

## **A Good Ole Fashioned Country Christmas Mystery**

### **A short play in three acts**

**By**

**Sue Hejhal**

*Based on "The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding"*

*By Agatha Christie*

*For 5 women, 5 men, 1 girl, age 11–14, 2 boys, age 11–14 and 5 or more children's choir members*

### **Characters**

*(in order of appearance)*

*Eleanor Sullivan:*

- *Description: Eleanor Sullivan is a middle-aged woman in her 40s or 50s, a renowned detective of international acclaim. She has a strong and resolute demeanor, reflecting her years of experience in solving complex cases. Eleanor is known for her no-nonsense attitude and dedication to her work. She appears exhausted but determined in the opening scene, and her desire for a peaceful Christmas holiday is evident.*
- *Costume: Eleanor is dressed in 1960s professional attire, likely a tailored suit or dress appropriate for a detective of her stature.*

*Robert Anderson (Bob):*

- *Description: Robert Anderson is a slightly disconcerted man in his late 30s or early 40s. He appears earnest and pleading as he seeks Eleanor's help with a matter of national importance. Bob is dressed in a conservative suit and tie, reflecting the seriousness of the situation.*

*Adolpho Gutierrez:*

- *Description: Adolpho Gutierrez is a handsome young man, likely in his late 20s or early 30s. He represents Mexico's interests and is the son of President Adolfo Lopez-Mateos. Adolpho appears distressed and remorseful, seeking Eleanor's assistance in recovering a stolen fire opal necklace. He is polite and formal in his interactions. His clothes are conservative, yet expensive.*

*Meemaw (Margaret Jean Winthrop):*

- *Description: Meemaw is a warm, Southern woman in her 60s or 70s. She embodies traditional Southern hospitality and takes care of her family. Meemaw is friendly and welcoming, offering Eleanor a glimpse*

into her family's Christmas traditions. She is kind-hearted and generous. She is dressed like a rancher's wife, She may wear a house dress and sensible shoes or a work shirt, jeans, and boots.

Carl Winthrop:

- Description: Carl Winthrop is Meemaw's husband, likely in his 60s or 70s. He appears gruff and skeptical of Eleanor's presence initially but may have a softer side as the story unfolds. Carl holds traditional values and desires to preserve the Christmas traditions of his youth. He dresses as a rancher and in Sunday-goin'-ta-meetin' clothes during the church service and at Christmas Dinner

Rose Winthrop:

- Description: Rose Winthrop is a member of the Winthrop family, possibly in her late teens or early 20s. She is dating Buck Murray, a local cowboy with a questionable reputation. During the play, she tries to balance her love of Buck with the loyalty of her family. She is dressed youthfully, but conservatively possibly in a twin set and tweed skirt.

Buck Murray:

- Description: Rose Winthrop's boyfriend. Buck is handsome and charming but has a questionable reputation. He bills himself as a cowboy, but Meemaw is skeptical. He is dressed in stereotypical cowboy attire, western shirt, jeans, and boots. He wears a cowboy hat when he leaves the house.

Bobby Joe:

- Description: Bobby Joe is a young boy, possibly in his early teens, who is part of the Winthrop family. He is enthusiastic about planning a fictional murder scenario for Eleanor and displays a sense of mischief and curiosity. He is dressed casually in typical attire for a boy his age in 1960, trousers, a button-down shirt, a sweater vest, and loafers.

Donald:

- Description: Donald is another young boy, likely around the same age as Bobby Joe. He is eager to participate in the murder scenario and is portrayed as being easily excited and impressionable. He wears overalls over a t-shirt and boots reflecting his lower economic status.

Ruth:

- Description: Ruth is a young girl, possibly around the same age as Bobby Joe and Donald. She is imaginative and creative, suggesting the murder scenario and actively participating in planning it. Ruth displays

*a sense of curiosity and a desire for excitement. She wears a dress and sweater and loafers or saddle shoes. Her hair is tied up in a ponytail*

*Minister:*

- *Description: The minister is a clergyman who introduces the children's choir performance during the church service. He is dressed in formal vestments and has a formal demeanor.*

*The Not-so-angelic children's choir:*

- *See the description in Act 1, Scene 7: The Church These children are wearing white robes, halos, and possibly wings*

*Miss Flores:*

- *Director of the children's choir. She wears a suit or a choir robe.*

*Vera:*

- *Buck Murray's girlfriend, who is masquerading as his sister. She is not from Texas and has a distinctive Northern accent. She is dressed in a modern 1960s fashion, a mini dress and white boots*

**SETTING:** Christmastime, Uvalde, Texas, 1960

## ACT 1

### Scene 1: ELEANOR SULLIVAN'S OFFICE - EVENING

*The room is dimly lit, with shelves full of books lining the walls. Eleanor Sullivan sits behind her desk, a detective of international renown. Robert Anderson stands before her, looking slightly disconcerted.*

BOB (*earnestly*) Miss Sullivan, Elanor. May I call you, Eleanor?

ELEANOR (*resolute*) Not in this instance, Bob. It's Miss Sullivan to you.

BOB *takes a deep breath, realizing the gravity of the situation.*

BOB (*pleading*) You must help us! This is a matter of national importance.

ELEANOR *Shaking her head emphatically.* I am sorry, but I cannot help you.

BOB (*desperately*) But, you don't understand, Miss Sullivan. This is a diplomatic disaster, the implications of which stretch all the way to the White House.

