

MOTHERLAND

A play
By Allison Gregory

Inspired by *Mother Courage*

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CAST

(7 actors, with doubling)

2W & 5M

(*cast can be expanded to 11 actors)

Mother: scrappy, clever, tenacious; African-American *female*

Destin I: nearly a man, impulsive, astute; African-American
male

Destin II: younger, truthful; guileless; African-
American or mixed-race *male*

U-Neek: late teens, will-full, expressive, passionate;
mixed-race African-American *female*

Sergeant: authoritative, humane, paternal; white *male*
and Vendor
and Hard Hat

Officer Flank: subordinate with a chip on his shoulder,
zealot; white or non-white *male*
and Street Dude
and Opportunity Smith

Dontavius: twenties, trouble, a fantasist; African-American
male

SETTING

An ignored lot in a hopeless corner of a large American city. Graffiti, concrete; a patch of dirt for U-neek's garden. Ideally an old food truck is parked on-stage: a defiant sign of life. This story unfolds in and around the truck, but we're aware of the restless push and buzz of the surrounding community.

TIME

Like it could have happened today.

"Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime."

Aristotle

Crime is increasing
Trigger happy policing
Panic is spreading
God know where we're heading
Oh, make me wanna holler
They don't understand
Dah dah dah

'Inner City Blues'
Marvin Gaye

One.

Early morning. A street corner in a failing section of a city too big to fail. Graffiti, concrete; a patch of dirt for U-neek's garden. Ideally an old food truck or trailer is parked on-stage: a defiant sign of life. A cracked vanity mirror is propped on one side. A hand-written sign reads: "Mother's Homemade". Other signs read "Military Discounted", "We Accept E.B.T. cards.", and "Sorry We Are Shut". This story unfolds in and around the truck, but we're aware of the restless push and buzz of the surrounding community.

STREET DUDE

Street Dude runs on, head full of mischief, of trouble.

He bangs on the door of the trailer. No answer.

You in there Mother? Anyone?
Come on!
Waitin'. Hungry.

He tries to pry the door open.

What'chu got in there for me?

U-NEEK opens the door of the trailer; she points a gun at the intruder.

STREET DUDE (CONT'D)

Hey I'm not-- hey, hey, I wasn't gonna do nothin', k? See, my car's outta gas and my girlfriend, my wife, she's gotta go to the doctor. I need a few dollars that's all, you understand? You gonna shoot me? You're not gonna shoot me.

U-NEEK fires off a warning shot.

STREET DUDE (CONT'D)

SHIT GIRL! What the f-? You crazy like your own ma! All of you crazy! Gonna end bad, understand me? You watch, you watch you dumb bitch! Street Dude exits, running.

MOTHER

U-NEEK? U-NEEK? WHAT'S GOING ON?
Mother enters on a cart pushed by
her sons.
Something happened, I knew it six
blocks ago when my knees seized.
You're not hurt? Alright, good
then. Scared ten years off my life!

DESTIN I

Destin taking the gun from his
sister.

MOTHER

Don't be messing with that gun,
Destin. Okay girl, now what
happened? Come on, tell mama.

DESTIN II

U-neek acting out the scenario.

MOTHER

A man? A tired man?

DESTIN II

A drunk man!

MOTHER

No?

DESTIN I

One of them druggies.

MOTHER

He was trying to get in?

DESTIN II

He was looking for money.

MOTHER

Fool. Thought I would leave money
for anyone to steal? Gonna have to
get his drugs some other way.
And girl, where's your mind?
What're you shootin' for anyway?
Panic the whole livin' city!

DESTIN I

Start the riots all over again,
right Mother?

MOTHER

Come to think of it that might not
be so bad.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Listen, we did pretty good the last riot, didn't we kids? People were afraid to go to the big stores, get caught up in the looting, beaten and arrested. But they came to us, didn't they? Our little truck did alright. That's the trick, being in the middle of it without being part of it! That's the beauty of the mobile vendor.

DESTIN II

We gonna open Mama?

MOTHER

Of course we're gonna open, son. Curfew's off, we are operating a business, people expect us to be open.

(singing)

"Oh what a beautiful mornin'
Oh what a beautiful day
I got a beautiful feel-in'
Everyone's goin' to pay!"

(to Destin I)

Destin, step it up. Help me unload this stuff into the truck.

DESTIN I

Why do I got to do this, Mother?

MOTHER

Because. And Destin--
(to Destin II)

DESTIN II

Yes Mama?

MOTHER

I want you to sweep up around the front. And turn the sign around proper.

DESTIN II

Okay Mama.

MOTHER gestures to U-NEEK, getting her attention.

MOTHER

U-neek, what's in your garden?
Anything ready to harvest? We need some Produce for the People.

DESTIN I

Mother -- Motorcycle cops, coming
this way.

MOTHER

Quick get inside, U-Neek. Fix your
face.

U-NEEK goes into the trailer.

DESTIN II

Are they even real cops?

MOTHER

Of course they are, what are you
talking about? You listen to me,
both you boys! If the police ever
get on you, I don't care what
you're doing, give it up. Now, keep
to your work *and stay out of the
conversation.* Destin, the gun!

