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Philip C. Kolin
University of Southern Mississippi, philip.kolin@usm.edu

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EMMETT TILL GOES SKIP-STOPPING ON THE CTA*

by Philip C. Kolin

Cast of Characters

Emmett Till, also known as Bo, has just turned 14 (in July) and is getting ready to start 8th grade. A fun-loving and intelligent boy, he is known for telling jokes and playing tricks. He talks with a slight stutter as a result of having polio early in life.

Mamie Till, Emmett’s 33-year old mother, is a widow whose husband died in WWII. She is solely responsible for raising her only child. Hard working and religious, Mamie Till grew up in the Delta, witnessing lynchings and other racial atrocities, but emigrated to Chicago, regarded as the land of milk and honey by blacks escaping racial oppression in Mississippi.

Nat, a classmate of Emmett’s, about his age, but unlike Emmett, he is the cynic in the crowd, and often the butt of the boys’ jokes.

Malcolm, another classmate of Emmett’s, but lacks his imagination and curiosity.

LeRoy, another of Emmett’s friends and classmates, skinny, given to tough language, and often critical of Emmett’s imagination.

Setting

Chicago in mid to late August 1955. Mamie’s small apartment on the Southeast side; at an L station where the boys wait for their train; on an L car as it travels from the Southeast side of the city and around the Loop and back to the Southside; at the Illinois Central station.

*The title of this play comes from the scheduling practices of Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) elevated train cars in the 1940s and 1950s. Trains were coded “A,” “B,” or “A/B” depending on where they stopped. “A” trains stopped at all “A” stations but skipped “B” stations and vice versa. “A/B” trains, however, stopped at all stations. Skip-stopping scheduling was intended to increase traffic/flow, especially at peak travel times.
Scene One

It is a sweltering Chicago midsummer in Mamie Till’s kitchen, 1955. She does not have a fan but the windows are open. There is a table covered with a flowered plastic tablecloth with an open Bible on it, and next to the table is a bird cage with a yellow canary that chirps occasionally throughout the scene. The time is about 5:30 p.m. on a Tuesday night just before supper and Mamie, exhausted from a day of hard work, sits reading the Chicago Defender when Emmett comes in. When he talks to her, he stutters on key words and phrases marked throughout. In three or four places, she attempts to wind a stubborn alarm clock that just doesn’t want to work. A large digital clock sits in the corner of Mamie’s kitchen. There is never a reference to this clock, but it registers changing time very quickly. The minute and hour hands move twenty or thirty times faster than they would in real time.

EMMETT: Mama, can I go skip-stoppin (he stutters on this word) on the CTA?

MAMIE: What in the name of the Lord is skip-stoppin and what are you doin on the CTA? You didn’t leave the neighborhood while I was at work, child, did you? (She attempts to rewind the alarm clock to make it work. It doesn’t and all she can do is sigh.)

EMMETT: No, Mama. My friends and I just want to see some of the big town and we can just by hoppin on a Green Hornet or an L car.

MAMIE: Couldn’t you fly faster on a bumble bee, son.

EMMETT: O, Mama, I’m bein serious. We wait for certain connectin buses, streetcars, L cars, or electric buses that come our way and then get a whole lot of life quick-like.

MAMIE: And that’s what you call skip-stoppin?

EMMETT: Yes, Mama. It’s all ok. There’s nothin wrong. The CTA says is all right. (“Time just keeps skippin, skippin by” from Steve Miller’s “Fly Like an Eagle” plays in the background.)

MAMIE: Well, I don’t. I don’t want you hangin round with a bunch of rowdy boys and go all over this city. God knows what could happen to you. You might get shot full of holes.

EMMETT: O, Mama, how can I get into trouble for 20 cents.

MAMIE: That’s a one-way fare. I’d like you to come back—and alive!

EMMETT: All right, Mama. Forty cents will give me a round trip, right back to your waitin arms.
MAMIE: Boys have gotten killed for far less, God bless their souls. I recall one boy near Wade, Mississippi, who wandered into a neighborin county and ended up dancin at the end of a KKK rope. He didn’t have a penny and got killed anyway. They left the sign on his body read—“He done too much talkin.” (Canary chirps.)