ELANOR, *a little exasperated, but resolute, leans forward. (firmly)* I don't think you understand. I have been working non-stop for seven months now. There was that murder in Bulgaria. Then, the land dispute in Chile. I am exhausted, Bob, and I need a rest. My doctor has warned me of the implications of working without a break, and my brother is worried sick. Besides, it will be Christmas next week. I would like nothing more than to curl up in a comfortable chair by a roaring fire with my new Agatha Christie story. She wrote one just for Christmas this year, something about a pudding. I will accompany her work with a cup of eggnog, and a plate of gingerbread. Nothing could be more perfect for Christmas.

BOB *glances at his companion, a handsome young man.*

ADOLPHO *(polite but formal)* How do you do, Madam? *He looks at Elanor. Signs of distress line his face. (lamenting)* Oh, Madam, I have made a grievous error. Please, can you help? Otherwise, my father will never forgive me. I will have disgraced my family and my proud nation.

ELANOR *sizing up* BOB.

ELANOR *(astute)* Let me see if I understand you correctly, Bob. Young Mr. Gutierrez here, son of Adolfo Lopez-Mateos, President of Mexico, was sent here on a diplomatic mission. He came bearing the gift of a three-karat fire opal unearthed from the mines of San Luis Potista. This opal set in a pendant necklace was valued at \$25,000 and was to be presented to the First Lady during his meeting with the president in the new year. Unfortunately, he met a girl, and that is where the trouble started.

ROBERT ANDERSON *(nodding)* Yes, Miss Sullivan.

ELEANOR SULLIVAN *(cynical)* It always starts with a girl, doesn't it, Bob?

ROBERT ANDERSON *(slightly embarrassed)* *He clears his throat.* It often does, Miss Sullivan.

ADOLPHO *He chimes in defensively.* She wasn't just any girl. She was a young lady of exquisite beauty and rare talent.

ELANOR *raises an eyebrow* (teasingly) Talent for what, I wonder?

ADOLPHO *shoots BOB a pained look.*

ROBERT ANDERSON *(sighs)* Never mind.

ELEANOR *(continuing)* Anyway, this, *making air quotes*, 'young lady,' as you call her, gets to know you and the purpose of your visit. She convinces you to allow her to wear the fire opal necklace when you take her out to dinner one night.

*Looking at ELANOR,* ADOLPHO *nods, remorsefully.*

ELEANOR During dinner, the 'young lady' briefly excuses herself from the table, but she never returns. When she leaves, she takes the necklace with her. Is that what happened?

ADOLPHO *raising his eyebrows he nods vehemently. (Very uncharacteristically)* Yup.

ELEANOR *sighs (sympathetic)* Ah, the follies of youth.

BOB *(urgently)* This mission calls for absolute discretion. Think of the coverage if this ever got out. It would be a public relations disaster.

ELANOR You know the police can also be discrete.

BOB *shaking his head vigorously* Oh, no, Miss Sullivan. We can't involve the police. Recovery of the opal would be subject to a lengthy court case. It could drag out for years. This matter must be resolved with the greatest expediency. If we don't recover the opal by the new year both countries will suffer a blow to international relations.

ELANOR *remains firm.*

ELEANOR *(resolutely)* I'm afraid the answer is no, Bob. That is my final word. I need to rest. Mrs. Christie and I have plans for Christmas.

BOB (*enthusiastically*) I understand completely, Miss Sullivan. However, I only have your best interest at heart. What could be more relaxing than a simple old-fashioned country Christmas at the Winthrop ranch in Uvalde?

ELEANOR (*intrigued*) Of course, Bob.

BOB The Winthrops own a cattle ranch, so I'm afraid there won't be any turkey for Christmas dinner. I'm sure they will serve beef brisket instead.

ELEANOR (*curious*) I don't think I've ever had beef brisket, Bob.

BOB (*sincerely*) Oh, you will love it, Miss Sullivan. Succulent slow-roasted beef brisket along with sweet potatoes, green beans, biscuits, cornbread, and pecan pie for dessert. Plus, there is a lovely little church in the center of town, St. Phillips, where the local children's choir will perform for the Christmas Eve service. They sing like angels. It will be magical, Miss Sullivan. Truly magical.

ELEANOR (*skeptically*) Uvalde? Where in the world is Uvalde? And why would I want to travel at this time of year? It's cold and snowy, and your feet get wet every time you go out. And when it isn't snowing, it rains, and the chill winds blow right down through your clothes into your bones.

BOB (*encouragingly*) You don't understand, Miss Sullivan. *pausing* Uvalde is in Texas, and Southern, Texas at that. Why, I have it on good authority that it will be a balmy 70 degrees on Christmas. If anything, you might be too warm.

ELANOR (*reconsiders*) Well, *pause*, it would be nice to get out of the cold for a while. *turning to* BOB How will I get there?

ROBERT ANDERSON (*winks*) Don't you worry. Miss Sullivan. Just leave that to me.

Scene 2: THE AIRPORT A wind whips around Elanor as she walks briskly across the stage carrying a suitcase in one hand and a book in the other. She is wearing an overcoat. There is a colorful scarf wrapped around her head. The sound of an airplane starting up can be heard off-stage. ROBERT ANDERSON, wearing aviator goggles and a leather helmet rushes up to meet ELANOR. He shakes her hand vigorously, takes her suitcase, and leads her off stage. A moment later the sound of a

*plane taking off can be heard. Then, the sound of a plane landing and shutting off is heard. ELANOR stumbles back across the stage clutching her suitcase looking considerably disheveled and windblown.*

### **Scene 3: THE WINTHROP FAMILY PORCH**

*It was a warm sunny day, and Elanor savors her coffee as she relaxes in a rocking chair on the Winthrop's front porch. Beside her, sits Margaret Winthrop snapping beans, her soft, slow drawl soothing Elanor's senses.*

MEEMAW: I hope you enjoy our little Christmas get-together, Miss Sullivan. Although, I'm shore we do things a little bit different down here in the Lone Star State. But, I think we do um just a little bit better if I say so myself.

