there and ask her to tell you the story about how that skillet put this dent in the porch.

SHARON KAY

(SHARON KAY turns on her heel into the kitchen. UNCLE LAKE starts to steadily play his banjo.) Malmaw! Malmaw?

MARYWORTH

Where'd you go?

SHARON KAY

I was just talkin' to Uncle Lake. He told me-

MARYWORTH

Come on, we gotta cut the dumplings and drop them in. *(She starts slicing the dough with a pizza cutter and UNCLE LAKE starts to play.)* You wanna make the creamed spinach?

SHARON KAY

Yeah. Can you-

MARYWORTH

Grab the spinach out of the fridge and the heavy cream.

SHARON KAY

Okay. *(She brings it to her.)* Uncle Lake said-

MARYWORTH

Put the spinach in that pan so it can start to wilt. Then add the cream.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

MARYWORTH

You got it?

SHARON KAY

Yeah. Uncle Lake told me to-

MARYWORTH

Lake said what? Is Frank not coming anymore?

SHARON KAY

No, no. Malmaw, just listen-

MARYWORTH

What is it? You always got a question or something to say, don't you?

SHARON KAY

Well, I, I just wanted, it's really no-

MARYWORTH

Spit it out!

SHARON KAY

Uncle Lake told me to ask you about the dent in the porch.

MARYWORTH

Oh. Well, my mama did it.

SHARON KAY

How?

MARYWORTH

That's not important right now. You got a job to do.

SHARON KAY

I just wanna know.

MARYWORTH

Fine. I'll tell you but keep stirring that spinach.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

MARYWORTH

It was a real hot summers day, and that was before we put the air conditionin' in the house, so the kitchen was hotter than church in July. Anyways, she was makin' cornbread in that cast iron skillet on the wall. See, the big one?

SHARON KAY

Yeah.

MARYWORTH

Well, she was mixin' it for the family reunion, so she was making about three batches, and she was carrying them outside to cool on the picnic tables. She brings that last one out, had just done the dishes too, kitchen was clean! Then she trips over a board she'd been beggin' Daddy to nail back into place, drops the skillet, and dents the porch with it! Me and Missy are upstairs, I don't remember what we were doing, and hear her start cussin' up a storm. We run down and she's taking these big handfuls of cornbread and throwin' them all over the yard. Hard as she could. Well, Daddy heard the commotion from the barn, so he comes runnin' 'round the side of the house and Mama hits him right in the head with a handful of cornbread. Boy, I was so young I almost peed myself laughin'.

SHARON KAY

What did you do about the cornbread in the yard?

MARYWORTH

Let the chickens out.

(They laugh together, then return to their tasks of stirring. MARYWORTH taps her foot to the music.)

SHARON KAY

I think I can add the cream now. How much?

MARYWORTH

I'd do about this much. You don't want the spinach to be submerged. Just simmerin' in it. Okay?

SHARON KAY

Okay. Thank you.

MARYWORTH

Of course. Looks good. Smells good too.

SHARON KAY

Well, thank you! Learned from the best, Malmaw.

MARYWORTH

You're just trying to get ice cream after dinner. *(The timer for the cornbread goes off.)* Oh! Watch out. Let me pull that out from the oven. *(SHARON KAY scoots over but stays stirring the pot. UNCLE LAKE picks up his speed.)* No, you gotta get out of the way.

SHARON KAY

It's all right. You won't get me.

MARYWORTH

(Firmly.) I said get back.

SHARON KAY

Fine.

(In quick movements, SHARON KAY moves back and MARYWORTH pulls the cornbread out. She closes the oven and takes a step back right into SHARON KAY. SHARON KAY yelps and MARYWORTH drops the pan onto the counter.)

MARYWORTH

I told you to get back! Now if I had got you with that hot skillet, you'd be burnt to a crisp! Then you'd be awful sorry for not listenin' like you're supposed to. If you'd just listen, I wouldn't have to worry so much! *(Beat. The two lock eyes and UNCLE LAKE starts playing a slow soft song. Like his banjo is whispering. MARYWORTH steps to the kitchen table and sits down. SHARON KAY pulls out an index card and pen.)* You really want this one? Mine? It's an old one. *(SHARON KAY nods.)* Okay. Well, it's two cups of cornmeal. Fresh if you can find it, but that ain't easy to find anymore. Nothing old and valuable is easy to find anymore. You need two teaspoons of baking powder. One teaspoon of grief, and an eldest daughter expected to take her place. Expected to take care of the kids left behind, keep them fed and in school. Not to mention takin' care of Daddy. Then you need one cup of butter milk and two children of your own later down the line. More people to take care of than you can count. Oh, and of course, to make really good cornbread you need a cast iron skillet that's been in your family so long no one can

MARYWORTH (contd.)

remember who had it first. You've got to grease and preheat your pan. Just let it sit in the oven while it's coming up to 425. Then you mix it all into a bowl until just combined. Lumps are okay, they help you cushion your kids. Stops them from having the same life you did. A whole life built around serving. Then, you want to let that cook for 25 to 30 minutes. Serve for your family.

*(SHARON KAY makes eye contact with MARYWORTH.
MARYWORTH turns away, uncomfortable. SHARON KAY exits
out the porch.)*

Scene 5

A few days later. MARYWORTH stands in the kitchen talking to MISSY.

MARYWORTH

Well, I do think we will have to make more sun tea this year for sure. You know how Bill LOVES his sun tea.

MISSY

Now that's just another thing for me to think about.

MARYWORTH

I can make it.

MISSY

No, I'll just add it to the list.

MARYWORTH

I will make it.

MISSY

Well, if you're sure. I'll have to make it up to you.

MARYWORTH

Well, you can just bring me those pitchers and it'll be all right.

(SHARON KAY bolts into the kitchen from the porch.)

SHARON KAY

Malmaw! Malmaw! Guess wh- Oh. Sorry. Hey Missy!

MARYWORTH

If we make three pitchers of sun tea, I don't see why we would need to make lemonade too. Can't we just buy it?

MISSY

Buy it! I'll be, I have never heard you say that!

SHARON KAY

What are y'all talkin' about?

MARYWORTH

We're talkin' about the 4th of July barbeque.

MISSY

It turns her upside down and sideways every year.

MARYWORTH

It does not!

SHARON KAY

I didn't know we were gonna do something that big for it.

MARYWORTH

We do it every year, honey.

SHARON KAY

Oh. Well, can Cole come?

MISSY

Bless your heart, Sharon.

MARYWORTH

Cole is there every year. The whole family comes.

SHARON KAY

Really?

MARYWORTH

Yes. Now, stop pesterin' me!

MISSY

Oh, the Conrads, the ones who go to St Francis, they want to know what we're doin' this year.

MARYWORTH

They always gotta know everything don't they.

MISSY

And always holier than thou too.

MARYWORTH

Well, you can't say that because you did the same thing when you were young.

MISSY

I did not!

MARYWORTH

Yes, you did!

MISSY

Now, where did you get that cockamamie idea?

MARYWORTH

Whenever Mish Welch would ask you what your favorite place to go was, you'd bat your little eyes and say, "The good lord's house."

MISSY

I don't remember that!

MARYWORTH

I do! Clear as day.

MISSY

I think you're making up stories, Maryworth.

MARYWORTH

I am not a liar! You're the one who's-

SHARON KAY

Missy, is Cole going down to the creek tomorrow?

MISSY

He's always down there. If we buy lemonade, we should get that fancy brand?

MARYWORTH

Simply?

MISSY

Yeah, pour it in the pitchers so no one knows the wiser.

MARYWORTH

I don't care what we do with it. I just don't want to make that much lemonade again.

MISSY

All right! And you won't have to. Don't need to go biting everyone's head off. I ought to get goin'. I've gotta make supper and feed the goats.

MARYWORTH

Okay, hun.

MISSY

Sharon Kay, a joy as always. Help your Granny with dinner. She's getting old and can't judge the salt as good.

SHARON KAY

Bye, Missy.

(MISSY exits.)

MARYWORTH

I don't know how I haven't strangled her yet.

SHARON KAY

Malmaw, why have we never come to the barbeque?

MARYWORTH

Huh? Oh. Well, I used to call your mama and invite her, but something was always happening.

SHARON KAY

Have you this year?

MARYWORTH

No.

SHARON KAY

Why?

MARYWORTH

Cause she is just gonna say no.

SHARON KAY

But I'm here.

MARYWORTH

You really think that's gonna make a difference? She left you by yourself here so fast you could of thought there was a fire under her chair.

SHARON KAY

I think we should at least try.

MARYWORTH

Sharon Kay, no.