DESTIN I

Destin, handing it over.

*Mother slips the gun into a baby-carrying sling she wears on
her chest.*

SERGEANT

Sergeant--

OFFICER FLANK

And Officer Flank--

SERGEANT/OFFICER FLANK

Ride in on motorcycles.

MOTHER

Beautiful day isn't it officers?

OFFICER FLANK

Officer Flank, scoping things out.

SERGEANT

We got a report there was gunfire
hereabouts. You know anything about
that, Mother?

MOTHER

I absolutely heard gunshots,
Sergeant.

SERGEANT

Anything else you want to tell me?
What about you boys?

MOTHER

Oh they heard gunshots too.

SERGEANT

Great. So everybody heard gunshots.

OFFICER FLANK

Not the first time we've had
criminal activity in this area.

MOTHER

Won't be the last, neither. This
crowded city with all its scarcity.
Times like these you have to wonder
what makes a body do the right
thing at all. *Enterprise*, that's
what I teach my children.
Enterprise. Don't wait for
inspiration -- *make your luck*,
spend your time, begin anywhere,
start something. Am I right,
Sergeant? You didn't get where you
are by fluke or whim, it *cost* you
something.

SERGEANT

Quite the operation you've got
going here.

MOTHER

This has always seemed as good a
spot as any to earn a living.

SERGEANT

You renew your business license
lately?

MOTHER

(gracious)

What can I do you for today,
gentlemen? Coca cola sound good?
Grilled cheese? When was the last
time you had a really good grilled
cheese?

OFFICER FLANK

You know you can't operate this
thing without a license.

MOTHER

That so?

OFFICER FLANK

That's against the law!

MOTHER

Earning a living? Since when?

SERGEANT

Just hold on.

MOTHER

Kids, put your wrists out.

DESTIN II

Destin scared, but doing it.

MOTHER

Slap on the cuffs and call the paddy wagon, officers! My kids and me have been breaking the law and we deserve to go to jail!

SERGEANT

No one said anything about jail.

OFFICER FLANK

Long as you cooperate that is.

MOTHER

It's a peculiar law that punishes people for being self-sufficient. We've never taken anything, no hand-outs, no social services, no safety net, no sir. Just a day's work for a day's pay, every day. If that's against the law then lock us up!

DESTIN II

We going to jail, Mama?

MOTHER

It'll be like a field trip, son. We might even get there in time for lunch!

OFFICER FLANK

Not so fast.

SERGEANT

All we're saying. You gotta have a business license to conduct a business.

MOTHER

What does a license prove? If anybody did my business better than me I'd be out of business, wouldn't I?

OFFICER FLANK

You gotta follow the law just like everybody else, sister!

MOTHER

I'm not "everybody else" and I am *definitely* not your sister.

OFFICER FLANK

Oh I'm sure she's special, right Sarge.

DESTIN II

My Mama *is* special.

OFFICER FLANK

Yeah? Are *you* special?

DESTIN I

Don't talk to him like that!

OFFICER FLANK

Like what, little man?

DESTIN I

He's not stupid, but maybe you are.

OFFICER FLANK

You need to watch what comes out of that mouth of yours!

DESTIN I

Hey don't tell me what to do or I'll--

MOTHER

Or *nothing*.
Stepping between her eldest and the police.
Nobody's saying nothing Destin, see there? Hush up. Now, what about that tooth, Sergeant?

SERGEANT

What tooth?

OFFICER FLANK

More crazy talk.

DESTIN I

You shut up, my mom ain't crazy!

OFFICER FLANK

Back off punk!

MOTHER

Mother grabbing her eldest by the scruff of his sassy neck.

DESTIN I

Ouch, what?

MOTHER

Be. Hayv.

DESTIN I

Destin, ruffled.

MOTHER

That tooth hurts I bet. How long's it been going on, Sergeant?

SERGEANT

What are you, a dentist?

OFFICER FLANK

Ha-ha! Good one, Sarge.

MOTHER

Dentists are all ass-holes. I was an oral hygienist, back in the day. Now open wide pussy cat. Come on let's see that tooth.

SERGEANT

Sergeant reluctantly opens his mouth.

MOTHER

Ah. Hm. Uh huh. You can close.

SERGEANT

Is it a cavity? You got a couple of aspirin?

MOTHER

Sweetie what you need is a root canal.

OFFICER FLANK

What? No way!

MOTHER

Abscess. You don't want the infection to spread.

SERGEANT

Infection-?

MOTHER

It's ready to burst. But you're in luck. I've got just the thing for you.
Mother slips behind the trailer.

OFFICER FLANK

What a crock, huh Sarge?

SERGEANT

Sergeant takes a look at the problem in the mirror.

OFFICER FLANK

I could call in a couple of extra officers, shake this place down in no time. You want me to make the call Sarge?

SERGEANT

Just hold on, Plank.

OFFICER FLANK

We should ask her for her papers, This dump, I'm gonna guess it expired a while ago.

SERGEANT

Just wait, Blank.

OFFICER FLANK

You're not going to let her do no voodoo dentistry on you, are you Sarge?

DESTIN I

My mom don't do no voodoo!