*(continuing)* It's only family who's comin'. Rose'll be here and my grandkids and one of Bobby Joe's school friends. Then, there's, Carl's cousin, Edwina, and Mr. and Mrs. Davila, who we ranched next ta us for years. Just a family party, really. Family and a few friends. Yep. A good ole-fashioned country Christmas.

ELANOR Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Winthrop.

MEEMAW Why don't ya jest call me, Meemaw. Everybody else does.

ELANOR Alright, Meemaw. Please call me Elanor.

MEEMAW Happy to oblige. With your parents gone and your brother working the mission field out in Africa, I am sure Christmas can get pretty lonely.

ELANOR Indeed it can.

MEEMAW *her voice brimming with nostalgia*, Nothin' could be more old-fashioned than us. When it comes to Christmas, my husband Carl really just lives in the past. He wants everything to be the same way it was when he was a boy.

He likes to have all the same things like a big ole tree and stockin' over the fireplace and a big spread fer Christmas dinner brisket and sweet patadas,



green beans, biscuits, *and* cornbread with plenty a butter. And, of course, pecan pie for dessert.

ELANOR *smiling* Everything sounds truly delicious, Meemaw. Thank you again for including me.

MEEMAW Course, I don't eat the pecan pie myself. Too sweet, My Carl, he just loves it, but to tell the truth, he ain't suppose ta eat. Doctor says he's got the sugar diabetes and needs ta lay off the sweets. But, I like ta see him happy at Christmas time, so I bake two pecan pies, a big one ta share with company on Christmas and a smaller one fer New Year's.

ELANOR *continues rocking in her chair sipping her coffee.*

MEEMAW Spect I'll get terrible indigestion after eatin' all that rich food. But, the kids won't mind. They're always hungry. No matter how much you feed um, they never seem ta get enough ta eat.

MEEMAW *stands up and squints into the audience shielding her eyes from the light with her hand. In the back, the sound of yelling, whooping, and laughter can be heard. A hound's baying mingles with the other sounds.*

MEEMAW What ya'll up to? Don't you be teasin' ole Rufus.

BOBBY JOE's voice *can be heard from the back.*

BOBBY JOE Naw, Meemaw. We ain't gonna do nothin ta old Rufus. We's jest havin' fun and Ole Rufus is havin' as much fun as us.

MEEMAW Well, you kids need ta come in and wash up. It's almost time fer dinner.

BOBBY JOE Yes, Ma'am. We cain't wait. Were starvin'

MEEMAW *turns to Elanor* See what I mean. Always hungry. *beat* By the way, don't mind Carl if he seems a little gruff. It's jest his way.



ELANOR I won't, Meemaw. *The stage where Elanor and Meemaw are standing goes dark.*

*A light comes up on CARL, who is standing off to the side.*

CARL Cain't understand why we hafta share our Christmas dinner with that spinster lady. Don't she have her own family to have Christmas with? Don't know what Carla was thinkin'. Why cain't she have the spinster lady over fer Christmas?

CARL *Coming to a realization.* Why Margaret Jean Winthrop, yer up ta something, Ain't cha?

*A light comes up on MEEMAW who stands up.*

MEEMAW *looking innocent* Whatever do you mean, Carl?

CARL I know yer up ta something. I can feel it!

*Innocently, MEEMAW shrugs and the stage goes dark. The light comes back up again on MEEMAW and ELANOR.*

MARGARET: Cousin Carla thought you might be able to help us out with a little problem we're havin'. Well, I don't know how you might be able to help us, but she said that you were a private detective and friends of hers found you to be most helpful in a case like ours.

ELANOR How do you mean?

MEEMAW Well, it's our Rose. She has made the acquaintance of the most disreputable young man. He says he's a cowboy, but he shore don't do no ranch work. I can tell.

ELANOR How do you mean?

Well, He cain't rope. He cain't ride, and his hands are softer then mine.

ELANOR *considering* That's very telling.

MEEMAW Plus, I heard there was trouble over in Hondo. Sheriff told him, "Leave town and don't come back." I think the fuss was over a girl.

ELANOR *shakes her head* I'm afraid I won't be of much help to you, Meemaw. In most cases like these, there is very little anyone can do aside from allow the romance to take it's course, then be there to pick up the pieces when it's all over. Still, I can make some calls.

MEEMAW Carl is all for forbiddin' Buck the house. But I say, "Let him come."

ELANOR *surprised* You mean you actually let him come for Christmas?

MEEMAW Him and his little sister.

ELANOR Why, that's very generous of you. But, why would you do that?

MEEMAW I figure it's the best way ta keep an eye on him. Besides, forbidding a young lady to see a man only makes him that much more attractive.

ELANOR, *a look of recognition on her face.* Good thinking. But, what about this sister of his?

MEEMAW Rose said she had ta come on account of the fact that she's recovering from an operation and Buck's her only family. I don't mind much. It's like she's not even here. She almost never comes out of her room.

ELANOR Then, how does she eat?

MEEMAW Oh, Buck takes all her meals up on trays. He's a very devoted brother.

ELANOR That's very interesting.