SHARON KAY

Why not? I'm sure sh-

MARYWORTH

I said no. That's it. End of discussion.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

MARYWORTH

Now, run grab that fabric from the hall closet. I'm gonna pull the sewing machine out.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

(SHARON KAY exits.)

SCENE 6

COLE and SHARON KAY sit by a creek. COLE is holding a fishing pole in the water, but it is not his priority. SHARON KAY is standing up and reenacting a soccer game.

SHARON KAY

-And then that bitch tried to steal the ball back from me! But I did this move and she couldn't get it. She couldn't even get close to it! I was too fast for her. So, so, before she could even figure out she didn't get it I kicked the ball halfway across the field and GOALLLLLLLLLLL! *(She kicks the ball.)*

COLE

Mmhmmm...

SHARON KAY

The goalie didn't even see it coming!

COLE

Wow.

SHARON KAY

And then, and then, we ended up winning the game like 17 to 5.

COLE

Cool.

SHARON KAY

Cole, are you even listening?

COLE

Yeah, yeah. You said you took the ball from her, she took it from you, you took it from her and shoved her, then you got a penalty, and then came back from it only to get the ball, then she tried to get it, then you scored, and the goalie didn't expect a thing.

SHARON KAY

Hold on - AND

COLE

AND, your team won the game. Now sit down and stop being loud. You're gonna scare away all the fish.

SHARON KAY

Oh. (*SHARON KAY sits beside COLE. There is a long beat between them. Long enough for SHARON KAY to observe her surroundings. Take it all in.*) It's really peaceful out here.

COLE

Yeah, it was better before you showed up.

SHARON KAY

Hey!

COLE

Chill out.

SHARON KAY

Sometimes, especially when I'm out here with you, I can't figure out why Mama left.

COLE

What do you mean?

SHARON KAY

I don't know. It's quiet.

COLE

I don't think it's quiet.

SHARON KAY

What?

COLE

Listen.

(They take a beat to listen to the sounds of the creek and the critters and the breeze.)

SHARON KAY

Yeah, but it isn't loud. It's just...

COLE

I know what you mean. (*Beat.*) Do you know why your Mama left?

SHARON KAY

Do you?

COLE

No.

SHARON KAY

You probably know as much as I do then. I know it has something to do with Malmaw.

COLE

Granny said it was because your Mama is stubborn. But so is Maryworth.

SHARON KAY

For a long long time we barely even came up here. That one Christmas was the first time I ever even met Malmaw. Well, at least that I remember. She wouldn't come down either.

COLE

Well, not much gets her out of that house.

SHARON KAY

She missed a lot.

COLE

Hmph.

SHARON KAY

That's why I wanted to come up for the summer.

COLE

Because your grandma missed stuff?

SHARON KAY

No, because I don't know anything about her. I can't imagine she knows anything about me.

COLE

Oh.

SHARON KAY

Did I tell you about the fight they had when I got here?

COLE

No.

SHARON KAY

It was about chili, I guess, and the recipe.

COLE

I've seen Granny and Mama get into fights like that. It blows over by mornin'. Trust me.

SHARON KAY

It felt different.

COLE

What do you mean?

SHARON KAY

They said these horrid things to each other.

COLE

So does mine.

SHARON KAY

Cole, you're- nevermind.

COLE

What?

SHARON KAY

I just think you're making it too simple.

COLE

What do you mean?

SHARON KAY

Just forget it.

COLE

Forget what?

SHARON KAY

Nothing.

COLE

Oh, come on.

SHARON KAY

Okay, fine. Well, that next morning I asked for coffee. Mama said no and Malmaw said she didn't care. They said it at the same time. Then there was all this tension in the air. It just hung there like humidity. I thought I was going to choke.

COLE

Okay...?

SHARON KAY

It felt like they were about to claw at each other's throats again.

COLE

They probably just had their engines still going from last night.

SHARON KAY

No, Mama gave in.

COLE

Okay, and?

SHARON KAY

You don't get it!

COLE

How are you going to tell me I don't get it? Like my family doesn't fight.

SHARON KAY

It's more than fighting! You know, she hasn't invited Mama to the barbeque in years.

COLE

Well, Natalie never wanted to come.

SHARON KAY

But shouldn't she still be invited?

COLE

Sharon, come on. It's better if you let it go.

SHARON KAY

Why? Why is that better?

COLE

You don't want to go diggin' your nose into it. Just let them fight.

SHARON KAY

I don't like it when they fight. I don't like it when anyone fights. There are better ways to do things than a screamin' match.

COLE

It's just how it is. Just stay out of it. That's what my Dad tells me to do. We go outside and mess with something. Unless someone gets hurt. Then you come in and pull them off of each other.

SHARON KAY

I guess, but they roped me into it.

COLE

Well, I don't know how to help you there.

SHARON KAY

Oh.

(SHARON KAY goes to speak but closes her mouth. There is a beat between them. Long enough to listen. COLE pulls his line in and examines the hook.)

COLE

Damn, a fish got my worm.

SHARON KAY

You got more. Put another on.

COLE

Here, I'll show you. *(COLE steps forward. SHARON KAY follows, she pulls an index card and pen out of her pocket. She writes as he speaks.)* It's real easy. First you got to pull the worm out and make sure you're keeping your head down, but not down enough so they think you don't care, or you aren't payin' enough attention. Take it like this and make sure you aren't crying. You have to pierce its body. This part feels slimy and wrong, but You've got be a man, but you've got to strike carefully. You've got make sure that you're resilient, don't let it win and keep them down. That's all. That's how you bait a hook. Then, once you catch something you take it home to mama to cook, but only if it's got enough meat, okay? You wanna try to cook it? *(SHARON KAY looks confused.)* Not the worm, the fish.

(SHARON KAY stares at the index card and looks at COLE. He checks over it and nods. The lights go down.)

Scene 7

Early morning in the kitchen.
SHARON KAY tiptoes in and
quietly picks up the phone.
She calls NATALIE.

SHARON KAY

Hey, Mama... No, nothing happened. I just wanted to ask you something... Well, Malmaw told me that they do a 4th of July-... Well, I was wondering why we never came?... It doesn't sound *that* complicated... I mean, I understand, but there is no guarantee y'all will argue, is there?... You're being silly... No... No, Mama. Malmaw isn't making me do anything... I'm whispering because I don't want to wake Malmaw up yet... Well, I wanted to ask if you would come this year... No, no, it's not that. I promise. I just think you're, you know... I mean, I'll be here and I just think it would be nice if you were too... Please, Mama. I miss you. Malmaw and Uncle Lake do too... Yes. I really do want you to come... Mama? You there?... Really? You will? Oh, thank you, thank you! Malmaw is gonna let me make all the cornbread... Mhmmm, says I know how to make it really good now... Well, I'll tell Malmaw and get her to call you... Yes, don't worry. I'll handle it! I promise... Okay, bye Mama... Love you too!

(SHARON KAY hangs up the phone. She looks out the kitchen window at the sun rising over the ridge and smiles. Intermission, if you want it here.)

Scene 8

MARYWORTH stands in the kitchen stirring various pots and sets the table. SHARON KAY sits attentively on the porch with UNCLE LAKE, he plays accordingly.

SHARON KAY
Do you think she's close? (*Beat.*) Uncle Lake?

UNCLE LAKE
Hm?

SHARON KAY
Never mind.

UNCLE LAKE
Okay.

SHARON KAY
Shouldn't she be here by now? I don't want dinner to get cold.

UNCLE LAKE
Neither do I. (*Stops playing.*) Cold green beans taste like snot.

SHARON KAY
Ew.

UNCLE LAKE
When did she say she left? 3:00?

SHARON KAY
Yeah.

UNCLE LAKE
It's bout 5:30. Should be close. (*Beat.*) Here. Let's play your favorite game.

SHARON KAY
Huh?

UNCLE LAKE
Ask some questions.

SHARON KAY
What does Frank do?

UNCLE LAKE
He teaches fifth grade at Piney Creek Elementary.

SHARON KAY
That's cool.

UNCLE LAKE
Mmhmm.

SHARON KAY
What do you do?

UNCLE LAKE
I work mostly as a freelance musician, sometimes I teach the banjo, but I do field work too.

SHARON KAY
What's field work?

UNCLE LAKE
It's when you go out somewhere and do research. Collect data.

SHARON KAY
Huh?

UNCLE LAKE
Well, I work to collect old timey tunes. Like old mountain music.

SHARON KAY
Do you like it?

UNCLE LAKE
I can't complain.

SHARON KAY
What's your favorite?

UNCLE LAKE
Tune?

SHARON KAY
Yeah.