OFFICER FLANK

Shut up, punk.

MOTHER

Mother reappears with a little something.
No sir, you don't want that pus and that nasty smell coming outta your mouth. Gargle with this.

SERGEANT

What is it?

MOTHER

A constitutional remedy. Five times a day. And lay off the sugar and dairy.

SERGEANT

What's in it?

MOTHER

Go on inside. And never mind my homely girl.

OFFICER FLANK

Hold on, are you licensed to prescribe? Can she do that, Sarge? Let's see your papers.

SERGEANT

Shut up, *Flunk*.

OFFICER FLANK

Flank.

SERGEANT

Huh?

OFFICER FLANK

It's Flank. For the record. Sir.

SERGEANT

Sergeant goes into the trailer.

OFFICER FLANK

Officer Flank with a note pad, writing things down. How come your kids aren't in school?

MOTHER

Uh-huh, you been to the schools in this city? No thank-you, my children are world-schooled. Everyday out in the world, learning more than they need to know.

OFFICER FLANK

(to Destin I)

How old are you?

DESTIN I

Why should I tell you?

OFFICER FLANK
The world hasn't taught you
manners! What's your name?

DESTIN I
(to Mother)
Do I have to talk to this guy?

OFFICER FLANK
You think you're too tough?

MOTHER
He's just talking. He's too young
to know what he means.

OFFICER FLANK
I said *what's your name, punk?*

MOTHER
Go on, tell him. You got nothing to
hide.

DESTIN I
Destin.

OFFICER FLANK
What about you, short-stuff?

DESTIN I
You leave my brother alone.

OFFICER FLANK
Name?

DESTIN II
My name is Destin Two, sir.

OFFICER FLANK
You're Destin and you're Destin. Uh
huh. You think I'm that stupid?

DESTIN II
Not necessarily, sir.

OFFICER FLANK
Brother's got the same name?

MOTHER
Of course not. He's Destin One and
that one's Destin Two. You follow?
Couldn't be plainer if they wore
neon signs. Destin One, now he's my
oldest and bravest. His dad was
Marines and all that.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Wanted his son to follow in his boot-prints but I wasn't having any of it. Commercials would have you believe they got things all figured out, the Marine Corp, pumpin' out upright quality citizens easy as takin' a shit. Excuse ma fran-says. That was not my experience, so I gave that man the honorable *boot* and never looked back. I was not about to have my boy raised to be a lionhearted fool with guns for brains.

OFFICER FLANK

So they're both named after him?

MOTHER

No, neither of 'em is!

OFFICER FLANK

Then who the hell's Destin?

MOTHER

They're *both* Destin. Pay attention! Now Destin Two came in the middle, between the Marine and the air-traffic controller. *His* dad-

OFFICER FLANK

Destin?

MOTHER

Are you *pretending* you don't understand? Anyway, that man couldn't stay sober to save his life-- he sold medical supplies-- but he was *honest*. Never cheated, never lied. Unfortunately he was a pill-head. Luckily Destin Two got only the good from his pitious dad. You won't find a one's more trustworthy and dependable than that boy there.

SERGEANT

Sergeant enters.

DESTIN I

Followed by U-neek.

DESTIN II

Our sister.

U-NEEK's face is now smeared with powder and dirt, her hair wild.

MOTHER

How's that tooth, Sergeant?

SERGEANT

Better. Good in fact.

MOTHER

There she is. There's my girl.

OFFICER FLANK

Let me guess: Destin III? Destin-e?

MOTHER

Your sorry sense of humor. That's my beautiful U-Neek. Beautiful inside, not out. A face only a mother cow could love. I judge people's character by how they react to her. Stone deaf, and that face, but the girl's funny as the night is black. Not everyone gets her humor. The girl's daddy was a back-up singer for Lionel Richie, she went deaf just to mess with him.

OFFICER FLANK

How do we know she's actually deaf?

SERGEANT

Shut up, Flank.

OFFICER FLANK

Where is the daddy?

MOTHER

Gone. He never did have a sense of humor.

OFFICER FLANK

Can't say that I blame him.

MOTHER

Nobody's blaming anybody. Men come and go, I can't keep track. They're mostly clueless and I don't look back. It's a war out there, gentlemen, a war on poverty, on terrorism, on drugs.

(holding her chest)

But not here. Here it is peaceful.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Spiritual. Bless us god. Just let me run my business and provide for my children. That's all I ask, all I need.

SERGEANT

And the gun?

MOTHER

The which-?

SERGEANT

The one you're holding in there.

OFFICER FLANK

Hand it over!

MOTHER

Mother pulls the gun from the sling.
Oh this? What do you know. Just for the riff-raff, you understand.

SERGEANT

To keep 'em peaceful?

OFFICER FLANK

Officer Flank grabs the gun from Mother.
You got a permit for this? Huh?

MOTHER

It's hardly more than a BB gun.
It wouldn't do damage to a healthy raccoon.

OFFICER FLANK

You want I should file a report?

SERGEANT

Sergeant taking gun.
We'll let it slide. This time.

MOTHER

Gentlemen, we've got work to do, so if you'll kindly excuse us.