MEEMAW Never seen such a devoted brother. Unfortunately, he's always hangin' about my kitchen.

ELANOR I'm sure that could get very annoying.

MEEMAW I'll say.

#### SCENE 4: MEEMAW'S KITCHEN

MEEMAW is wiping the kitchen table presumably after a meal. There is a cabinet and refrigerator behind her and large basket under the table. ROSE sits in a chair at the table. BUCK two-steps into the kitchen. He is wearing a black western shirt, tight black jeans, and cowboy boots. He rummages around until he finds a tray. He begins to fill the tray with things to eat.

BUCK to ROSE Ready ta go out dancin'.

ROSE It's Christmas Eve, Buck. I thought we could stay here tonight. Besides, there's a service at St. Phillip's at 11. We always go to Christmas Eve service.

BUCK Oh, Darlin. I don't wanna go ta no church service. He stops filling the tray and dances over to ROSE taking her by the hand, and pulling her up out of the chair, he takes her in his arms. I wanna take you out dancin', Darlin.

ROSE sighs, but then smiles resolved. Alright, Buck. Let's go dancin'.

BUCK smiles and kisses ROSE on the nose. Great! Well, go just as soon as I take this tray up to Vera. She must be starvin'.

ROSE You want me to take it up to her?

BUCK Naw, Darlin. Vera said she didn't want nobody to see her on a count that she's such a mess after her operation. She don't mind me seein' her cause I'm just her brother. I'll take the tray. You go get ready. He walks out carrying the tray.

MEEMAW looking at ROSE Don't know when I've ever seen such a devoted brother. You go get ready. I can clean up here.

ROSE Thanks, Meemaw. I'll go up in a minute. There's plenty of time. I don't know what Buck and Vera get up to in that room, but I'm sure he'll be up there a good long time.

MEEMAW Shaking her head. There's no tellin

#### SCENE 5: THE STUDY-LATER THAT EVENING

BOBBY JOE *and DONALD are sitting on the rug listening to a record player, while RUTH sits on the nearby sofa next to Rufus who is napping. There is a bookshelf in the background.*

BOBBY JOE *Putting a record on the player.* Have you heard this one yet? It's by Skeeter Davis.

DONALD Yeah, he's okay, but I think I like Chubby Checker better. Can you dance the Twist? DONALD *gets up and dances around the room, giggling.*  
(pause) Hey, Bobby.

BOBBY JOE Yeah, Donald?

DONALD It's awful cold outside. You think it's gonna snow?

BOBBY JOE *Looking out the window.* Naw. I don't think it's gonna snow.

Donald: *Determined* Well, I think it's gonna snow and I am so sure, I'm willin' ta bet you \$5.00.

BOBBY JOE *Scoffing* You ain't got no \$5.00.

DONALD Do too.

BOBBY JOE Donald, where'd you get \$5.00?

DONALD *Proudly* From my granny. She gave it to me for my birthday.

BOBBY JOE Now, I know you ain't got no \$5.00 'cause your granny ain't got \$5.00 to give you.

DONALD Does too!

BOBBY JOE Does not!

RUTH *Stepping in to end the conflict.* Cut it out, you two. *Changing the subject.* Hey! What do y'all think about that lady detective?

BOBBY JOE *(Curious)* What lady detective?

RUTH You know. That lady who came down here for Christmas. Miss Sullivan. I bet she's been involved in some pretty interesting cases.

DONALD: (*Confused*) Who? You mean the lady who's staying at the house? She's a detective?

RUTH I hear she's a pretty famous one too.

DONALD (*Skeptical*) Oh, yeah? Well, if she is so famous, how come I ain't never heard of her?

RUTH (*Smirking*) Do you read the newspaper?

DONALD (*Sheepishly*) Well, no.

RUTH *Speaking in a superior tone*, I read newspapers all the time. Got some pretty interesting stories too.

DONALD Like what?

RUTH Well, there's stories about science and politics and natural disasters, and sometimes they have stories about crime. I like crime stories the best. Let me tell you. Miss Sullivan is pretty famous and you would know that if you read newspapers.

DONALD (*Considering*) Well, maybe I'll have to start reading them too.

BOBBY JOE: *pipes up*. If Miss Sullivan is such a famous detective, maybe we should plan a crime for her to solve. We could even make it a murder.

DONALD *Scoffs*. That's a stupid idea. We ain't gonna murder nobody.

BOBBY JOE: *Clarifying* I didn't mean for real. I meant like a show.

RUTH (*Gamely*) Sure. Bet it'll make her feel right at home.

DONALD: (*Excited*) But, who we gonna murder? (*considering*) I know! Let's murder Rufus.

*\* At the mention of his name Rufus looks up thumping his tail expectantly.*

BOBBY JOE *Chuckling* Naw, you cain't murder a dog. It would have to be a person.

DONALD *Suggesting* It could be a dog murder.

\*RUTH *Affectionately patting Rufus* Don't you worry, boy. Nobody's gonna murder you. *Excitement over, Rufus returns to his nap.* I know. You can murder me. *(Dramatically)* I'll wear my ruffly white nightgown and let my long brown hair cascade down my back as I lie lifelessly in the straw. It will be very dramatic.

DONALD: *(Enthusiastically)* Be even better if it snowed. Then, we could make footprints.

BOBBY JOE: *Interrupting* Listen, Donald, there ain't gonna be no snow.

DONALD: *Speaking in a challenging tone* How do you know?

RUTH: Let's stop arguing so we can plan this murder.

BOBBY JOE: There's an old bayonet up in the attic. Think it's from back in the war. And, I think we can get some red paint from the shed.