EMMETT: Mama, this is Chicago, not backwater Mississippi where some folks still believe electricity’s the invention of the devil. Negro boys (he stutters on this last word) don’t get killed just for travelin around on the CTA.

MAMIE: Well, Mr. Geography, have you forgot about the three white boys who right here in Cook County Chicago were kidnapped, molested, murdered, and had their bodies thrown into Robinson Woods. Do you want to end up a murder victim on the CTA? (Mamie winds the clock again; it still doesn’t work. This time she shakes it before setting it down.)

EMMETT: I can just see the headlines in the Sun Times (he stutters) or the Defender—“Handsome Young Negro Boy Goes to His Death in Glory on the CTA.”

MAMIE: Don’t smart sass me, Son.

EMMETT: Mama, I ain’t like those white boys.

MAMIE: The Peterson boy was your age.

EMMETT: Mama, I’m a whole year older (he stutters on this word) than he was.

MAMIE: But he is a whole lot deader. All kinds of strange and wicked people ridin’ those L trains and buses. Who knows what could happen to you just for lookin at someone the wrong way or smilin or coughin or askin a question or even sayin “Excuse me?” Folks just have to be careful these days. Read your Bible, Bo. Read Psalm 52, where you’ll learn about those “workers of treachery.” Look out, Bo. (We hear a soundbite: “The bodies of the three civil rights workers were found today burned in an earthen dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi.”)

EMMETT: Mama, you are just too suspicious (he stutters). Someday you got to let me go. I’m gettin to be a man.

MAMIE: You’re soundin like your Uncle Moses himself, always getting on to me about not letting you come down home to Mississippi to see all your relations. I guess this has to be the summer but I don’t like it.

EMMETT: Mama, I’m getting to be a man. Let me go.

MAMIE: Oh, I see, a 14-year old grown man with all the experience and knowledge of a boy. (She shakes the clock again and then disgustingly puts it on the table.) This foolish clock just does not want to cooperate.
EMMETT: Well, Mama, I’m big for my age and some people might think I was already in the 10th or maybe even 11th grade at Chicago Vocational or Bloom.

MAMIE: But the truth of the entire matter, son, is that you’re only goin to be a whoppin 8th grader in a few weeks. You’re still a child, your mama’s baby, the only son born to Mamie and Louis Till of Chicago, Illinois.

EMMETT: Mama, I’m cool, Mama, really cool. I’ve been around. I could talk my way out of anythin. I know what’s up. I’m cool (he stutters on the last word).

MAMIE: Boy, if you know what’s up, then tell me how high the temperature climbed in this great city today?

EMMETT: It’s just right for ridin the CTA.

MAMIE: What are you talkin about. Ridin around in this weather is dangerous. We are sittin in the middle of a heatwave.

EMMETT: Mama, the buses and L trains are cool. The Green Hornets and L cars move so fast you can barely follow one with your eye. Not even the wind can catch ’em. (Canary chirps.)

MAMIE: We’re in the hottest month in Chicago history and you want to be ridin all over the South Side in a heatwave, a desert heat that would parch your throat and bake your bones. Read your Book of Job, Bo.

EMMETT: Mama, you told me a 100 times how hot it was in Mississippi where you’re born and how hard it is for Uncle Moses to crop in that hot sun all day long.

MAMIE: Bo, there’s a big difference between Chicago heat and Mississippi heat.

EMMETT: But, Mama, people is people (he stutters), no matter where the heat is.

MAMIE: Chicago couldn’t stand the heat they have in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, Bo.

EMMETT: Why you say that, Mama?

MAMIE: Watch the news, boy. When we get a touch of Mississippi heat up here in the Windy City, it’s so hot that bodies start to get on fire and disintegrate. There was a story in the Chicago Defender a couple of days ago about folks gettin so hot that their bodies went all the way to 105 or 106 degrees. They’re dyin in their homes, and their bodies are decomposin. Maybe some of the CTA riders you want to join are decomposin right in their seats, and that wind you talkin about will carry their ashes straight down to the Gulf of Mexico.
EMMETT: Straight through Tallahatchie (he stutters through this word) County, right, Mama.