DESTIN I

She meaning get out of our faces.

MOTHER

Destin.
You have to forgive him, he's young and hot-headed.

(MORE)

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Just like his daddy.

(to Destin I)

Land him in jail or worse if he's not careful. *You understand?*

OFFICER FLANK

I can teach that one. Show him how to properly address his superiors. And one or two other things a man needs to know.

Flank displays his weapon.

You ever seen a gun like that?

That's the real thing. Oh, now you're interested.

DESTIN I

Destin, reaching.

OFFICER FLANK

You never touch my gun!

MOTHER

Mother rushing between.

You keep your tacky gloves off my boy!

SERGEANT

That one's no boy. He's spittin' distance from being a man.

OFFICER FLANK

You need your mama to take care of you? Huh punk?

DESTIN I

(referring to Flank)

I could take you any day, I know that!

MOTHER

Violence is not the answer.

Her arm around her boy.

He's all talk. All appetite and impulse. Very immature. Come away now, son.

SERGEANT

He's got moxie. Knows this city too, I bet.

DESTIN I

So?

SERGEANT

Not afraid of unclean corners and
dark streets?

DESTIN I

Why should I be?

MOTHER

I was gonna tell you why.

SERGEANT

We could use more of you on the
force.

DESTIN I

The force..?

MOTHER

Mother, alarmed.

OFFICER FLANK

You think this rooster's ready to
fly the coop, Sarge?

SERGEANT

Thinking maybe.
Maybe.

DESTIN II

Is Destin going somewhere, mama?

MOTHER

No.

SERGEANT

What do you think, son? You want to
go to the academy, become a cop?

MOTHER

No thank-you. He doesn't.

DESTIN I

Wait

MOTHER

Mother dragging Destin.

DESTIN I

Messing my shirt!

MOTHER

Now help your mother. Start this
grill up.

DESTIN I

Why suddenly me? You the one starts
the grill.

MOTHER

Today you start the grill. Put your
giddy ass right there!

DESTIN I

Why are you all

MOTHER

Smiling. Excuse us.

DESTIN I

Pulling on my shirt

MOTHER

Sharp, whispering voice!

DESTIN I

And talking like that?

MOTHER

*You need to take a breath, do a
brain check!*

DESTIN I

How? Why-?

MOTHER

Mother suddenly grabs her gut.

DESTIN I

Momma, you hurting?

MOTHER

Nah, my insides talking. Now hear
me, *just because you're smart
doesn't mean you think straight.
You got to slow it down. Slow will
win.*

DESTIN I

You need to let me have my own
mind. You can't be deciding things
for me all the time!

MOTHER

When have I ever?! Okay fine. I see
all your *potential* is all. I don't
want it squandered.

DESTIN I

How is coppin' squandering? You're always telling me take pride in my work; well coppin' is real work.

MOTHER

How about something less fraught?

SERGEANT

Ahem. Well? Want to wear the uniform, someday carry a *real* piece, son?

MOTHER

Did you not hear me? He's going nowhere. I need him *here*, with his family.

SERGEANT

Why don't you ask him what he wants?

MOTHER

I'm telling you what I know! The war tore through his daddy, he lost his marbles fighting and blew his brains out, understand? Out there on the streets it's just another war. This boy isn't going to be that. I'm keeping him safe at home. Now if you're not buying *move on*, you're scaring away business!

SERGEANT

Maybe we're buying. Let's see now.

Sergeant looks around the back of the trailer.

Well, well. Pet food. Soap. Toilet paper. Beer. You know these items are ineligible for food stamps?

MOTHER

So?

SERGEANT

So I think we have a problem.

OFFICER FLANK

(sniffing)

Yeah, it stinks around here. Smells like food stamp fraud.

SERGEANT

I'm guessing you're selling under the table.

MOTHER

Honey, if I'm under the table I'm giving it away.

OFFICER FLANK

Ask the honest kid. Hey, King Destin the Second--

MOTHER

Leave him out of it.

SERGEANT

Looks like you're really working this war on poverty. Government doesn't like that.

OFFICER FLANK

No sir, the government does not.

MOTHER

Ha! They make a bigger deal of people trying to buy gas or beer or sell a hundred dollars worth of food stamps than they do over a banker who steals ten million! You come out here and look around and then tell me you're going to sweat someone for that? People here got nothing. If I swipe their E.B.T's for cash to help them get by -- and maybe keep a little for my labors, so what?

SERGEANT

You're cheating and they're stealing from the government. That's what.

MOTHER

If it keeps the lights on or buys some gas to get to work, who gives a damn?

SERGEANT

You can twist this anyway you like, doesn't make it straight.

OFFICER FLANK

Want I should 'cuff her, Sarge?

DESTIN I
Destin, steppin' up.
You're not arresting my mother!

MOTHER
How 'bout a shine?

MOTHER drops to her knees and begins shining OFFICER FLANK'S boots.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
You can tell a lot about a person
by their shoes. Their character.
Their future.

DESTIN II
Go on, Mama. Tell him.

OFFICER FLANK
Tell him what?

DESTIN II
Destin, prideful.
My mama's a psycho!

MOTHER
Psychic, child.