RUTH *(Curiously)* What color red is the paint?

BOBBY JOE I don't know. I guess it's red red. Pawpaw used it last summer to paint the tractor.

RUTH: *(Thoughtfully)* Hmmmm. I think that might be too red. We'll have to mix it with something brown to make it look more realistic.

DONALD: *(Helpful)* My granny's got some cocoa powder in the pantry. We could mix it with that.

RUTH: *(Pleased)* Good idea.

BOBBY JOE *finalizing the plan*. Okay, does everybody know what they need to do? I will get the bayonet and the paint. Donald, you get the cocoa powder, and Ruth can be the victim. This is gonna be great.

DONALD (*Excitedly*) Yeah, it'll be the best murder ever planned.

*\*If a dog is not available, the actors can talk about Rufus instead of interacting with him.*

## SCENE 6: THE HALLWAY

*There is a door to the left of the stage and a halltree with a hat hanging on it next to the door.*

*Action is continuous. As Christmas swing music plays in the background, The family walks briskly across the stage in their church clothes smoothing hair, straightening ties, and buttoning coats. Meemaw looks into the halltree mirror by the door as she puts on and straightens her hat. She is the last to leave.*

*Next, Buck and Rose two-step across the stage and disappear. The stage goes dark.*

## SCENE 7: THE CHURCH

*The family comes down the steps and settles into the front row of the audience. As the lights come back on, a pulpit sits to the left of the stage while a group of children dressed in white robes with silver garland halos and angel wings (optional) assemble in the center of the stage. One child is crying. A little girl sits down on the floor. A boy turns his back to the audience. The MINISTER approaches the pulpit to introduce the choir. He is wearing formal vestments and a clerical collar.*

MINISTER (*dubious*) *clears his throat* And now, our children's choir will favor us with a song, "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem." Miss Flores?

*A woman walks out in front of the stage and stands in front of the children, who stop whatever they are doing long enough to look at her. Miss Flores raises her arms and the music to O Little Town of Bethlehem begins to play on a piano. She waves enthusiastically in time with the music. The children begin to sing. The boy who is facing the back of the stage sings. The little girl sitting on the floor pulls her robe up*



*over her head and rocks sideways knocking the children next to her off balance. These children continue to attempt to sing. Another boy sings loudly giving his best Elvis Presley impression while he curls his lip and swings his hips suggestively. Swinging his arm in an air guitar motion, he hits another child in the face. The other child stops singing, squints grabs her eye, and cries. The girl cries louder and drowns out the singing. The other children sing louder to drown out the sound of crying. Finally, the song ends as one child holds the final note out longer and than all the others. His voice crescendos and warbles as he finishes with a flourish. Miss Flores bows. The children bow and shuffle off-stage. The boy who was facing the back of the stage walks off backward. The little girl is still crying holding her eye. The girl with the robe over her head continues to sit on the floor. Then, the boy who thinks he's Elvis runs back to the center stage:*

*BOY (in his best Elvis voice) Thank you. Thank you very much. He gives one last guitar strum and winks as the stage goes dark.*

*By now, the MINISTER has left the pulpit. He walks down to confront, MISS FLORES, who shrugs and walks off. As the houselights come up on intermission, the MINISTER greets members of the congregation.*

## **ACT 2**

### **SCENE 1: THE WINTHROP'S DINING ROOM ON CHRISTMAS DAY**

*Everyone sits around a large table. Rose is clearing away the dishes. CARL WINTHROP sits at the head of the table.*

*ELANOR patting her stomach appreciatively That was delicious, Meemaw. I don't think I could eat another bite.*

*MEEMAW I hope you saved room for dessert.*

*MEEMAW and ROSE walk off stage. MEEMAW returns carrying a pecan pie and a bowl of whipped cream. ROSE follows with a stack of plates and forks. They place everything in front of Carl so that he may serve.*

CARL *frowns*. What's goin' on here, Meemaw? Why is the pie so small? Don't you usually bake up a big one fer Christmas?

MEEMAW *sighing*. I'm afraid the big pie went the way of ole Rufus. He's always hangin' around the kitchen, usually underfoot. This time he swung his big ole paws right up on the counter and gobbled up one a my pies. We's lucky though.

CARL *raises an eyebrow*. How you figure, Meemaw?

MEEMAW *shrugs*. Lucky, it was the pie he got and not the brisket.

CARL *grumbling under his breath*. Damn dog. Eatin up all my pie. Now, I gotta share this little one with the spinster lady. Why did Margaret have to invite the spinster lady to Christmas? Ain't gonna be enough pie.

ELANOR *offering* I can forgo a piece of your pie if there isn't enough.

MEEMAW *insisting* Nonsense Carl will be happy to cut you a nice piece of pie. You don't need pie anyway, Carl. The doctor said so.

CARL *angrily* Now you, listen here, Meemaw. It's Christmas dinner. I always finish my Christmas dinner with a piece of pecan pie, and that is just what I am gonna do, and I ain't gonna let you, or Rufus or the doctor spoil that for me. (*demandingly*) I will have my pie!

*Carl cuts himself out one-quarter of the pie and sits it on a plate, then covers it with an enormous dollop of whipped cream.*

CARL There. Now, I have my pie. Y'all can have the rest.

*The children swarm over the pie each cutting themselves slices. They pass the dish around the table. When the dish gets to BUCK, there is nothing left, but crumbs. Buck watches the pie expectantly. When the dish is passed to him empty, he glares silently around the table unnoticed by everyone else, who is gobbling up pie.*

CARL *shovels a bite of pie into his mouth and starts chewing enthusiastically. Then, he raises his hand to his mouth and cries Ouch!*

MEEMAW What's a matter, Carl?