MAMIE: Don’t sass talk me again, Bo, or it’s the switch for you.

EMMETT: I’m sorry, Mama, but you been watchin too many of those horror movies on WGN on Friday nights.

MAMIE: Bo, you and your friends will roast ridin and stoppin on the CTA all day long in this weather.

EMMETT: Mama, please let me try. Let me go; let me go!

MAMIE: Bo, those fancy crepe-soled shoes of yours will melt and you’ll dissolve right along with them. You’ll drown in your own sweat. (Once more, she picks up the clock. Shaking it, she gives up in frustration and puts it down on the table again.)

EMMETT: Mama, I’ll drink plenty of that cherry Kool Aid. I’ll jump in the Chicago River to cool down. Mama, I’ll skip-stop through the Loop and glide home under the waves of Lake Michigan. I’ll come back clean, bright, shinin and new. (Bo makes some comic gestures indicating jumping off a bridge or swimming in the river.)

MAMIE: Emmett, you’d wear a pine tree down. Your words are like an ax whiddlin down whatever I say.

EMMETT: Mama, ridin the CTA is educational. (He stutters on the second syllable).

MAMIE: (Giving him a stern look.) Sure, like learnin all the bad things of life, right, all that dirty writin on L cars and station walls about what nasty boys and girls do.

EMMETT: No, Mama. I can learn about the presidents of the USA (he stutters out the letters)—Washington, Adams, Wabash, Van Buren, Clinton, etc.

MAMIE: O, tell me, Bo, when did this big country of ours ever elect a President Wabash. I must have missed his term when I studied my American history.

EMMETT: Mama, maybe some day I’ll make history and have my face on a coin or my name on a Chicago street, such as “Good Lookin Emmett Till Blvd.”

MAMIE: History ain’t limited to coins and streets. It’s the tears people cry.

EMMETT: So every time you whip me for misbehavin I make history, right Mama. (Canary chirps.)
MAMIE: Bo, history is as much about pain and hate as it is about honor and glory.

EMMETT: Mama, no one hates me except maybe that big bad ugly joker (he stutters) JoJo who looks like Mr. T.

MAMIE: Your eyes haven’t grown big enough yet to see the hate I have.

EMMETT: They don’t practice hate on the CTA. It would cost em riders!

MAMIE: (Fearfully) But they do in Mississippi. You would never come back alive if you smart talked a white man in Sunflower or Leflore County. My cousin’s husband Rodney once forgot to tack a “Sir” on when he spoke to a white man.

EMMETT: What happened?

MAMIE: He received his Christmas present early, a welt the size of a tree ornament on his lower lip that he wore for a month. Thank God, they didn’t lynch him or blow a bullet through his head.

EMMETT: The CTA doesn’t go to Mississippi, Mama.

MAMIE: Thank God Almighty! (Aside) Always remember, Bo, Mississippi’s only a nightmare away from Chicago. If you want to learn about the geography of nightmares, ask our friends who grew up in the Delta. Ask your Uncle Moses.

EMMETT: But, Mama, I can learn my geography just by ridin on the CTA. I can see important buildings—the new Urban League Headquarters on Michigan Ave., the Sears Tower, Soldier Field, or Wrigley Field.

MAMIE: Oh, that’s just great! Goin to the ballpark will really round out your education.

EMMETT: Mama, please think about it. I promise not to get into trouble on the CTA, and I’ll be back home whenever you say. Name the day, name the hour. Travelin is good for my soul, Mama! (Canary chirps.)

MAMIE: Bo, you just do not have any sense of history or geography. (Stage goes dark.)

Scene Two

Emmett with a few of his friends go through a turnstile on an L platform after they pay their fares to a CTA collector who is dressed in a Civil War Union uniform and is seated in a small booth.
stage right. They wait for a train on the L platform to take them to the Loop and beyond. The boys are spontaneous, full of themselves, seemingly untouched by the high humidity and soaring temperatures. A rap song by Kayne West or 50 Cent or maybe even Vigilante’s song on Emmett plays in the background before dialogue starts.