UNCLE LAKE

I've been working on this recently. Don't know if it's my favorite or not, but - (*UNCLE LAKE plays Big Sciota.*)

SHARON KAY

I like that one.

UNCLE LAKE

What do you like about it?

SHARON KAY

I don't know. I think it kind of sounds like a story.

UNCLE LAKE

Most of these old songs are some sort of story.

SHARON KAY

Mama said she likes it when you play murder ballads.

UNCLE LAKE

Oh, this is a good one. (*UNCLE LAKE plays Little Sadie.*)

SHARON KAY

(*Before he finishes.*) Do you know anything modern?

UNCLE LAKE

What? You don't like old music?

SHARON KAY

No. I think it's cool. I just didn't know if you knew anything I did.

UNCLE LAKE

Hmmm. What about this? (*He plays I Wanna Dance with Somebody by Whitney Huston. He plays about 45 seconds or so.*) You know that?

SHARON KAY

I don't think so.

UNCLE LAKE

Aw, come on. (*He sings.*) "I wanna dance with somebody, wanna feel the heat with somebody, with somebody who loves me." No?

SHARON KAY

I think I know it. Do you know anything by Brandi Carlile?

UNCLE LAKE

You like Carlile?

SHARON KAY

Yeah. Mama plays her a lot.

UNCLE LAKE

I know this one. *(He plays You and Me on The Rock. SHARON KAY hums along and taps her foot.)*

SHARON KAY

(Beat. She sees someone coming up the driveway.) Mama! Mama!
(She runs in the house.) Malmaw! Malmaw! Mama is here! Mama is here, come on! *(She starts tugging on her grandmother's arm.)*

MARYWORTH

Oh, be gentle!

SHARON KAY

Come on!

MARYWORTH

I'm coming!

SHARON KAY

Mama!

(SHARON KAY pulls MARYWORTH out the door and runs to NATALIE who has entered the porch area with a duffle bag over the shoulder. SHARON KAY takes the bag from her.)

NATALIE

Hey, Kaybug.

SHARON KAY

Hey, Mama!

MARYWORTH

Why don't you take your Mama's bag upstairs, honey. We'll wait for you at the table.

SHARON KAY

Okay! *(She takes off into the kitchen.)*

UNCLE LAKE

She is just rattleheaded.

NATALIE

Why do you think we put her in soccer, Lake?

UNCLE LAKE

You know, I make her run around the house a few times.

NATALIE

Jack tells her it's "training".

UNCLE LAKE

I just bet her she couldn't do it in ten seconds. Been trying all summer. Just for five dollars.

MARYWORTH

She's headstrong. *(A compliment.)* Like you.

NATALIE

Hey, Mama.

MARYWORTH

Hey. Come on in. Don't want supper getting cold.

NATALIE

What did you make?

(They move to sit at the table.)

MARYWORTH

Meatloaf, green beans with bacon, creamed corn, and cornbread. Sharon Kay wanted the cornbread.

NATALIE

Really, she's kind of picky.

UNCLE LAKE

Eats so much you'd think she'd turn into cornbread.

SHARON KAY

(Enters.) Are y'all talking about me?

MARYWORTH

Not a thing honey.

UNCLE LAKE

Just syain' you like cornbread.

SHARON KAY

Mama, we gotta get a cast iron skillet.

UNCLE LAKE

Yeah, Sharon said you don't make any cornbread at home.

SHARON KAY

No, no! I said Mama doesn't use the cast iron.

MARYWORTH

Why not?

NATALIE

We don't have one.

SHARON KAY

Nope.

MARYWORTH

Well, remind me to give y'all one before you head out.

NATALIE

Mama, you don't need to do t-

MARYWORTH

Everybody needs a skillet.

NATALIE

We have skillets.

MARYWORTH

Nonsense, I'll give you one of Grandpas. Who wants to say grace?

UNCLE LAKE

I will. *(They bow their heads.)* Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this day and this opportunity to gather and break bread with Natalie back here. We ask that you bless this food and the hands that prepared it, in Jesus' name, Amen.

MARYWORTH

Amen.

NATALIE

Amen.

SHARON KAY

Amen.

MARYWORTH

Thank you.

UNCLE LAKE

What way did you come, Natalie?

NATALIE

I took NC 16.

UNCLE LAKE

Well, that's the long way.

NATALIE

I know.

MARYWORTH

How's the old ball and chain, Natalie?

NATALIE

Good. He's missing that little one.

SHARON KAY

I'm not little.

MARYWORTH

Is he coming up on the 2nd still?

NATALIE

No, couldn't get out of work. He's going to come up that afternoon.

MARYWORTH

Ah, too bad.

SHARON KAY

Why couldn't he get out of work?

NATALIE

He had surgeries scheduled.

UNCLE LAKE

Does he still work at the children's hospital?

SHARON KAY

Yeah! One of my teammates had her knee fixed by him.

MARYWORTH

Sharon Kay, we are eating.

UNCLE LAKE

What did she do?

SHARON KAY

At a game she got her knee kicked in and the bone popped out the other way. I didn't see it, but Dani said she could see-

MARYWORTH

Drop it. Both of ya.

SHARON KAY

It's not that bad. People get hurt all the-

MARYWORTH

(Sternly.) What did I say?

(Beat.)

NATALIE

(Clearing her throat.) How's Frank?

UNCLE LAKE

He's all right. He was gonna come tonight, but he caught the flu. Got it from someone in that play.

SHARON KAY

Frank is an actor?

NATALIE

Likes to think he is.

UNCLE LAKE

Oh, come on now!

MARYWORTH

Remember to take him a plate. And I've packed a thermos of chicken broth too.

UNCLE LAKE

I will, Mama. I will. Trust me, I don't want to sleep on the couch tonight.

SHARON KAY

Huh?

UNCLE LAKE

What?

SHARON KAY

Why would you have to sleep on the couch?

UNCLE LAKE

Lord, if I forgot his food, he'd be madder than a hornet.

(SHARON KAY is confused, she goes to ask another question.)

MARYWORTH

(Interrupting.) Natalie, how did your summer camp go?

NATALIE

Really good! The kids loved the end of camp celebration last week. They got to make costumes for the party. Drama teacher came in from the high school and everything.

SHARON KAY

Oh, you did do camp?

NATALIE

Got roped into it again. You would have liked it this year. School made it space themed.

SHARON KAY

Really?

NATALIE

Yes, Sharon.

MARYWORTH

Don't matter anyways.

NATALIE

Huh?

MARYWORTH

She's had a summer well spent with grandma.

SHARON KAY

And Cole! He taught me how to fish! I know how to bait a hook, Mama.

MARYWORTH

Oh, yeah, Cole is more important.

SHARON KAY

I don't mean it like that.

MARYWORTH

No, it's fine.

(Beat.)

NATALIE

You like to fish now?

SHARON KAY

Yeah! I brought Malmaw some catfish the other day.

MARYWORTH

Fried real good too.

NATALIE

Did you get your fishing license?

UNCLE LAKE

Don't need one till you're 17.

NATALIE

Oh.

MARYWORTH

You knew that.

NATALIE

Must of forgot.

MARYWORTH

Figures.

NATALIE

What's that supposed to mean?

(UNCLE LAKE and SHARON KAY make eye contact quickly.)

SHARON KAY

Cole said next summer we can make some money by selling the fish we catch.

UNCLE LAKE

Nah. He'll have a job by then.

SHARON KAY

Well, can I get a job?

UNCLE LAKE

I mean you'd have to get paid under the table. But there's plenty of that around.

NATALIE

Oh, she doesn't want to do that.

SHARON KAY

I think it sounds fun.

MARYWORTH

It'd be good for her to make some pocket money. Be able to pay for her own. Thicken her skin.

SHARON KAY

My skin's already thick!

NATALIE

That's hard work, baby.

SHARON KAY

Do you not think I can do it?

NATALIE

No, no, I just think you might be underestimating it.

MARYWORTH

Trust me. She can do the work.

NATALIE

And how do you know?

MARYWORTH

I know my granddaughter.

NATALIE

Well, Sharon, you want to spend next summer up here too?

SHARON KAY

I was thinkin' about it.

MARYWORTH

And what's wrong with that?

NATALIE

Nothing's wrong with that. I just-

MARYWORTH

Just what? Don't want her up here with the rednecks?

UNCLE LAKE

(Trying to make a joke.) No, we're hillbillies. *(Doesn't land. SHARON KAY might giggle.)*

NATALIE

Lake, stop. I just wanted to know what she was thinkin'.

MARYWORTH

You gonna try to change her mind?

(Beat.)

NATALIE

She can make her own decisions.