CARL Meemaw, you've got to be more careful when shelling these pecans. A big one got in the pie and I nearly broke a tooth when I bit down on it."

MEEMAW Serves you right for being so greedy, Carl.

*Carl spits something out into his hand. It is covered in pie filling.*

ELANOR May I see that, Mr. Winthrop?

*CARL hands the offending object to ELANOR who wraps it in a napkin and slips it into her pocket. Buck watches her carefully the entire time.*

ELANOR Just a memento of the best Christmas dinner I have ever had. *smiling*  
Thanks again.

## Scene 2: THE DINING ROOM

*The table is pulled out of the way and the rug is rolled up. Chairs are moved to the edges of the space. A record player is placed on a small table. It starts up with lively country music. Everyone partners up and dances around the room. ELANOR, dances with DONALD then tired from dancing sits down to watch the scene. She taps her feet to the music. BUCK comes over and offers her a drink. She graciously accepts it but does not drink it. When BUCK isn't looking, she sets it on a table near CARL, who picks up the drink and gulps it down whipping his mouth on his sleeve when he is finished. A moment later, he stumbles into a chair, closes his eyes, throws his head back, and begins to snore loudly. MEEMAW notices CARL, helps him up, and takes him off stage to bed. ELEANOR stands, stretches, yawns, and walks off stage to be. The lights go down on the party.*

SCENE 3: ELANOR'S BEDROOM *There is a bed and dresser and a rug on the floor. A wash bowl and pitcher sit on the dresser. Next to the bed is a side table with a lamp.*

ELANOR comes into the room wearing long pajamas a house coat and pink fuzzy slippers. Her hair is in curlers and she wears a green mud mask on her face. She climbs into bed and turns out the light. A few seconds later she begins to snore softly.

BUCK wraps softly at the door, then, when he does not get a response, creeps into the room and begins to search it. He searches the table and the dresser. When he doesn't find what he is looking for, he sneaks over to the bed and slips his hand under Elanor's pillow. He pulls his hand back empty. ELANOR does not wake up.

BUCK Whispering Damnit! He quietly slips out of the room.

ELANOR sits up, smiles, adjusts her pillow, then settles back down to sleep.

### ACT 3

#### SCENE 1: THE NEXT MORNING. ELANOR'S BEDROOM

INT. ELANOR'S BEDROOM - MORNING

ELANOR is awakened by a soft, urgent knock at her bedroom door. She sits up and calls out. Who is it?

BOBBY JOE standing on the other side of the door, It's me, Bobby, Miss Sullivan. Are you decent? It's urgent.

ELANOR One second, Bobby. She quickly gets out of bed, dons her dressing gown, and sits on the edge. Come on in, Bobby.

BOBBY JOE opens the door and enters, followed by DONALD. Both boys look anxious and breathless. At the sight of Elanor's hair and face, BOBBY JOE struggles to contain his laughter.

BOBBY JOE Oh, Miss Sullivan, could you help us? I think something terrible has happened.

ELANOR Oh? What could that be?

BOBBY JOE It's Ruth, Miss Sullivan. She's out in the barn lying very still. I don't think she's breathing, and there is a lot of blood. I'm afraid she might be dead.

ELANOR What? Ruth is dead!

DONALD We think someone might have murdered her.

BOBBY JOE There's so much blood. Please come and help!

ELANOR *Leaping from her bed and putting on her slippers, she asks,* Have you told your grandparents?

BOBBY JOE Oh, no. We haven't told them yet. We came to you first. Meemaw's downstairs makin' breakfast and Pawpaw's still asleep. But we didn't tell on account that they might get too upset.

ELANOR I see. Well, lead the way.

*Elanor follows BOBBY JOE, and DONALD out the door, stage right. They come back on from stage left into the barn.*

## SCENE 2: THE BARN

*The barn floor is covered with straw. This could be accomplished by laying down a tarp with hay stuck onto it using double-sided tape. When it is time to change scenes, the tarp could simply be rolled up with hay or straw in it. RUTH lies across a bale of hay in a long white nightgown. Her hair is loose around her shoulders. A bayonet is thrust into her side with blood spreading out in a puddle around her. Ruth's arms are thrust out to her sides. Her hands are clenched into fists.*

DONALD *(dramatically)* Oh, No! There she is! It's worse than we thought.

ELANOR My goodness. It's like a scene from a movie.

DONALD *starts to choke with laughter.*

BOBBY JOE Did you see those footprints in the mud leading up to the barn?

DONALD They have to be the footprints of the murderer.

BOBBY JOE We have to preserve the scene. I'll stand guard to be sure no one comes in while you call the sheriff.

ELANOR I will, but first, we need to be sure little Ruth is actually dead. If she is still alive, we need to call a doctor.

BOBBY JOE Of course. With you bein' a internationally renown detective, we figured you'd know what to do. That is why we came to you first.

ELANOR That was good thinking on your part. You stay here with Ruth while I creep around the side of the barn to see if I can't catch the killer. I will be sure not to step into the footprints on my way out. ELANOR *walks carefully off stage. Then, returning.* The footprints were made with a long narrow boot, perhaps a cowboy boot. Very distinctive. I am sure they will be an important clue to the sheriff when he tries to identify the murderer.

*BUCK and ROSE enter the barn.*

BUCK Now, what do we have here? Looks like a...