DESTIN II
She knows what's going to happen
before it happens!

MOTHER
*Supernatural insight. Comes
straight from motherhood.*

OFFICER FLANK
I don't go in for that phony stuff,
it's all a carnival scam.

MOTHER
Well look at that.

OFFICER FLANK
What?

MOTHER
Nothing. Just. Ohhh.

OFFICER FLANK
What? What do you know?
Officer Flank a believer now.
Say it, witch! Not that it means
anything.

MOTHER

There's a struggle, there's a gun,
someone dies.

OFFICER FLANK

Flank examining his own shoes!

MOTHER

My advice to you is get your
affairs in order.

OFFICER FLANK

Where do you see that?

MOTHER

Pay off your debts. Make amends.
Say adieu to your loved ones. You
don't want to leave a mess when
you're gone.

OFFICER FLANK

Gone-? When?

MOTHER

Before you're ready. Presently.

OFFICER FLANK

How-?

MOTHER

You really want to know?

OFFICER FLANK

No!

MOTHER

That is to say if you stay in your
current profession. Renounce your
badge, abandon your billy club,
become a barber or banker or
butcher of meat and not men. You
might live forever.

OFFICER FLANK

Charlatan! You're making it up.

MOTHER

My fee is ten dollars. Tip is
optional.

OFFICER FLANK

Get away from me you fraud!

FLANK kicks at her; MOTHER curls up in the fetal position to protect herself.

DESTIN I
No, stop it!

DESTIN II
Help her! Mama!

SERGEANT
Settle down, Officer. Stand away.

SERGEANT approaches, standing over Mother.

MOTHER
Heels of your boots are worn clear to nubs, Sergeant. All that patrolling must be hard on a man's shoes. Ah. Could use a nice new pair of shiny leather boots I bet. How about you and me have a reparation discussion?

OFFICER FLANK
Can I get new boots?

SERGEANT
Shut up, Flank.
(to Mother)
Turn your son over to us or I report you.

MOTHER
You're out of your mind.

SERGEANT
Furnishing a minor with a firearm. Food stamp fraud. Operating an illegal business. Bribing an officer. That's just for starters. Seems unfair. You'll dine off the government but you won't pay your bill? Letting a promising young man's talent go to waste selling to the vulnerable, when he could be protecting them-- and you.

MOTHER
My kids aren't for sale.

DESTIN I
Mother.

MOTHER
Hush. Go inside.

DESTIN I

No.

MOTHER

(*a shock*)

What did you say to me?

DESTIN I

Destin surprised as anyone.
I said No. Let me go with them.

MOTHER

What are you saying? You don't know
what you're saying.

DESTIN I

It'll keep you out of jail.

MOTHER

Destin.

DESTIN I

Let me go.

MOTHER

Keep your mouth shut!

DESTIN I

I want to go. I'm almost grown, I
need to get out of here and be
something. A man. Not just some
chill kid with no nothing to show
for it.

SERGEANT

He knows his own mind. You've done
a good job with him.

MOTHER

Mother grabbing hold of Destin's
foot.

DESTIN I

Let go, come on Mother!

MOTHER

There it is, right there in front
of her: senseless death. Her oldest
son's sure fate if he leaves home.
No, no, you're too young, too
brave, too much your father. You
don't have any sense, you'll do
something stupid!

SERGEANT

Young people need to make mistakes,
that's how they learn.

MOTHER

Tell me, what will this boy learn
from the grave, Sergeant? What use
will it be for him there? Because
that's what I see and you know it's
the truth!

DESTIN I

You don't know, not for sure.

DESTIN II

Mama she knows.

MOTHER

Look now

*(inspecting the feet of
Destin II)*

There, my youngest Destin, my
innocent, it's on your shoes as
well! The mark of a ruined life!
How can that be? Why would one so
un-corruptable and trustworthy be
thrown away like old food? What
good is that?
Looking at U-Neek's feet.
And my sweet U-Neek is marked too!
My funny girl? No no no no no.
There's no sense to this, no
fairness. None of my children stand
a chance out there. We've got to
stay here, stay together!

DESTIN I

You gotta let me try sometime,
Mother. Just let me try.

MOTHER

My boy. My hope.

DESTIN I

I will be the best at whatever I
do. Mother. You gotta believe in my
belief in myself.

MOTHER

You're right. For once.
Doesn't staunch the worry none.

SERGEANT

You coming, son?

DESTIN I
Yeah, I was just

SERGEANT
Yes, *Sergeant*.

OFFICER FLANK
Move, kid!

DESTIN I
Destin, U-Neek-- I'll see you
around. Destin walking away.

MOTHER
Destin! Don't be brave, don't be
foolish, save yourself.

DESTIN I
Don't worry, Mother. You're gonna
be proud.

MOTHER
Promise me!

DESTIN I
It's gonna be fine. I promise.

SERGEANT
I thank you for your remedy. And
your son. Have a nice day.

OFFICER FLANK
Sergeant and Officer Flank

DESTIN I
And Destin

SERGEANT
Exit.

MOTHER
Mother. Motionless on the ground.

DESTIN II
Destin and U-Neek. Real still.
Mama? Where they taking Destin?
Mama?