EMMETT: What train we goin to catch?

NAT: They got lots of them—A Trains, B Trains, A/B Trains.

EMMETT: Let’s take a B Train—it stands for Black Talent on Board, right. We can travel in style.

MALCOLM: You’re nuts. They don’t have special trains reserved for Negroes on the CTA.

EMMETT: Why not? We got the money; we should ride in style on the Southside.

NAT: Bo, you are touched in the head. Your twenty cents may get you a seat; it may not. You could be standin all the way to the Loop or to hell for that matter. At rush hour so many people try crowdin in the doors that sometimes they close and a man or woman gets their face smashed in or they are dragged along the tracks like the L car tried to kidnap them, or they get shoved so hard they hit the rails. So, Bo, don’t expect to be seated in a club car or anythin near that fancy.

EMMETT: (asks with mock incredulity) They don’t run club cars on the CTA?

NAT: Bo, you’re real funny, man, really splittin my gut.

MALCOLM: And the next thing you’ll be tellin us, Bo, is that Mayor Daley give his private Lexus limo to pick us up when we get off in the Loop and give us a police escort, sirens blastin away, screamin, “Important folks visitin us all the way up from South Shore.”

EMMETT: Why not? I heard one of the deacons at Roberts Church say the Southside is the capital of Black America. Don’t that make us ambassadors and such. We should have diplomatic immunity. (Emmett stutters on this last word.)

LEROY: That’s right, Bo. Go for the big time. Yeah, we’ll all be skip-stoppin downtown as if we are travelin from some foreign country to make a peace treaty with white America. And with Boss Daley. He and his aldermen. They goin to treat us like royalty. Give us the keys to the city. Take us on an outin at Riverview. Take pictures of us with him. We’ll be in all the papers. jet will do a feature story on us; we’ll be in the centerfold, smiling away.

EMMETT: Don’t be a smartass. Percy Ricks told me that his cousin Claude came from France. That’s a foreign country, and the last time I looked Claude was still livin at 61st and Constance.
NAT: Bo, Claude ain’t from France. His mother is a trashy white woman livin in Mobile, Alabama. His daddy is as dark as street tar. The only thing foreign about Claude is his “Made in Japan” pocket knife and his stuck up ways.

EMMETT: Well, if we ain’t royalty or dignitaries or anythin so grand, we’re ladies men, right. Maybe there’s some good lookin girls on the L train who we can say “Hi” or “Bye” to. (*Strains from Lucille play in the background.*)

MALCOLM: Yeah, and maybe we can take them to a show. How about *Train to Tombstone* or *The Freedom Riders* playin at Loew’s.

NAT: No, let’s see *Express to Terror* starring Robert Alda.

LEROY: (*Shudders*) That’s a disaster film, ain’t it. We got nough disasters brewin up right here on the South Shore. Let’s see somethin funny instead. How about *Girl 6*?

EMMETT: Nat, you got a girl?

MALCOLM: (*Mockingly*) Whooo. Nat’s got a girl. Does she have four legs and a tail? (*All the boys laugh and push each other.*)

NAT: Watch out, Bo!

EMMETT: I got lots of girls interested in me—black, white, cream, and all with sugar for me. That’s cause I’m so good lookin. (*He stutters on the last word.*)

NAT: Yes, sireeee, Bo. You good lookin all right. In those cream crepe-soled shoes, and tailored polyester pants you the Negro Cisco Kid, the hero in every girl’s dreams. Maybe you can get us dates with Dinah Washington, Sara Vaughn, Anita Eckberg, or even Heddy Lamar or Beyonce. Look out, Miss Chicago, here comes Romeo Till, the movie star hero of Champlain Ave, to take your breath away.

LEROY: Yeah, we’re with a star. It’s just a matter of time before they change the name of James McCosh Elementary School to the Emmett Till School of Sweet Talkin Romance. (*Boys giggle; Emmett blushes.*) Big man talkin; little boy walkin.

EMMETT: Shut up, you punks (*He stutters*). I think you’re all just jealous. (*An A train rushes by not having to stop at the boys’ station which is a B stop. On the side of this passing train is an Obama-Biden campaign sticker.*)

MALCOLM: How come that train did not stop for us? I flagged him but it did no good.