BOBBY JOE (*interrupting dramatically*) It's a murder!

ROSE *with a gasp.* What have you boys been up to?

BUCK But, that's impossible. Who on earth would want to harm little... um...uh... little... What's her name?

ROSE Ruth.

BUCK That's right. Who on earth would want to harm a hair on dear little Ruth?

ELANOR Exactly. Now everyone stay back!

*ELANOR approaches the body, while BOBBY JOE and DONALD turn away unable to contain their laughter.*

ELANOR We must call the Sheriff immediately!

ROSE *scolding* Alright, boys. I think Miss Sullivan has had enough.

BOBBY JOE and DONALD *turn toward ELANOR now unable to contain their laughter.*

BOBBY JOE *gasping a little.* We're awful sorry, Miss Sullivan.

ELANOR What do you mean?

DONALD It was all just meant as a little bit of Christmas fun. With you being a famous detective and all, we thought we'd cook up a murder for ya.

ELANOR Hmm, you thought you'd cook up a murder for Christmas, eh?

BOBBY JOE We didn't mean nothin' by it. It was all just a little bit of fun.

ELANOR I see. So you to fool the great detective. I understand, eh? Today, my brother is a grown man serving on a mission field in Africa, but once he too was a 13-year-old boy.

BOBBY JOE Then, you'll forgive us?

ELANOR Of course.

BOBBY JOE *approaches RUTH.* Ok, Ruth. The jig is up. Get up and come back to the house for some coco and breakfast. It's cold out here, and you must be half-frozen to death.

RUTH *does not move.*

ROSE Come on, Ruth. You can get up now. Time to come in the house for breakfast.

RUTH *still does not move.*

BOBBY JOE Hmm. Maybe she just caught a chill.

ELANOR *walks over and checks Ruth's wrist.*

ELANOR Oh, no! I can't feel a pulse!



BUCK Do you think she's really dead?

ELANOR *pries open RUTH's clenched fist, revealing a large object.*

BUCK Is that the thing that was stuck in the pie? *He stoops to pick it up.*

ELANOR What are you doing? We shouldn't disturb the scene.

BUCK Well, I ain't disturbing the body. But this here is a valuable piece of evidence. Can't just leave it. It might get lost. We need to get the sheriff out here. I'll go telephone immediately. BUCK *rushes out of the barn.*

ELANOR *Looking at Rose and pointing to BUCK'S footprint* There! Do you see those footprints? Look at them!

ROSE What about them?

ELANOR Don't you see? Buck's boot prints look exactly like the ones in the mud leading to the barn.

ROSE What are you saying, Miss Sullivan? Do you mean that Buck is the murderer? I don't believe it!

*The sound of a pickup truck starting up is heard from off-stage.*

ROSE Why, that sounds like Buck's pickup! He must be going to fetch the sheriff.

MEEMAW *enters the barn.* What's happened? Buck came in to use the telephone but said he couldn't get through. He said the line was dead, so he was going into town to fetch the sheriff.

ELANOR *gestures toward RUTH.*

MEEMAW *gasps and rushes toward RUTH.* Oh, My poor little Darlin'.

ELANOR *blocking her way.* Stand back! She's gone. There's nothing we can do for her now. Gather up the kids and take them into the house for some cocoa while we wait for the sheriff.

MEEMAW takes BOOBY JOE, DONALD, and ROSE and shepherds them off stage. Everyone is visibly upset. ROSE is crying.

**SCENE 3: THE DINING ROOM** ELANOR, BOBBY JOE, DONALD, and ROSE walk into the dining room. MEEMAW is setting the table for breakfast as everyone enters. They sit down to eat. MEEMAW brings them cups. They sip as ELANOR begins to tell them a story.

ELANOR I have a confession to make.

ROSE, BOBBY JOE, and DONALD all look up at ELANOR. MEEMAW continues making preparations for breakfast.

ELANOR A few weeks ago, the son of Mexican President, Adolfo Lopez-Mateos, was sent on a diplomatic mission to the United States. He carried with him a valuable fire opal necklace that he was supposed to present to the first lady when he met with the president in the new year. Unfortunately, he met a pretty young lady, who stole the necklace and then disappeared. She has been hidden away at this very house pretending to recover from an operation.

ROSE (Shocked) What? You mean Buck's sister is...

ELANOR (Nods) That's right. She has been here the entire time. But by a little deception, so have I. That is why I came here for Christmas.

ELANOR continues her story, as the family listens with interest.

ELANOR When the young lady and her confederate, Buck Murray, realized that the Winthrops would be hosting a famous detective for Christmas, they decided they would have to hide the opal. So Buck concealed it in the smaller of the two pecan pies, knowing that the larger pie would be eaten at Christmas and the smaller one left for New Year's. Before the second pie was eaten, Buck and his sister would be long gone.

BOBBY JOE (Excitedly) So, was it the opal that Pawpaw almost broke a tooth on when he bit into his pie?

ELANOR (*Smiling*) Exactly. Then, when Mr. Winthrop gave it to me, I nonchalantly slipped it into my pocket and changed the subject. But, Buck wasn't fooled. He saw what I had done. He generously offered me a nice cup of cocoa before bed. But, I gave it to your Pawpaw, when Buck's back was turned. I bet he slept soundly last night.

MEEMAW *pausing at the table* He shore did. Snored so loud, I hardly slept myself.

ELANOR Then, after I went to bed, Buck snuck into my room to try to recover the opal. He was pretty annoyed when he didn't find it.

DONALD Was that because you gave the opal to Ruth? (*Accusingly*) But, he murdered Ruth for the opal, and you let him get away!