UNCLE LAKE

(Diverting.) Oh! You know who might need work?

SHARON KAY

Who?

UNCLE LAKE

The Oaklands.

NATALIE

Didn't you work for them in high school?

UNCLE LAKE

Yeah.

NATALIE

They're still around?

UNCLE LAKE

Well, yeah. Still got the dairy farm going.

SHARON KAY

Like cows?

UNCLE LAKE

No, chickens.

NATALIE

How old is Mr. Oakland then?

UNCLE LAKE

Well, his son runs the place now. But he's still kickin' it.

MARYWORTH

He was sweet on me.

SHARON KAY

Ew!

MARYWORTH

What? I was a looker back in my day!

NATALIE

Lake, I remember that time you came home from fixing Mr. Oaklands pasture covered in mud and Mama chased you out of the house with the mop.

UNCLE LAKE

You're forgetting the part where she hit my backside with it!

NATALIE

Why'd you even try coming in the house?

UNCLE LAKE

I thought she'd want me to throw my clothes in the washer!

MARYWORTH

I would of!

UNCLE LAKE

Then why'd you chase me with the damn mop?

MARYWORTH

Because you put boot prints all over my clean floors!

UNCLE LAKE

Learn from my mistakes, Sharon.

SHARON KAY

Do you think they'd actually let me work for them?

UNCLE LAKE

Probably.

SHARON KAY

Would I work with the cows?

UNCLE LAKE

Sometimes. You kind of just do a bit of everything.

(They eat in silence for a few minutes. A sense of ease and calm washes over the stage.)

MARYWORTH

Been too long since we've had you home.

NATALIE

I know, Mama.

*(SHARON KAY and UNCLE LAKE glance at each other.
Lights down.)*

Scene 9

NATALIE and MARYWORTH walk to the porch together with three glass pitchers of tea bags, sugar, and water. They sit them on the side of the porch. NATALIE looks out, MARYWORTH starts to go back in the kitchen.

NATALIE

You wanna sit out here for a bit?

MARYWORTH

I've gotta do the dishes.

NATALIE

Come on, sit down. Relax, mama.

MARYWORTH

All right.

NATALIE

It's pretty today.

MARYWORTH

Yeah.

NATALIE

You all right?

MARYWORTH

Yeah.

NATALIE

What's wrong?

MARYWORTH

Nothin'.

NATALIE

Okay. *(Beat.)* You sure?

MARYWORTH

I'm just worried about everyone comin'.

NATALIE

What do you mean? You do this every year.

MARYWORTH

And every year I get nervous.

NATALIE

No need, Mama.

MARYWORTH

Well, let me go check. I might of forgotten s-

NATALIE

All the drinks are done. Cole slaw, potato salad, and macaroni salad are in the fridge. Lake put the meat out to thaw. They're going to get all the rest of it.

MARYWORTH

Every year I forget something.

NATALIE

It's all right. Sharon made that list for you.

MARYWORTH

I know.

NATALIE

Just relax.

MARYWORTH

All right. *(She settles into the rocking chair and breathes deeply.)*

NATALIE

There you go.

MARYWORTH

Thank you.

NATALIE

Of course.

MARYWORTH

Thank you for cutting all those vegetables today. My hands keep swellin'.

NATALIE

You should go get it looked at.

MARYWORTH

No. It's all right.

NATALIE

You might be getting arthritis. Didn't Grandpa have it?

MARYWORTH

Yeah. Started about this age too. You're worryin' too much.

NATALIE

Says the woman who's worryin' about a party she throws every year.

MARYWORTH

You don't have the right to judge that.

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

You haven't been here.

NATALIE

I'm here now.

MARYWORTH

Don't matter.

NATALIE

It does too.

MARYWORTH

Whatever.

NATALIE

God, Mama! How do you expect me to care if you can't even appreciate that I'm trying?

MARYWORTH

Because it's too late Natalie!

NATALIE

I don't think it's too late.

MARYWORTH

So, what? You're just going to waltz back into the house like nothin' has happened?

NATALIE

That's not what I'm say-

MARYWORTH

Then what are you saying?

NATALIE

(Beat.) I want to make it work. I want us to make it work. I want to fix it.

MARYWORTH

Well.

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

You never said anything like that before.

NATALIE

I know.

MARYWORTH

I thought you didn't want anything to do with me.

NATALIE

I know.

MARYWORTH

And you've said it too.

NATALIE

I know!

MARYWORTH

Why all the effort now then?

NATALIE

It was just hard then.

MARYWORTH

I don't understand what's so hard about not abandoning your family.

NATALIE

There was nothing wrong with what I did.

MARYWORTH

Nothin' wrong with it? Well, that's a load of shit.

NATALIE

I did what I had to do.

MARYWORTH

Natalie, you promised me you would come back.

NATALIE

(Snapping.) And I didn't! So, what? *(Beat.)* I don't understand why you always have to do this.

MARYWORTH

Didn't you want me to relax?

NATALIE

Fine. *(She gets up to stir the tea. Long beat.)* Can I ask you a question?

MARYWORTH

What? So, you can jump down my throat again?

NATALIE

No.

MARYWORTH

Then why are you asking all these questions if it's not to make me lose my temper?

NATALIE

Why didn't you make Lake promise?

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

Why didn't you make Lake promise to come back?

MARYWORTH

I did.

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

I did make him promise.

NATALIE

But he went to Nashville. Nothing happened. You never yelled at him ove-

MARYWORTH

He said he intended to come back. You said the opposite.

NATALIE

Oh.

MARYWORTH

You make me feel like a villain, Natalie. I jus-

NATALIE

Mama, you were the villain. (*MARYWORTH goes to interject.*) Now, don't start yelling. Just let me finish.

MARYWORTH

Fine. Tell me how I'm so evil then.

NATALIE

(*Beat.*) At least I saw you as the villain. I didn't see that I was complicit in it too.

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

You weren't the only one who said awful things, did awful things.

MARYWORTH

And what did I do that was so awful?

NATALIE

You're missing the point!

MARYWORTH

Then what is the point?

NATALIE

That I'm sorry.

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

For making you feel like that. Sometimes I think I got so used to holding a grudge that I fell into a habit.

MARYWORTH

You broke a promise.

NATALIE

And it doesn't fuckin' matter anymore!

MARYWORTH

Watch your tone.

NATALIE

No. It's not about us anymore.

MARYWORTH

Then who is it about?

NATALIE

Sharon Kay! Mama, don't you see?

MARYWORTH

See what?

NATALIE

It's bigger than us. When we fight don't you see the look on her face? On Lake's? Hell, Missy and Cole even look like they're gonna have a conniption fit.

MARYWORTH

You think I like it?

NATALIE

I used to.

MARYWORTH

There you go again.

NATALIE

I said used to.

MARYWORTH

And it hasn't changed.

NATALIE

I want it to.

MARYWORTH

Do you?

NATALIE

Yes! I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to!

MARYWORTH

(Long beat.) She's just like you, you know?

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

Sharon.

NATALIE

You didn't say that like it was a bad thing?

MARYWORTH

It's not.

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

She's always asking questions, trying to figure things out.

NATALIE

Oh.

MARYWORTH

You did the same thing as a kid.

NATALIE

I thought you didn't like us asking questions.

MARYWORTH

Maybe I wasn't the best mother. I di- do things I shouldn't have, but I did it for a reason.

NATALIE

Because of Daddy?

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

Does it have to do with Daddy?

MARYWORTH

What about him?

NATALIE

You know what I'm talkin' about.

MARYWORTH

You know he left.

NATALIE

No, what happened?

MARYWORTH

Nothin' happened. He just left.

NATALIE

I'm not stupid!

MARYWORTH

I never said you were stupid!

NATALIE

Will you just tell me?

MARYWORTH

There is nothin' to tell.

NATALIE

Lake told me a story once. When I was in college. Made it seem a little more complicated than someone just leaving.

MARYWORTH

What are you talkin' about?

NATALIE

He said that a boy he was in middle school with had an older sister, she, well-

MARYWORTH

That's not true.

NATALIE

You didn't even let me finish.

MARYWORTH

I don't have to. Just rumors.

NATALIE

Then why did he leave?

MARYWORTH

How the hell should I know? He left!

NATALIE

I know what he did.

MARYWORTH

You don't know anything!

NATALIE

I know he touched her!

MARYWORTH

(Beat.) Natalie, you were never supposed to know that.

NATALIE

What happened?

MARYWORTH

No.

NATALIE

No?

MARYWORTH

I'm not telling you. It's none of your business.

NATALIE

It is too my business.

MARYWORTH

It's my business. You can keep your nose out of it.