MOTHER
Ssh. Comfort your sister.

DESTIN II
He gonna be the police?

MOTHER

That's what he thinks.
Closing her eyes.

DESTIN II

We gonna open today? Don't go to
sleep. Mama?

MOTHER

Gimme a hand.

DESTIN II

Destin and U-neek helping Mama up.

MOTHER

Of course we're going to open
today. We're a business, people
expect us to be open. Can't look
back.
Deep breath.
Get a move on, now!

DESTIN II

They get ready for business.

TWO.

Another day, a few weeks later. U-NEEK, in a bulky unattractive sweater and unruly hair, hangs laundry and sheets on a clothes line with MOTHER. A VENDOR stands among several boxes.

MOTHER

What I'm saying is

VENDOR

Vendor *trying* to be patient.

MOTHER

I couldn't care less if you're a
pacifist, a peaceful protestor, a
conscientious objector, a PHD, or
nine months pregnant. The War on
Poverty is a war on the poor.

VENDOR

I'll let you have them for ten
bucks.

MOTHER

A *piece*?

VENDOR

I'm not here to dicker.

MOTHER

We all got drafted and we're all prisoners. It's fight or rot, those are the choices.

VENDOR

You'll sell 'em for twenty and make one-hundred percent. I'm giving you a deal.

MOTHER

Uh-huh. Now me, I'm an *Entre Peneur*. It's a creative livelihood and I make the rules.

VENDOR

Yeah, sure. How many you want?

MOTHER

Self-sufficiency, that's the ticket.

VENDOR

Four dozen? Six dozen?

MOTHER

Self-sufficiency, just like Mr. President Lyndon B. Johnson envisioned. And the key to self-sufficiency is *work. Industry. Employment.*

VENDOR

I can get more. I've got the best connections of anyone around here.

MOTHER

And the key to a thriving business is providing a service or product that your buyers can use, at a reasonable price.

VENDOR

Neat. How many, Mother?

MOTHER

Now what is my clientele supposed to do with a bunch of firecrackers, 'cracker?

VENDOR

It's almost New Year's!

MOTHER

I know what time of year it is.

VENDOR

Stating the obvious.
Everybody celebrates New Year's.

MOTHER

You think lighting up M-80's and
Cherry Bombs is gonna heat up their
houses for New Year's?

VENDOR

Everybody's gonna party, whether
they can afford to or not.

MOTHER

Sure, they could stick a sparkler
in a socket and put a match to it
when their electricity gets turned
off. Great idea.

VENDOR

Hey you sell *cancer sticks*. At
least fireworks don't kill.

MOTHER

Cigarettes are a *comfort* to
individuals in distressed
situations.

VENDOR

And fireworks *aren't*?

MOTHER

They're cheap tricks, nothing but a
nuisance and a hazard. Get in the
wrong hands and they'll blow up in
your face. I'll give you one dollar
a piece.

VENDOR

A buck? Forget it! I can sell 'em
to China Sam down at the Quickie-
Pickie.

MOTHER

You do that.

VENDOR

Can I uh, stow them here till I
talk to China Sam?

MOTHER

Go ahead. No sense in you dragging
everything all the way over there
just to have him tell you the same
thing.

VENDOR

Yeah, we'll see.

MOTHER

Fifty dollars, please.

VENDOR

What-?

MOTHER

Stow fee.

VENDOR

You're shittin' me!

MOTHER

Think I don't know firecrackers are
illegal in this city, 'cracker? I'm
taking on your burden of guilt.

VENDOR

Forget it!

DESTIN II

Mama--
Destin enters, excited.

MOTHER

You see I'm working, son?

DESTIN II

Oh sorry. Patrol car coming, Mama.

VENDOR

Those pigs see all this crap my ass
is theirs.

MOTHER

Language, 'cracker.

VENDOR

Uh. Sorry.

MOTHER

No sense you landing in a crowded jail on account of your pride.

VENDOR

Okay, okay!

MOTHER

One hundred dollars, in advance, please.

VENDOR

Bitch, you said fifty!

MOTHER

Cheaper than paying the fine for illegal possession and losing your inventory. And what did I say about language?

VENDOR

This is blackmail!

MOTHER

We accept cash or money orders.

He takes some money out, throws it at Mother.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Help the nice man, Destin.

DESTIN II

Okay Mama.

They quickly load the boxes of fireworks into the trailer.

VENDOR

Christ, smells like wet dog and old milk in here!

MOTHER pulls a bedsheet off the clothes-line.

MOTHER

Cover it up with this sheet, U-Neek. Make it look stylish.

U-NEEK takes the sheet inside the trailer. They wait.

VENDOR

Well? Where are they?

DESTIN II

I think they drove off.

MOTHER

What do you know.

VENDOR

Hey! Hey that boy of yours and you just swindle me?

MOTHER

Are you calling my son a *liar*?

VENDOR

No, I'm calling both of you liars!

MOTHER

We got better things to do than shakedown a second-rate 'cracker salesman!

VENDOR

I'll be back for those boxes soon as I talk to the chink! If any of that stuff is missing--

MOTHER

Who's going to steal from you? My honest son or my deaf daughter?