LEROY: That’s an A train. We are at a B station and so we have to wait for B trains.
NAT: How does that song go again—"I Got the A Train Blues."

EMMETT: Wow! A train ride could change our lives. Missin one train could change history. Catchin another train could remake history. We’re waitin here on the tracks of life. Catchin the wrong train could land you in a heap of terror. But getting on the right one might take you all the way to heaven where they have the most beautiful girls in the world.

LEROY: Get off it, Bo. (All the boys laugh.)

NAT: I wish one of these L cars would take us all the way to Hollywood. We could be stars. Emmett could use his influence and get us all in the papers, on TV, and on radio. Hey, Bo, could you get us invited to one of those Beverly Hills parties with those good lookin stars like Jessica Lange or Doris Day. (Lucille plays again.)

EMMETT: I’ll see what I can do, my good man! But in the meantime, Nat, maybe you could get some doctor to work on your face and make you look less scary. No girls want to see your ugly puss in the papers or on TV. Maybe the National Inquirer would do a feature about you.

NAT: Tough talk, Bo. Want to make somethin out of it.

EMMETT: Nat, I was just kiddin around with you. We all know that John Wayne and Tony Curtis shake in their boots at the thought of you comin to Hollywood and takin their movie star fame and fans away from them. (Boys laugh as another A train rushes by the station.)

LEROY: These L cars are passin us by as if we had the plague, the leprosy, or somethin slimy like that runnin all over us. Maybe Emmett’s right. Missin one train could be bad for your health.

NAT: My grandpa says there’re ghosts riding the third rail on the L tracks.

LEROY: Ghosts, my ass. That’s bull. You ever see a ghost buy a ticket for a ride on the CTA?

EMMETT: Yeah, I’ve heard of people bein electrocuted (he stutters on the word) by steppin on that third rail, over there (he points). Do you want to take a chance to dance with a ghost, Nat.

NAT: How about you, lover boy. Want to have a hot date on the third rail. (They all laugh.) That third rail would turn you into a ghost on a string wire in a Mississippi minute.

EMMETT: I’m as strong and fast as Mohammed Ali. No third rail is goin to get me.

LEROY: The only thing fast about you, Bo, is your talkin. You think you can talk yourself out of startin 8th grade this year?
MALCOLM: I can’t believe that school starts in less than a month. Hell! Where’d the time go. It’s like the summer heat murdered it, suffocated the days of the month. We goin to be freshmen next year. High schoolers! Who would have believed Emmett was ever goin to be in high school.

LEROY: Yeah, and then we can pick on whoever we want in junior high—those skinny jerks in 6th and 7th grade.

EMMETT: They’re wimps. None of them knows life like we do. They got to get educated in the ways of the world and learn quick what they can say and can’t say and to who. It has taken us eight long years to get that smart. (*He smiles and makes a victory sign as if he had won a prize fight.*)

MALCOLM: But, Bo, what happens after we graduate high school. Then we’re right back at the bottom of the river. Maybe that’s how life works. First you struggle to get to be an 8th grader and once you hit the top and have some fun, then you sink to the bottom again, takin orders, gettin jokes played on you, havin to be careful about what you say and do. My brother said the bigger guys at his high school made sure the freshmen knew who was in charge right from the get go. Can’t laugh or joke; gotta keep a straight face when they jive with you.

EMMETT: I ain’t worried about bein a freshman. All I want to do is get on one of these L trains and get movin. Our good times are right now, this morning, today. All we got to be thinkin about is makin sure the right train stops for us. I hear a B train comin. (*Strains of Lucille play again.*)

**Scene Three**

*Emmett is riding on the L seated on a bench looking out a window at the traffic below the tracks and outward toward the horizon. He is alone in a state of euphoria, filled with the joy of freedom, the desire to claim his world. He has no limits on his imagination. The entire scene is taken up with his monologue as he fantasizes different identities. Scene 3 should simulate the interior of an L car with wicker seats, drop down straps for passengers to hold on to, lights that flicker, and a 1950s open window through which a hot breeze caresses Emmett’s face. Running along the walls above the windows in the car are ads for Botox, the NRA, the TV program ER, and the words “Black is Beautiful” written in large letters.*