NATALIE

I deserve to know.

MARYWORTH

Why?

NATALIE

Because I'm a part of this family!

MARYWORTH

Well, you don't act like it.

NATALIE

Why do you think that is?

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

You don't talk to me! I feel like I hardly even know you sometimes.

MARYWORTH

You've never tried to know me!

NATALIE

That's not true.

MARYWORTH

Yes, it is!

NATALIE

(Beat.) I'm trying now.

MARYWORTH

Why do you need me to tell you?

NATALIE

Because I was five. I don't remember any of it.

MARYWORTH

It doesn't matter.

NATALIE

It does.

MARYWORTH

Natalie, it was so long ago...

NATALIE

That doesn't mean it doesn't matter.

I-I don't know if I-

MARYWORTH

Please.

NATALIE

Natalie...

MARYWORTH

I need to know.

NATALIE

Fine. *(Beat.)* This girl came into the front office one day, when I was the secretary for the high school. She said Lloyd was, he-I don't want to talk about this!

MARYWORTH

Did he get arrested?

NATALIE

No.

MARYWORTH

Why?

NATALIE

I never trusted the cops.

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

I didn't call them.

MARYWORTH

What happened then?

NATALIE

I took care of it.

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

I said I took care of it.

MARYWORTH

NATALIE

Please. Talk to me.

(Long beat.)

MARYWORTH

I sent you and Lake to Missy's. Made dinner with the table all set and everything. I had the shotgun in my lap.

NATALIE

Mama, you did-

MARYWORTH

The gun wasn't even loaded, but I pointed it at him like it was. Told him to get out of town and send me the divorce papers when he was settled. Told him if he didn't leave, I'd call the cops. Tell them everything. How much of that does Lake know?

NATALIE

Only about the girl.

MARYWORTH

I never wanted y'all to know this. I didn't want you to see your Daddy that way.

NATALIE

Can I ask you something?

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

Did you see it coming?

MARYWORTH

He was always sort of aggressive.

NATALIE

With you?

MARYWORTH

I never expected him to get that way with a kid, Natalie. If I would of known, I- I- I would of done things differently. I never would have married him.

NATALIE

Why did you marry him?

MARYWORTH

What?

NATALIE

All Lake remembers is fighting. He said Daddy would hit you.

MARYWORTH

Only whenever he was trying to go after you and Lake.

NATALIE

So why did you marry him?

MARYWORTH

It's not like he was always mean. At least at first.

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

I had to marry him. I had to. *(Beat.)* Can we please drop this?

NATALIE

I'm sorry, Mama.

MARYWORTH

I don't need no damn pity.

NATALIE

I'm not trying to pi-

MARYWORTH

You and Lake are the best things that have ever come out of my life. I wouldn't trade you or what I've been through for anything. Maybe a softer skin, but I had to be tough. I had to be tough for the both of you. I never wanted you to be somewhere I couldn't get to you. I can't protect you if you're far away. That's why I made you promise.

(Long beat.)

NATALIE

Didn't you ever want to leave?

MARYWORTH

Not leave. Maybe visit. Never leave.

I'm not far.

NATALIE

I'm not far.

MARYWORTH

Yeah.

NATALIE

I best go in. Check on the washin' machine.

MARYWORTH

Wait, don't go in. I want to keep talkin'.

NATALIE

I can't anymore.

MARYWORTH

*(MARYWORTH enters the house and exits the stage.
NATALIE stares out down the drive and starts to cry.
It builds into quiet sobs. UNCLE LAKE enters carrying
bags of groceries.)*

What's wrong? What happened?

UNCLE LAKE

Nothin'. Nothin'.

NATALIE

Where's Mama?

UNCLE LAKE

Inside.

NATALIE

You okay?

UNCLE LAKE

Yeah.

NATALIE

Need anything?

UNCLE LAKE

No. Go talk to Mama.

NATALIE

(UNCLE LAKE enters the house and exits to find MARYWORTH. SHARON KAY enters with grocery bags.)

SHARON KAY

Mama! We got- Mama? You okay?

(SHARON KAY drops her bags and sits next to NATALIE.)

NATALIE

I'm all right. I promise.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

(NATALIE places her head on SHARON KAY'S shoulder. SHARON KAY pulls out an index card and pen. UNCLE LAKE plays.)

NATALIE

Mama used to make sun tea when everyone was tan and warm. Sweat pooled and dripped down our spines. It was made when needed. She let me carry it to the porch. To rest it on the railing. I kept an eye on it, but you have to trust her. You have to trust her when she tells you, "It's not done. Just a few more hours." It's the type of Sweet Tea that turns your whole body golden. Like magic. But I think it lost that magic after a while. It got bitter, sour, maybe we started adding too much lemon. I don't know. But I want that magic back. I want to tug on her sleeves and ask for a taste. I want her to give it to me. To sip sun tea, is to let it heal you. It's a gallon of water, a cup and a half of sugar, and just pure gold.

Scene 10

The kitchen. Four hours before the barbeque. MARYWORTH is stirring pots, NATALIE is doing dishes, and MISSY and SHARON KAY are frosting cupcakes at the table. UNCLE LAKE runs in carrying a hoe glistening with a snake's blood.

SHARON KAY

Is that blood?

UNCLE LAKE

There was a snake in the grill!

MARYWORTH

Did you kill it?

UNCLE LAKE

No, I just got a bloody hoe for nothin'. Yes, I handled it, Mama!

(NATALIE laughs. MARYWORTH grabs a rag and starts swinging it at UNCLE LAKE.)

MARYWORTH

If you don't get that out of my kitchen, so help me I will find a switch from them woods.

(UNCLE LAKE runs out.)

UNCLE LAKE

You can't hit me woman! I'm growed!

MISSY

Never too old for a switch!

SHARON KAY

What's a switch?

MISSY

Better you don't know. Proves you got decorum.

NATALIE

He has never stopped being scared of you, mama.

MARYWORTH

Good.

SHARON KAY

Can I go see the snake?

NATALIE

No. Finish the cupcakes honey. You still got a dozen more.

SHARON KAY

Please?

MARYWORTH

Don't argue with your Mama.

SHARON KAY

Cole gets to be outside!

MISSY

He's helping with the grill.

SHARON KAY

(Under her breath.) So, the boys get to play with fire, and I get to decorate cupcakes.

MARYWORTH

What did you say?

SHARON KAY

Nothin'.

MARYWORTH

(Low so SHARON KAY doesn't hear.) She's in a mood today.

NATALIE

We should let her go outside when she's done.

MARYWORTH

Yeah. We should.

SHARON KAY

Is Frank coming?

MARYWORTH

Well, of course. He's family.

SHARON KAY

I didn't realize they were so close.

MARYWORTH

That's a silly thing to say.

SHARON KAY

Why?

MISSY

Maryworth, are the baked
beans about done?

MARYWORTH

Yeah, I think we put them in too early this year.

SHARON KAY

Well, we have to bake the pies.

MARYWORTH

It's all right. We can always warm them back up.

NATALIE

All right. Done with the dishes. Now what?

SHARON KAY

Will you come help me?

MISSY

Come on, decorate the cupcakes with us! I'm having a ball over
here.

MARYWORTH

Go ahead.

NATALIE

How we decorating these?

SHARON KAY

I'm doing stars. You do a white base. Then a big blue star and a
little red one inside. Or the other way around.

MISSY

Well, we best put you on one of them baking shows.

SHARON KAY

You like them?

NATALIE

They're cute, honey.

SHARON KAY

Do you wanna do it? So I can go look at the snake. Outside.

NATALIE

You gotta finish these. You said you would.

SHARON KAY

But there's a snake!

NATALIE

And you've got a job to do first.

SHARON KAY

But-

MARYWORTH

Sharon Kay, you listen to your Mama, or I will send you upstairs.

MISSY

You can go outside after.

SHARON KAY

Fine.

(MARYWORTH comes to sit at the table. She helps them decorate.)

MISSY

Natalie, did you hear about the Conways?

NATALIE

No, what happened?

MARYWORTH

They lost their land.

NATALIE

No, really?

SHARON KAY

Who are they?

MISSY

Your Mama used to date their oldest son.

SHARON KAY

You dated someone before Dad?

NATALIE

Yes. What? You thought I was a prude?

MISSY

Lord knows you weren't.

NATALIE

How'd the lose the land?

MARYWORTH

The bank foreclosed on it.

NATALIE

How is Johnny taking it?

MISSY

I'm not sure. I haven't heard from them in a few months. Might give them a call tomorrow.

SHARON KAY

Wait, if you haven't talked to them how do you know that?

MISSY

Honey, you just hear things.