VENDOR

Vendor exits, *pissed*.

MOTHER

China Sam won't have nothing to do with fireworks. Thing is he's Korean, he's got no use for them. I doubt we'll ever see that gentleman again.

DESTIN II

I saw him, Mama.

MOTHER

Who? What are you talking?

DESTIN II

In the patrol car. Destin.

MOTHER

So there *really was* a car? What do you know.

DESTIN II

How he in the car?

MOTHER

Maybe your brother is making something of himself. Maybe he's going to make this a better world and your Mama proud. Maybe. Maybe.

DESTIN II

The firecracker man, he isn't nice.

MOTHER

No. Lot's of them aren't. Mother taking note. U-Neek I don't like how that sweater is slinking offa your shoulder. Too much skin is a sin.

Mother pulls a man's shirt off the clothes line and drapes it over U-Neek's bulky sweater -- making her look like a badly wrapped package.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

There, that is how a young woman looks. For her own good.

DESTIN II

Mama, did we swindle?

MOTHER

Listen up. Now you gotta be good and kind and honest, you understand? That's your strength. You keep being all those things, Destin, and you'll be a success in this world. Got that?

DESTIN II

Yes Mama.

MOTHER

Your brother's too brave for his own good, your sister's too helpless to amount to anything. You're my good boy. Now let's you & me go to the swap meet.

DESTIN II

That's far to walk, Mama.

MOTHER

Thank goodness we got strong legs and soles on our shoes. U-Neek, take inventory of those boxes.

U-NEEK goes inside the trailer.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Mother locking the trailer door.
U-Neek can stay inside where it's
safe.

She turns the sign to "We Are Shut".

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Mother and her youngest start
walking.

DESTIN II

All the damn way to the swap meet.

They exit. A moment later the door is unlocked from the inside and U-NEEK emerges. She looks offstage in the direction of her mother's exit, then, delighted, she reveals a sparkler.

DONTAVIUS

Dontavius enters, quiet. Lights a
cigarette. Just watching.

He holds out his lighter to her. U-NEEK holds the sparkler out to him.

THREE.

A freeway underpass. The sound of fast traffic echoing overhead. DESTIN I, SERGEANT, and OFFICER FLANK on foot-patrol.

SERGEANT

The thing about the homeless is,
most of them want to be this way.
You give them the option of a
shelter with a bed and a meal, or
this, they're going to pick this.
Almost every time.

DESTIN I

Why is that, Sarg?

OFFICER FLANK

They're stupid.

SERGEANT

They're not stupid. Some are crazy.
Others just can't follow societies
rules.

(MORE)

SERGEANT (CONT'D)

They would rather sleep in the dirt
and dine on trash than hold a job
and pay a mortgage.

OFFICER FLANK

They could rent or lease.

SERGEANT

Rent, lease, buy, they don't want
to do any of it, Flank. They can't
conform, they have to go against
things, it's just their nature. And
society pays for it. Society runs
on rules, that's why we need laws.
Do you know how much manpower we
waste trying to keep these guys out
of trouble? And we're seeing a lot
more women, too.

OFFICER FLANK

Whole families living under here.

DESTIN I

It's hard to have to live this way.

SERGEANT

It's a choice, young man. They've
made a choice to go their own way.
Apparently that's more important to
them than comfort. It is a hard
life, son. I feel bad for them.

*OFFICER FLANK pulls a large piece of cardboard up, revealing
a homeless camper's site: a mattress, a small fire pit,
utensils, books, a radio, clothes, etc.*

OFFICER FLANK

Check this out. A freeway condo.
Looks like a family. Blankets,
cups, band-aids, books.

DESTIN I

I know this family. My mom sold
them this stuff.

OFFICER FLANK picks up a book.

OFFICER FLANK

"The Call of the Wild". Wonder what
that's about.

DESTIN I

I have that book. I read it when I
was a kid.

SERGEANT

"Call of the Wild", great story.

OFFICER FLANK

"This book belongs to...Destin".
Hey, that your name scrawled there?

DESTIN I

Why my name?

OFFICER FLANK

How many Destin's are there around
here?

DESTIN I

Lemme see

OFFICER FLANK

Holding it, out of reach.
This book? Is this what you want?

DESTIN I

Give it here!

OFFICER FLANK

Aw, little Destin's baby book!

DESTIN I

I mean it! Give it to me!

OFFICER FLANK

Hey, just playing witchu. Punk.

SERGEANT

Officer.

DESTIN I

Destin grabbing his book from that
sorry-ass Flank!

OFFICER FLANK

Guess your Momma forgot to tell you
she sold your baby book.

DESTIN I

Destin shoving Officer Flank.

SERGEANT

Simmer down. You should try reading
it, Flank.

OFFICER FLANK

What's so great about it?

SERGEANT

Tell him the story, Destin.

DESTIN I

Uh. Yeah so this dog.

SERGEANT

Buck.

DESTIN I

Buck yeah, yes sir. He's this dog.

SERGEANT

Great dog. Loyal.