Look out, Chicago. Look out, world. Here I go. I’m marked for glory. I’m prince of the air, movin faster than Jesse Owens and hittin the rails quicker than Jackie Robinson. We just passed a Bel Air V8, a Studebaker Cruiser, and a swanky Infiniti. They’re fast but not as fast as this L car. It’s a fast-moving 22,000 lbs monster. It makes Hurricane Katrina (*he stutters on the word*) seem like an old woman’s cough. That old white Hudson Hornet down there doesn’t stand a chance. I’m Emmett, the star of the CTA, the celebrated traveler, the man
with the plan for all the ladies. This L car is my stage. I am a Hollywood wonder. Once the press sees me, they won’t get their eyes to work right ever again. I’m the romantic lead in all women’s dreams. I’m tall, dark, and handsome, an irresistible (he stutters on this word) movie star. My picture will be in all their wallets. Everyone will know and want to carry my picture. They’ll be writin songs on the L station walls about me. Oh, boy, there goes another wreck on 63rd Street. (Sounds of a car crash.) They ought to call that the street that eats cars. (In the background, we hear the sound of an L car on the tracks.) Yeah. I’m goin to take the women out in style. I’m smooth (he stutters) in every mile. They gonna swoon over me. First, I think I’ll stroll over to the Rhumboogie Club and do my thing. Then I’ll brisk up for a trip up to South Shore Beach. Hey, conductor, point this car in that direction. Go back South, man. Up here I can sing better than Frankie Lymon. (Emmett pauses for a minute as we hear some strains from “Why do fools fall in love?”) That’s cause most boys (he stutters) got no sense. You got to have sparkle. I got it. Maybe the Turbans will ask me to sign up with them. I would look good in one of those head wraps, lookin’ like an Indian prince. I could take this CTA car on a Do-Wop tour all over America. Alan Freed is goin to give me a full hour. I can tell my life story to Larry King Live or 60 Minutes. (He stutters.) My new name might be Bo Till or Emmett B or the Chicago Eminem or even Wait Till, makin the audience fidget until I get on stage. Billboards look different up here. Words big as clouds. My name in lights. My name a household word. Maybe even my own personal CTA L car.

Now this L car is a space ship and I’m Spiderman flyin through the air; nothin is gonna stop me now. If there is any evil out there, watch out. Here comes Emmett Bo Till. But I got to travel fast. Mama gonna whip my butt if I ain’t back by the time that Air Force office she works for lets her come home. In the meantime, I can battle better than Rob Roy. I’m the new Robin Hood of the CTA, takin from the rich and givin to the poor. (He jingles the change in his pockets.) I got the money, honey! But I guess that I always will be broke as long as I hang around with my friends. Some of them are so poor they couldn’t afford the four dimes for a checker match or for a CTA roundtrip around the globe of Chicago. Their pockets are thin. 27th and Halstead already. We are ridin fast. Who cares about the heat or sweat up here. Let the hot winds blow. I can take it. (We hear the voice of a conductor telling Emmett not to stick his head out of the window.) I got to get a radio to listen to the hits on the way to the Loop. (He sings:) “One kiss will/ Make it clear/ That tonight is right/ This is nothing like/ They told us of/ Just to think we fell in love.” (Emmett imagines he is talking to a beautiful woman sitting next to him.) No, I don’t go to school (he stutters) anymore. I graduated from all that kid stuff. I’m a hero, a pilot, a politician. People wait to hear me speak. (He stutters.) Listen to someone else? You gotta be kiddin. Get out of the way, Levi Dawson. They’re my people now. I’m goin to ride this CTA car into glory. (A soundbite is heard from Dr. King: “I have a dream today.”)