NATALIE

Aunt Missy has always liked to gossip.

MISSY

It's not gossip if it's true.

SHARON KAY

Where did Uncle Lake and Frank meet?

MARYWORTH

In college, right?

NATALIE

I think so.

SHARON KAY

And they've lived together that long?

MARYWORTH

I mean, not the whole time.

SHARON KAY

What?

MISSY

Well, they dated first. You think people just go off and get married without a trial run of it first?

SHARON KAY

What?

MARYWORTH

Missy, stop.

MISSY

What?

MARYWORTH

I said stop.

MISYY

Doesn't she know?

SHARON KAY

Know what?

NATALIE

Sharon, just be quiet.

MARYWORTH

Missy, keep your mouth shut.

SHARON KAY

No, what are you talking about? (*Beat.*) What is it?

MISSY

Honey, you know.

MARYWORTH

And you know they're private.

SHARON KAY

Will someone please tell me what's going on?

NATALIE
We should tell her.

MARYWORTH
Do not.

NATALIE
What harm can it do?

MARYWORTH
We don't want to upset Lake.

MISSY
Or Frank.

SHARON KAY
What is it?

(Long beat. MISSY looks at MARYWORTH. MARYWORTH looks at NATALIE. NATALIE looks at MISSY. MARYWORTH looks at MISSY.)

MISSY
Why's everyone lookin' at me?

NATALIE
You brought it up.

MARYWORTH
~~Dear lord.~~ *(NATALIE looks to MARYWORTH.)* Fine.

(Everyone looks to SHARON KAY.)

NATALIE
Sweetheart, Lake and Frank are married.

SHARON KAY
What?

MARYWORTH
They're together.

SHARON KAY
Since when?

NATALIE

2015. A few days after they legalized it. They went up the courthouse and got married, right Mama?

MARYWORTH

Yeah.

SHARON KAY

But I was alive for that.

NATALIE

Well, we didn't come.

SHARON KAY

Why didn't we come?

MARYWORTH

You don't need to ask all th-

SHARON KAY

You're gonna tell me that and expect me not to ask questions?

MISSY

Honey, why are you acting surprised? You knew this.

SHARON KAY

No, I don't.

NATALIE

Yes, you do. Remember the pictures I showed you of the barn for the cook out after?

SHARON KAY

You just said it was their party! I thought it was a birthday party or something. I didn't know.

MARYWORTH

Sharon, you're being silly. You know this.

SHARON KAY

No, I don't!

MARYWORTH

Now don't go yelling in my kitchen! And not to your elders either.

SHARON KAY

No! Y'all lied to me!

NATALIE

No one lied to you.

SHARON KAY

I have to go talk to Uncle Lake.

MISSY

Come on Sharon, sit down. You're throwing a fit over nothing.

SHARON KAY

No, I'm going to find Uncle Lake!

MARYWORTH

Stop yellin'. Right now.

SHARON KAY

Like you can talk about yellin'. You're so damn mean. All you know how to do is bite people's heads off. Maybe I'd known if you wouldn't have made me feel so bad for not knowing things. Why'd you keep it a secret? You really have nothing to say? You're just going to sit there!

NATALIE

Sharon Kay Hendricks that is *enough*.

SHARON KAY

And you're not any better!

MARYWORTH

(Exploding.) Get out of my kitchen!

SHARON KAY

(Shocked.) What?

MARYWORTH

Go outside. And don't come back in until you're ready to apologize.

SHARON KAY

Malmaw, I-

MARYWORTH

Now!

(SHARON KAY runs out of the kitchen. NATALIE sits stunned as MARYWORTH wraps an arm around her. NATALIE leans on her shoulder. Lights down.)

Scene 11

SHARON KAY is throwing rocks down the driveway, mumbling to herself. UNCLE LAKE enters with his banjo.

UNCLE LAKE

(Startled.) Holy shit, kid! Stop throwing rocks! You're gonna hit someone!

SHARON KAY

Sorry, I didn't mean to.

UNCLE LAKE

You're all right. Both of our heart rates don't need to be raised. *(Beat. He knows something is wrong.)* Can I sit there?

SHARON KAY

Yeah.

UNCLE LAKE

(He sits next to her and starts tuning his banjo.) What's wrong?

SHARON KAY

Nothing.

UNCLE LAKE

Don't you lie to me.

SHARON KAY

I yelled at Malmaw.

UNCLE LAKE

Now why would you go and do that?

SHARON KAY

And Mama.

UNCLE LAKE

What happened?

SHARON KAY

They told me something about you.

UNCLE LAKE

What?

SHARON KAY

I just, I wanted to kno- I mean, you don't gotta tell me, I was just wonder-

UNCLE LAKE

Is this about Uncle Frank? (*SHARON KAY nods. UNCLE LAKE sighs and places his banjo down.*) Come on, sit down.

SHARON KAY

(*Sitting.*) I just don't really understand. I thought you and Frank were just roommates.

UNCLE LAKE

He's my husband. (*SHARON KAY nods.*) Are you mad at me?

SHARON KAY

No.

UNCLE LAKE

Well, you know I spent time in Nashville, right?

SHARON KAY

You did?

UNCLE LAKE

Yes ma'am. Right out of college I moved there for a few years. East Tennessee State. Went for music. But, when I was in Nashville, I met Frank.

SHARON KAY

I'm sorry.

UNCLE LAKE

For what?

SHARON KAY

I don't know. I just feel like I've done something wrong.

UNCLE LAKE

You don't got nothing to apologize for kiddo. Maybe for yellin' at Malmaw and your mama.

SHARON KAY

I know.

UNCLE LAKE

Why don't you go back in and-

SHARON KAY

I wanted to talk to you first.

UNCLE LAKE

About what?

SHARON KAY

I just want to know the story.

UNCLE LAKE

Okay?

SHARON KAY

Well, how long have y'all been together then?

UNCLE LAKE

I think we're going on 18 or 19 years; I can't really remember. He can tell ya'.

SHARON KAY

That's a long time.

UNCLE LAKE

You're tellin' me.

SHARON KAY

Have you told anyone?

UNCLE LAKE

What do you mean?

SHARON KAY

Like, have you come out? To Malmaw? To Mama?

UNCLE LAKE

Well, yes. They know.

SHARON KAY

Why do they just call him your roommate.

UNCLE LAKE

I-

SHARON KAY

Why didn't mama tell me? Why doesn't anyone say anything? Why did no one tell me?

UNCLE LAKE

Baby, calm down. It's okay. It's not like that.

SHARON KAY

What is it then?

UNCLE LAKE

(*Blunt.*) Sweetheart, Frank works as an elementary school teacher. We've gotta be private. Protect his job.

SHARON KAY

But I just don't understand why no one ever told me.

UNCLE LAKE

Because I don't want everyone knowin'! Frank don't either.

SHARON KAY

Why didn't you tell me?

UNCLE LAKE

I really just got to know you this year. I thought you knew.

SHARON KAY

Why didn't Malmaw say anything?

UNCLE LAKE

I asked her not to. She don't like to talk about it.

SHARON KAY

So, she doesn't like that you're gay?

UNCLE LAKE

I mean it took her a minute to come around. I think it takes a lot of people some time. But she is a good woman. She accepted me for who I was. She loves her children more than anything and she loves you more than us. She just wants us to be safe and happy, honey.

SHARON KAY

I know. I know she loves me, but I just don't understand why she always has to act like- like- I don't know.

UNCLE LAKE

Like what?

SHARON KAY

She's just so mean sometimes.

UNCLE LAKE

I know, but her life has been a battle.

SHARON KAY

So has mamas, so has yours, so has everyone else who lives around here.

UNCLE LAKE

I know. Mama is just stubborn. Like you.

SHARON KAY

But why doesn't she treat Frank as your partner? Why does she make it a secret?

UNCLE LAKE

It's not a secret, honey. They know. The important people know.

SHARON KAY

What?

UNCLE LAKE

They just don't say anything. We don't talk about it.

SHARON KAY

Why?

UNCLE LAKE

It's just like how you don't talk about money problems, when someone's fighting, drugs, sex- (*SHARON KAY gasps at sex. UNCLE LAKE laughs at her.*) See, it's shockin'!

SHARON KAY

I guess so.

UNCLE LAKE

Now, imagine how Malmaw feels.

SHARON KAY

Oh. (*Beat.*) Are you okay with it?

UNCLE LAKE

It's just how things are, but I'm content with my life.

SHARON KAY

Doesn't it hurt you?

UNCLE LAKE

Sometimes. I wish it was different for me and Frank. But I've made choices to be able to live my life the way I do. I don't regret them choices.