DESTIN I

Real loyal. But he gets stolen from his owner and then sold to these bad guys in, like, Alaska. They beat him bad. Then they train him to be a sled dog. Right away Buck becomes the lead dog. Because he's mega tough and smart.

SERGEANT

One without the other is useless.

DESTIN I

But then they sell him. And the new owners don't know what they're doing and they die crossing a river of melting ice. Their dogs die too. Except Buck. He's like Survivor.

SERGEANT

Because he's tougher and smarter than the others. You and Buck have that in common.

DESTIN I

Yes sir.

OFFICER FLANK

So what, it's just a book.

DESTIN I

And even though Buck finally gets a decent master and he seems happy, he senses he's got like another calling.

SERGEANT

The call of the wild. The law of club and fang.

DESTIN I

Right Sarge. And when his master gets killed by the Yeehats, Buck he attacks them and kills them. See he has to revenge the death of his kind master, that's part of it. But it's also part of his nature-- a part he has denied because of being in captivity. Then he runs off to be with the wolves. Now he is free and doesn't have to think about being anything but what he is: wild.

SERGEANT

A great, great book. Well done, son.

DESTIN I

Thanks Sarge.

OFFICER FLANK

Officer Flank not following all of it. Stupid book.

DESTIN I

Are you going to give the homeless family a ticket?

SERGEANT

Nah. They wouldn't pay it, they can't.

DESTIN I

What then, jail?

OFFICER FLANK

They should be so lucky! Free housing and food, plus a shower. All paid for by you and me.

SERGEANT

We need to fix it.

OFFICER FLANK

Fixing it, sir.

SERGEANT

Hold on.

OFFICER FLANK

I know what to do!

SERGEANT

I said hold on, Flank!
Destin. Destroy this crap.

DESTIN I

Sargent-?

OFFICER FLANK

No way, he gets to?

SERGEANT

He's got to learn.

OFFICER FLANK

He won't do it, he's soft like his
sweet brother!

DESTIN I

Shut up, Flank!

OFFICER FLANK

Yeah well you suck!
Officer Flank stomps off, torqued!

SERGEANT

Go ahead. It's part of the job,
son.

DESTIN I

Yeah but. This is their stuff.
Maybe all they have.

SERGEANT

You think like that you'll never do
anything and they'll never change.
Listen, Destin. What kind of name
is that anyway? *Destin*. Sounds like
housework. We need to get you a
better name. A name you can take
pride in. From now on I'm calling
you Buck. Listen Buck, unless
someone comes along and forces
these people out, they'll live in
the dirt under the freeway, like
dogs. You think that's a good
thing?

DESTIN I

I don't know. No. Won't they need
some of this?

SERGEANT

What they need is to re-think the
way they're living.

(MORE)

SERGEANT (CONT'D)

There's plenty of shelters, this is no place to sleep or raise animals, much less kids. We can't let them stay here like filth, son. Otherwise we're adding to the problem, aren't we?

DESTIN I

I don't want to. It's not fair.

SERGEANT

You want to talk about *fair*? A man starts a family, then doesn't like his job and quits or gets fired. Skips out on his family. Now, I don't give a shit about that rat bastard, but he's got kids. Kids who are gonna miss out on all the things kids do with their dads. What are they supposed to do? Maybe they fight their way through life and put themselves through police academy just to show that scumbag they can be somebody. Or maybe they live in a trailer unlawfully selling stuff on a street corner. What kind of life is that? You think a kid deserves that, just because the dad didn't hold up his end of the bargain?

DESTIN I

Destin picking up the book.
No Sargent. No I don't.

SERGEANT

Agreed. It's unfair. People need to take responsibility. Do the right thing by their kids. Kids need *stability*. They need a strong roof over their heads. As a parent, I'd be ashamed to provide anything less.

DESTIN I

Destin, comprehending.

DESTIN I tears the book in half and half again, letting the pages flutter to the ground -- then he stomps on and smashes the family's belongings.

SERGEANT

Sergeant, impressed.
That's right, son. Good boy.

FOUR.

A man appears in shadow, off-center.

OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity is on the horizon. You haven't seen him before. You'll see more of him later.
Opportunity exits.

FIVE.

DESTIN II wears a McDonald's uniform; the pants are too small for him.

DESTIN II

(practicing a script)

"Welcome to McDonalds! Can I help you?"

U-NEEK acts the customer, deciding, pointing, changing her mind, etc.

Yes ma'am, that's uh, let's see, three Double-Quarter Pounder extra cheese, five Big Mac no lettuce, ten Chicken McNugget, extra Ranch sauce. Ma'am, let me ask you, did you want some of our world famous fries?
Trying to get it all said.
Cooked in Canola oil with zero grams of fat? Fifty large fries? Yes ma'am, comin' right up!"

U-NEEK grabs the hat off his head and puts it on her own head, mimicking Destin Two.

DESTIN II (CONT'D)

Shut-up U-neek, what are you laughing at? This was the only size of pants left! Looks like bad yoga. Ima roll 'em up like so, like capris! That better?
Don't mess with my hat, U-Neek.

She neatly places the hat on his head.

The assistant manager, Mr. Skip, he a screamer but Ima get on his good side. He say if I'm good I can advance real quick.

(MORE)