I can’t believe school starts next month. But I’m a big, powerful 8th grader in the class that will pass. Smooth. I’m goin to shake up the world. Sometimes I do get a little scared, especially when I hear all that yellin and cursin down the street from McCosh. Fightin neighbors. Broken noses, dropping, bloody eyes, cracked heads—all over a woman (Emmett hums “It’s a sin to tell a lie.”) They sure are pushin The Lady and the Tramp on the signs. No dog I ever saw could outrun this CTA train. Let’s take it to glory. Mama and I and my cousins Simeon and Wheeler and Uncle Moses—we all can ride to Kingdom Come on the CTA. Next stop—Heaven. State and Adams already. Here comes the big swing. Hang
on. I love it when this L car turns and the wheels squeal like an animal caught in a trap. It would be neat to kidnap some pirate and tie him underneath this L car and watch his face (he stutters) when the car turns so fast you think it’ll fall and kill all the jay-walkers. Look out below. (Emmett hollers out of the window.) Goin across the Chicago River is a little spooky, I guess. What if a wheel slipped and we fell to our death. How long would I last in the water? On a hot day like today I’d make it all day, if I remember how to swim. I’m goin to take the CTA now underwater. I’m goin to hunt all those U boats that blasted our ships in WW2. My dad would have sunk a whole fleet. Mama told me he had a magic ring that got him through a lot of tough times. I wonder if you can see when you are under the waves of the Chicago River. It looks like a mug of hot coffee to me. But not all the money in the world would make me jump into that stinky, black river. What if this heavy L car drug me down? Douglas Park next. I got to get off in a few minutes. I just got to get off or I’ll get Mama’s switch. (A mournful Gospel song is heard, preferably one about a mother losing her child.)

Scene Four

Emmett and Mamie are at the 63rd Street station of the Illinois Central hurrying to get to the train that will take Emmett to Mississippi. A ticket collector dressed in a Confederate grey uniform sits in a booth stage left. The station should be marked with two large signs—one of them with an arrow pointing to CHICAGO and another pointing to MISSISSIPPI. The CHICAGO sign might also have some large lettering announcing HOME OF THE WORLD FAMOUS CTA while the MISSISSIPPI sign might carry these words “WHITES ONLY.” Mamie and Emmett have spent the last few hours rushing to get him ready. She is anxious, drained; he is eager, ready to get on board. He checks his wristwatch at least half a dozen times in this scene.

MAMIE: Now you remember, Bo, all the things I told you about what not to say and do and what will be expected of you in Mississippi. Sir to the men; ma’am to the ladies.

EMMETT: Yes, sir, yes, sir, yes, sireeee. No, ma’am, no ma’am, no mamereeee. (He laughs hilariously.)

MAMIE: This is not a jokin matter, Bo. Mississippi is not South Chicago; it’s the Southern Terror for any Negro who dares to get out of place. I still cry over what happened to Medgar and Addie Mae and the other two girls.

EMMETT: All right, Mama. I understand.

MAMIE: Understandin and doin are two different things, Bo. This is one time you better heed your elders if you expect to come back home in one piece.
EMMETT: I’ll follow Uncle Moses’s advice and do whatever he says. I promise, Mama.

MAMIE: Honey, for all purposes we live in a protected colored city on the Southside of Chicago. Most of the stores we shop at, the movies we go to see, the restaurants we eat at are black places; the doctor and dentist we go to are black folks. They would’ve gotten into big time trouble in the South for ever tryin to go to school with white children. (We hear a soundbite in the background “An angry crowd at Ole Miss spit on James Meredith today.”) The people on the Southside look like and talk like us. A colored doctor or a colored store owner in Mississippi is a rare bird. Black folks cannot sit with or touch or eat with white folks. Whites control everything. Mississippi is their home town. And as far as they are concerned a Negro does not rate so much as a “Hello” or a “Goodbye.” You have to see the white man or woman as the boss and not say a word to them unless they speak to you first, and then you better not look ’em in the eye or answer anythin beyond what they ask and always keep your head down. You can’t even steal a look at a white woman unless you want to get your head blown off by her husband, an angry storekeeper, or the woman herself. White gals can get awful revengeful in Mississippi, Bo. Always keep your head down and your mouth shut.

EMMETT: Like this, Mama. (He hangdogs his head and then starts to laugh and then looks at his watch.)