SHARON KAY

I don't understand. Why don't you just go somewhere else?

UNCLE LAKE

I don't want to.

SHARON KAY

Why?

UNCLE LAKE

This is my home, honey. These mountains are my home. They always have been, and they always will be. No other. I love waking up with something beautiful to look at and I love being able to sleep with all the windows open. When I die, I want my body in this ground.

SHARON KAY

Okay.

(There is a beat between them.)

UNCLE LAKE

You excited for the barbeque?

SHARON KAY

Yeah, but I feel like I ruined the day now.

UNCLE LAKE

Only thing that could really ruin the day is rain. *(Beat.)* Come on, cheer up. Name two things you're excited for.

SHARON KAY

I'm excited for the fireworks and food. Are you going to play Born in the USA like I asked you to?

UNCLE LAKE

Told you I learned it. Here, listen. *(UNCLE LAKE plays a few seconds of the song until SHARON KAY starts to smile.)* You still gonna sing?

SHARON KAY

Yeah. *(Beat.)* I like that you play the banjo.

UNCLE LAKE

Thank you.

SHARON KAY

Do you think they will ever talk about it?

UNCLE LAKE

About what? Me and Frank?

SHARON KAY

Yeah.

UNCLE LAKE

I don't know. We can hope, but aren't we talkin' about it now?

SHARON KAY

Yeah.

UNCLE LAKE

Well, there you go. We're talkin' about it.

SHARON KAY

Is that enough?

UNCLE LAKE

For me it is. You better get back in there. The ladies are going to be looking for their cornbread girl.

SHARON KAY

I don't think they want me in there anymore.

UNCLE LAKE

Of course, they do. Just say you're sorry.

SHARON KAY

Fine. All right. (*SHARON KAY gets up to leave.*)

UNCLE LAKE

Hey.

SHARON KAY

Yeah?

UNCLE LAKE

I'm glad you came. You're a good kid.

SHARON KAY

Thank you, Uncle Lake.

(SHARON KAY starts to leave but stays in between the crack of the door watching her uncle. UNCLE LAKE sighs and pulls his banjo into his lap. He finishes tuning it and starts playing a song.)

SHARON KAY

Uncle Lake?

UNCLE LAKE

You got more questions for me?

SHARON KAY

How do you play that thing?

UNCLE LAKE

Come sit down. I'll show you. *(SHARON KAY sits next to her uncle and pulls out an index card and pen.)* You don't need that pen. Here, hold your hand like this. *(He holds his hand up in the shape to play clawhammer. SHARON KAY mimics.)* More like this. *(He adjusts her hand for her.)* Like that, yeah. Okay, your thumb stays here. *(He places her thumb on the first string of the banjo.)* Yup, and then your other fingers go on these strings. *(He places the rest of her fingers on the string.)* Then you just hammer it. It's called clawhammer. Let me show you. *(He moves her hand away.)* Watch me. Then you can try. *(He starts playing his song to demonstrate. SHARON KAY picks up her pen and index card but doesn't write. She watches. The song is compassionate, caring, and kind. It brings everyone together. This is his recipe.)*

Scene 12

MARYWORTH is at sink washing dishes. NATALIE is sitting at the table. SHARON KAY enters carefully.

MARYWORTH
You ready to apologize?

SHARON KAY
Yeah.

(Beat. SHARON KAY shifts awkwardly.)

NATALIE
Did you talk to Lake?

SHARON KAY
Yeah.

NATALIE
And?

SHARON KAY
He said that he wanted to keep it private.

MARYWORTH
Told ya.

SHARON KAY
I know. I'm sorry, Malmaw. I didn't mean to get so mean. I just got mad. *(Beat.)* I really am sorry.

NATALIE
You can't talk to people like that.

SHARON KAY
I just got angry, and I didn't know what to do with it. I just had to yell. I'm sorry.

NATALIE
It's okay. I know you're sorry.

SHARON KAY
I don't want us to fight anymore.

MARYWORTH

Honey, there's gonna be fights, but that's okay.

SHARON KAY

What?

NATALIE

What?

MARYWORTH

It don't matter. It's gonna happen.

SHARON KAY

But we don't have to.

MARYWORTH

You just gotta handle it. Handle them.

NATALIE

Well, me and Mama have been talkin' about- well, um...

SHARON KAY

(Slowly.) Are we going to start seeing each other more?

NATALIE

Yeah.

SHARON KAY

Here?

NATALIE

Yeah.

SHARON KAY

Really?

MARYWORTH

Mhmm.

SHARON KAY

Can Malmaw come to my soccer games, mama?

(Beat.)

NATALIE

Mama?

MARYWORTH

Only if you want me there.

SHARON KAY

When's the next time we're coming up?

(Beat.)

NATALIE

Mama?

MARYWORTH

My door's always open.

SHARON KAY

What about Thanksgiving?

(Beat.)

NATALIE

Mama?

MARYWORTH

I wouldn't mind, but you gotta help me cook, okay?

SHARON KAY

I will. What do you want to make?

MARYWORTH

Well, we could make turkey.

NATALIE

Sure.

SHARON KAY

Here, I'll start a list. Is that all right?

(Beat. UNCLE LAKE enters and sits in his usual spot.)

NATALIE

Mama?

MARYWORTH

Yeah. Go ahead.

(UNCLE LAKE begins to play. SHARON KAY pulls out an index card and pen. She pulls on MARYWORTH'S sleeve and brings her over to sit on the other side of NATALIE. She places the index card in front of her on the table and hands the pen to NATALIE.)

SHARON KAY

I learned this one recently. Mama, you write. Malmaw, you gotta listen, okay? (*MARYWORTH nods. SHARON KAY moves in circles, pacing around the table. This is careful.*) Okay, we can make turkey. Cole can probably get us one. Missy can bring the drinks and the mac and cheese. But you and Mama make the sun tea. Did you hear Malmaw? Yeah? (*MARYWORTH nods and looks to NATALIE. NATALIE looks away. SHARON KAY tugs on MARYWORTH'S sleeve pulling her to sit closer to NATALIE.*) Then we need to make green bean casserole, but with the French onions on top. Yams. Oh! Uncle Lake likes cranberry sauce. And creamed corn too. (*SHARON KAY moves MARYWORTH closer.*) Maybe a few snakes. (*MARYWORTH starts to move away. SHARON KAY stops her.*) But remember, you said we could handle them. Uncle Lake will come with his husband Frank. (*MARYWORTH grimaces. SHARON KAY stands beside the two of them.*) It's okay. We don't have to be private now. We need apple pie, but we should make pumpkin too. Oh, I'll make the cornbread, with great grandmas' big skillet. Malmaw, you listening? (*MARYWORTH nods.*) We need to have stuffing, mashed potatoes, butter beans. Y'all can teach me how to make collards. But, I'll help handle it all. (*MARYWORTH reaches to NATALIE'S hand. NATALIE lets her hold it.*) Good. We'll handle it.

THE END

Setting: Piney Creek, North Carolina. Summer, present day.

There will be one 15-minute intermission

Cast List

(in the order of appearance)

Uncle Lake.....David Rolland
 Natalie.....Kendall Rhue Wilson
 Maryworth.....Ella Powell
 Sharon Kay.....Kiersten B. Caliguire
 Missy.....Sarah Jewell
 Cole.....Kayla Marie Ramey

Director’s Note

Southern women are tough. They hold tradition close. On holidays, in the kitchen, in conversations at the supper table, we do things **the way we’ve always done them. And when things get** uncomfortable, we avoid them at all costs.

Watching this show come together has been magic. During **the rehearsal process, we curated this family’s story, deciding their** home life, habits, history, and intricacies. This production exists as a melding of our collective experiences with southern tradition. The set is adorned with gifts, photographs, heirlooms, and memories from the families of the cast and crew.

We hope to tell the story of one family with care and uncover hope with this performance. Questions lead to discomfort. Discomfort heals. Healing is possible here.

- Preston Hilliard

Production Crew

Director.....Preston Hilliard
 Stage Manager.....Janis Nordeen
 Asst. Stage Manager.....Kayleigh Laibson
 Technical Director.....Joe Cockrell
 Dramaturg.....Michael Sousa
 Costume Designer.....Dylan Furr
 Set Designer.....Scout Klein
 Props Designer.....Nat Hnat
 Lighting Designer.....Wil Martin
 Sound Designer.....Joe Cockrell
 Fight Choreographer.....Eli Golden
 Directing Mentors.....Derek Davidson and Gina Grandi
 Videographer.....Dylan Beiler

W+ITT Executive Board

High Priestess.....Mac Boone
 Magistrate.....Ebie Britt
 Oracle.....Elonie Quick
 Scribe.....Alex Rowland


Content advisory: This play portrays family violence, the use of strong language, and mentions of sexual violence and sexual violence towards a minor.