ELANOR (*Calmly*) Not quite. Come with me. I want to show you something.

*ELANOR walks briefly off stage. The sound of a door opening can be heard. She returns followed by RUTH.*

ELANOR (*Smiling*) Come on in and have some breakfast.

*Everyone is astonished, and BOBBY JOE and DONALD voice surprise.*

BOBBY JOE (*Confused*) You mean you've been foolin' us this whole time?

ELANOR *winks*. Classic double bluff. You boys need to read more detective novels. *Then, as RUTH comes to the table,* Great job, Honey!

RUTH (*Gratefully*) Thanks, Miss Sullivan.

BOBBY JOE *and DONALD are still in shock. They gape open-mouthed.*

BOBBY JOE (*Stuttering*) But..but..Miss Sullivan... How did you know?

ELANOR (*Smiling*) Remember, boys, I once had a teenage brother and I know what they get up to. Next time you plan a murder, shut the door before you start planning. When I heard of your plot, I asked Ruth to help me. She played

her part well, even made footprints using Buck's boots, a stroke of genius. Don't you think?

ROSE (*Puzzled*) But what was the point of sending Buck to fetch the sheriff? Won't he be angry when he discovers that the murder was a hoax?

ELANOR (*Shrugging*) I'm afraid that's the last time we'll be seeing Buck. I reckon he's halfway to Mexico by now. But if you want to know for sure, just ask his sister.

VERA *comes trudging on stage carrying two of what appear to be heavy suitcases. When she speaks, her accent is distinctively Northern.*

VERA (*Irate*) Sister! You think I'm Buck's sister? Well, think again. I ain't his sister and his name ain't Buck. It's Irving Schwartz and he's an out-of-work actor from Pittsburg, so he ain't no cowboy either.

MEEMAW Huh! I knew them hands was too soft fer a cowboy's.

VERA Why it just so happens that Irving and me was gonna go down to Mexico and get hitched after we pulled this caper. Now, he's run off with the jewel and left me here holding the bag. But, they better not try to prosecute. If they do, I'll make it real embarrassin' for 'em. I'll just say Alphie gave me the necklace as a gift. It'll be his word against mine, and the press'll eat up the story. Now, can I please use your telephone? I need to call a cab so I can get out a here.

MEEMAW (*Kindly*) This way, Darlin. MEEMAW *leads Vera off stage lugging her suitcases with her.*

MEEMAW *leads the young VERA off-stage lugging her suitcases as she goes.*

DONALD *Looks curiously at ELANOR.* Miss Sullivan, why'd you let Buck or Irving escape with the loot?

ELANOR (*Smiles*) Don't you worry, Donald. We'll catch up with him soon enough.

DONALD (*Doubtfully*) You mean you really let him get away?

*ELANOR winks playfully. RUTH, sitting next to DONALD, punches him in the arm.*

*RUTH (Laughing) No, silly. She's foolin' us again.*

*ELANOR pulls a large coin purse from her pocket and shakes out the contents. A glowing rainbow-colored object falls into her hand.*

*RUTH (Grinning) Another classic double bluff.*

*Everyone shares a smile as they admire the jewel, relieved by the clever ruse.*

*DONALD: But, what did Buck/Irving take out of your hand and run away with?*

*RUTH (laughing again) That was just a big ole pecan. He needs to look more carefully next time.*

*EVERYONE shares a laugh.*

*The family remains astonished by the turn of events. Next, BOBBY JOE, DONALD and RUTH help MEEMAW clear the table. ROSE remains at the table staring blankly into the middle distance. She is holding a mug but isn't drinking from it. After the table is cleared, MEEMAW comes out and sits beside her, and puts her arm around her.*

*MARGARET (Soothingly) I know it's hard, Darlin'. But, what kinda life is a life on the run in? If you'd gone with him, you'd never be able to come back and I'd shore miss ya.*

*ROSE Brushing a tear from her eye, Oh, Meemaw, do you think I will ever have a future? With men, I mean.*

*MARGARET (Encouragingly) Of course you will. You can't see it right now. But, trust me. We've all been there. The pain will fade. You'll see. Just gotta give it some time.*

*MEEMAW wraps her arms around her granddaughter and kisses her forehead. ROSE looks up into her smiling face.*

MARGARET (*Sweetly*) You know we will always love ya, Darlin'. Love hurts sometimes, but think of it this way. Through this experience, you have gained wisdom. You'll know better what to look for next time. And, yes, young lady, I am sure there will be a next time.

ROSE *Smiling through her tears*, Thanks, Meemaw. Love you too.

*Margaret and Rose share a heartfelt moment, finding solace and support in each other's company.*

#### SCENE 4: THE WINTHROP PORCH

MEEMAW *sits in the rocking chair holding a mug. There is a second mug on the table next to her. CARL comes up on the porch. He is dressed in work clothes. MEEMAW pats the chair next to her. CARL sits down.*

MEEMAW *handing him a cup.* Made you some coffee. CARL *accepts it.*

CARL *crosses his arms.* Well, Meemaw, looks like it just the two of us again.

MEEMAW You, me, and ole Rufus. You think you can ever forgive my little deception?

CARL *harrumphs and considers for a moment. (Smiling)* Alright, Meemaw, I'll forgive you as soon as you bake me another pecan pie. But this time, be shore to keep that dog away from it.

MEEMAW *smiles up at her husband.* It's a deal, Darlin'.

*They share a loving moment, solidifying their bond with humor and affection.*

*Curtain.*