MAMIE: Bo, this is deadly serious business and if you don’t want to end up lynched you better listen up, son.

EMMETT: Yes, ma’am.

MAMIE: Mississippi is so white, Bo, that even the governor’s name is White.

EMMETT: (Ominous whistle in the distance.) Mama, when is that train comin. I’m gettin antsy. (He looks at his watch; he even rubs it to make time hurry.) I hope they send the B train again. The A train never stopped for us on the CTA.

MAMIE: I wish it would never get here. I do not want to see you leave Chicago. Mississippi is no place for a boy like you, Bo. My Bo, I miss you so much already.

(Emmett checks his watch again.)

EMMETT: I am itchin to travel, Mama. I want to feel the wheels spin and the engine tug. I want the Illinois Central to be like ridin the CTA—the wind blowin, the cars talkin to each other, the people walkin through, movin down a car like the car is movin down the track, the blur of buildings and people as I rush by. I’m a seasoned traveler, Mama.

MAMIE: Ridin the IC to Mississippi is nothin like goin to the Loop on the CTA, Bo. (She starts to tear up.)
EMMETT: They both help me to make believe, Mama. They’re like rockets takin me into a world of dreams and adventures. I can just see my picture in Jet magazine. Can I get on and off the IC like you do on the L. Can I go skip-stoppin on the IC, Mama. (Again, he looks at his watch. This time he shakes it to make time move faster.)

(The sound of the coming IC train is heard. As it approaches, Mamie becomes even more tearful and anxious about Emmett leaving.)

MAMIE: Absolutely not. You don’t do any skippin or stoppin on the IC. You stay put until that train drops you off in Leflore County, Mississippi.

EMMETT: How will I know I’m in Mississippi (he stutters on this word) Mama.

MAMIE: The first time somebody refers to you as that “Nigger boy,” you’ll know you’re in Mississippi.

EMMETT: Mama, you told me never to use that word. (Train whistle signals become louder and closer).

MAMIE: The only thing dirtier is the person who uses it to push another human being down and drown him in shame and hurt.

EMMETT: Mama, give me my bag and a kiss. I’m off to see the world. I feel like one of those ballplayers, cowboys, or soldiers who is glory bound, destined to do great things and come back with a chestful of awards, medals. I’m ready for any old Vietnam or Iraq. I’m off to Mississippi to make you so proud, so proud of me, Mama.

MAMIE: The proudest thing you can do for your Mama is just to come back home smilin. Until then I’m goin to keep huggin your picture, Bo. You look so handsome, so, so handsome.

EMMETT: Just think, Mama, when I come back in two weeks, I’ll probably be a foot taller than when I rode the CTA this summer. (He checks his watch. He shakes his head in disbelief at how slowly time is going.) Everyone will think I’m a hero who has done brave things. I’m goin to think of Mississippi as the wild frontier, the fortress held by the enemies of the South Shore. The IC is my stage coach, my trusty stallion, my bullet-proof tank, my playin field. Look out, Mississippi. Bo Till is on his way!

(The train arrives with a campaign sticker on its side reading “Vote for Wallace.” Mamie helps Emmett get on board. She hugs him one last time. He climbs on and gets a seat by a window right in front of her. He waves frantically and then points to his watch)

EMMETT: (He mouths these words since she cannot hear him): Hurry up, please; it’s time. I love you, Mama. Don’t worry. Think of me as just ridin the CTA around the city. See you
soon. The time will fly by. I’ll be back even braver, stronger, more yours. You’re goin to be so proud of me. Bye, bye, Mama.

MAMIE: O, Lord, protect my boy. He’s a good boy, a little impressionable at times, a little bit too much the dreamer, but he’s got a good heart. Lord, I want so many good things for him. Help him, Lord. Help him talk clear and sweet and be the angel I raised. Let him come home but not to go skip-stoppin on that old CTA again. (She cries.)

(The train leaves the 63rd Street station for Mississippi. A record plays “At My Front Door Crazy Little Mama” by the El Dorados or “I Hear You Knocking” by Smiley Lucas or “Pleading My Love” by Johnny Ace.)

The End