Momma Martin's Ranchy Noodles

- 1 package diced ham
 - 1 packet ranch powder
 - 1 container sour cream
 - 1 bag egg noodles
 - parm cheese for end
 - container ranch
- ① brown ham in pam, boil pasta
- ② combine, noodles, ham, ranches, sour cream in bowl
- ③ finish w/ parm

Arroz Imperial (Imperial Rice)

- 8 servings of yellow rice
- 8 servings of shredded cheese
- Rotisserie chicken
- ~~Mayo~~ Mayonnaise

layer each
food 



layer the rice in the bottom
of the dish. Follow each
layer as follows

- 1 - rice
- 2 - chicken
- 3 - mayo
- 4 - rice
- 5 - cheese

cook it over at
350 for an hour

Enjoy
from Cuba
Wadjiro

Wacky Cake

Bake 350
DF for 30

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 cup of flour
- 1 cup of sugar
- 3 Tbsp unsweetened cocoa
- 1 Tsp baking soda
- 1/2 Tsp salt
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 1 tbsp apple cider vinegar
- 1 Tsp Vanilla
- 1 cup cold water

Put in
square
baking pan
Mix well

Make 3
indentations
and insert
40 indentations

Chicken Stew: } + Saline Crackers

1/2 gallon of whole milk

2 sticks salted butter (Melted)

1 1/2 lbs. Chicken breast

3 Tablespoons salt 3. Pepper

Pot Pie

Frozen mixed vegetables
1 box Bisquick pie crust
2 cans cream of celery soup
salt & pepper
garlic salt

- ① Steam them
veggies
- ② mix in the
soup, salt, pepper,
garlic salt
- ③ mix up that
Bisquick crust &
throw it on top
- ④ cook on 350°
until it's done

TUNA NOODLE CASSAROLE

1 lb elbow pasta. Cook + mix w/ 2 cans condensed soup (chicken + mushroom). Mix also w/ 2 cans of tuna + 2 cans of Le Serr brand peas (IT MUST HAVE THE MUSHROOMS + LIL WHITE ONIONS IN W/ THE PEAS!!!)

Layer in a corning ware dish w/ shredded sharp cheddar.

Bake 20 mins @ 350°

Crockpot Butter Chicken

1 pack of chicken breasts

1 pack of dry ranch seasoning

1 pack of dry brown gravy mix

6 pepperoncini peppers

1 stick of butter

Add all ingredients to crockpot

Cook on high for 3-4 hours

or low 6-7 hours

Shred & enjoy on sliders or with rice.

Roasted cauliflower

Pre-heat oven to 425°

chop cauliflower

place in pan with vegetable oil
spice with cumin, salt, pepper

Bake for 25 minutes

Garlic Dip

- Creme cheese 8oz
- milk (eye ball till you like the consistency)
- garlic (add like 5 cloves and then taste it. And then add more depending on your tolerance)

Popovers

by Preston + Mimi

2 eggs

butter / honey

1 cup. flour

1 jam to

1 cup milk

fill



1 tbs. oil

salt to taste

Put all ingredients in a blender until well combined. Pour (half full) into popover pan. Cook at 400° for 40 min (until they pop up!)

Apple Pie

by Preston's Mini-Mary Dew-

2 Cups Flour
1/2 tea Salt
2/3 Cup Crisco
or Cold Butter

} Cut Crisco
into
flour

Add - 1/3 - 1/2 Cup ice water
Slowly mix till soft
Dough -

Roll out bottom
put in 9" Pie Pan

6-8 Tart Apples
Cut, Pealed +
Sliced -

Place in Pie Pan -

Mix - 3 T. Flour

3/4 Cup Br. Sugar

1/2 " Sugar -

Cover apples

AM



Abridged Field Guide

Lake



Maryworth



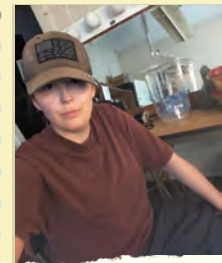
Missy



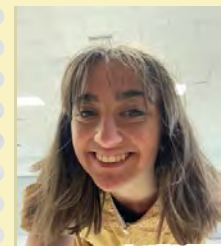
Lake



Natalie



Cole



Sharon Kay

Sarah

Our Family

Southern Avoidance

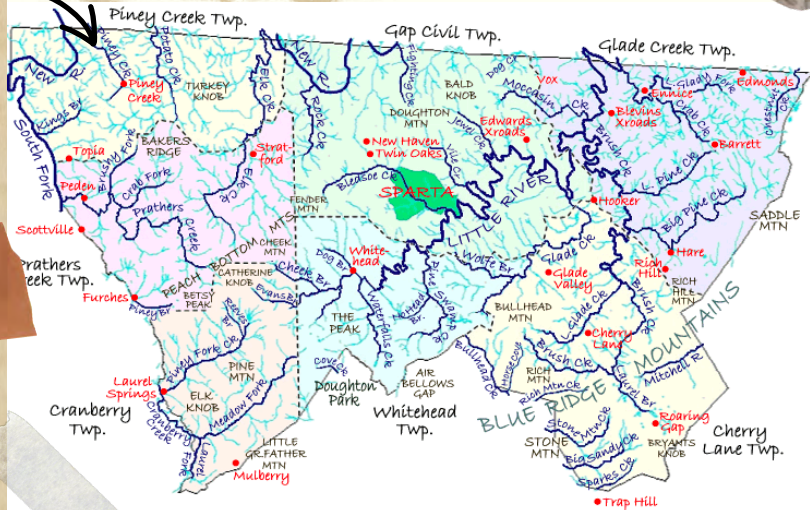
A term coined in 2020 by Michael Sousa, Emily Odum, Andrea Dutton and Preston Hilliard to describe how Southern culture has a tendency to avoid hard or controversial topics by avoiding the conversations all together. **We don't talk about that.** A deep rooted part of Southern Culture is the idea of comfort. Comfort food. Quilts. Coming home to Mama. This plays its role within Southern Avoidance. **Responding to discomfort with comfort.** While this homey and loving response is a beautiful part of our culture, we often use it in the wrong ways. We wind up not talking about the things that matter. **We get tough. We bottle it up.** Breaking this habit is crucial to growing this living culture. Somewhere, someone decided to talk. **Decided that we have to handle it.**

-Lake

Piney Creek, NC



Census report
for Piney Creek



Piney Creek is located about an hour from Boone. The closest town, Sparta, is about 30 minutes away. The population of Piney Creek is 1,051 as of the 2021 census.

Piney Creek is a relatively quiet place to live, but like most hollers in Appalachia there is a tight knit community. With peaks covered in tall trees and fields that stretch themselves across the dips of the mountains, Piney Creek is a place most are proud to call home.

- Lake



Banjo & Music



Clawhammer, the style of banjo used in this show, is a traditional strumming pattern popular in Old Timey Appalachian music. While most strumming patterns consist of up-picking movements, clawhammer uses down-picking to achieve its distinct sound. While clawhammer typically has the same patterns, style can vary in style from place to place within Appalachia.



The banjo finds its origins in West Africa. It was introduced to the American colonies by enslaved African people. The instrument became more widely popular through minstrel shows. These shows were full of racist imagery and stories. This history is important to acknowledge as we try to move to a more inclusive South.

-Lake



A Field Guide to NC









Do you have a family recipe to share? Write it down and slip it into the basket. Recipes will be added to display!

Family: [unclear]
1. [unclear]
2. [unclear]
3. [unclear]
4. [unclear]
5. [unclear]
6. [unclear]
7. [unclear]
8. [unclear]
9. [unclear]
10. [unclear]

Carrots
1. [unclear]
2. [unclear]
3. [unclear]
4. [unclear]
5. [unclear]
6. [unclear]
7. [unclear]
8. [unclear]
9. [unclear]
10. [unclear]

[unclear]
1. [unclear]
2. [unclear]
3. [unclear]
4. [unclear]
5. [unclear]
6. [unclear]
7. [unclear]
8. [unclear]
9. [unclear]
10. [unclear]





Family Fixin's

Written by Michael Sousa

"Hand it off.

Share it.

Eat it 'til you're full of it."

April 21st @ 7 PM

April 22nd @ 7 PM

April 23rd @ 2 PM

IG Greer Studio Theatre

\$5 for students

\$7 for non-students

Use this QR code to reserve
your ticket now! Payment will
be taken at the door with either
cash or venmo.



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