

THE SULLIVAN FAMILY'S CHRISTMAS BEGAN IN THE traditional way that year. All six children gathered at the top of the stairs in order, from youngest to oldest, and waited for the signal from Daddy-o that it was safe to come downstairs and inspect the work of Santa. Never mind that the oldest Sullivan child, St. John, was twenty-one. The youngest, Takey, was only six, and Daddy-o insisted on keeping up the annual rituals so Takey wouldn't feel as if he'd missed everything.

The signal — “Joy to the World” sung by Nat King Cole — burst through the stereo speakers, and the six children — Takey, Sassy, Jane, Norrie, Sully, and St. John — trooped downstairs to the family room and rummaged under the tall Christmas tree for presents. Afterward they waded through the sea of discarded wrapping paper to the kitchen for a pancake breakfast cooked by Daddy-o. (Miss Maura had the day off, though she always stopped by with her husband, Dennis — known to the Sullivan children as Mr. Maura — to say hello and drop off presents around noon.) Ginger contributed her signature dish, sliced grapefruit halves sprinkled with Splenda. Slicing the grapefruit

was the most work she did in the kitchen all year, unless you counted transferring caviar from the tin to the silver serving dish on New Year's Eve.

After breakfast, everyone retreated to their bedrooms to try on their new Christmas clothes and get ready for the big family dinner at Almighty's. The Sullivans lived in a very big house, but Almighty — their grandmother Arden Louisa Norris Sullivan Weems Maguire Hightower Beckendorf, known to everyone in Baltimore as "Almighty Lou" — had a house that was a bona fide mansion, with a fancy name to match: Gilded Elms.

Christmas Eve at Gilded Elms was a party for family and friends. But Christmas Day dinner was a quieter occasion, usually just for Almighty and the Sullivans. That year, an unexpected guest joined the family at Almighty's Christmas table: her lawyer, Mr. Calvin Murdoch. Mr. Murdoch had the silent, nodding, overly polite demeanor of an undertaker. Each of the Sullivans wondered what he was doing there while they quietly chewed on their turkey breast and passed around the homemade raisin bread.

In time, they got their answer.

After dinner, Almighty gathered her nearest and dearest in the library for a special announcement. She wore a simple black dress, which set off the bold white stripe in her iron-gray hair.

"I have recently learned that I may not have long to live," she declared to gasps of surprise. "There is a tumor in my brain. If it doesn't grow, I might live out my natural life as I was intended to, active and sentient. If, however, it grows — and the doctors say it has a distinct possibility of doing so — then I will quickly

decline. Therefore, I have revisited the affairs of my estate, financial and otherwise. In other words, I have changed my will.”

The family members gathered around her sat perfectly still, with a studied lack of emotion. No one wanted to appear upset at the possibility of a change in Almighty’s will. Such a change, however, would affect the fate of everyone in the room to a great degree. Almighty was very rich, and her son, his wife, and all of their children were completely dependent on the money she controlled.

“Alphonse,” Almighty continued, looking to Daddy-o, who’d been named after his late father, “I fear your entire family has been cut out of the will.”

The Sullivans gasped in horror. They couldn’t help themselves. This was just too awful.

“Now now, there is no need for alarm,” Almighty said, even if no other reaction seemed sensible.

“Mother, why?” Daddy-o asked.

“One of you has offended me deeply,” Almighty explained. “I’m not going to name names. But unless that person comes forward with a confession of his or her crime, submitted in writing to me by New Year’s Day, I will donate your share of my fortune to my favorite charity upon my death.”

“Which charity is that?” Ginger asked.

“Puppy Ponchos,” Almighty replied.

The Sullivans collectively restrained themselves from groaning. Puppy Ponchos provided rain ponchos for the dogs of people too poor to buy dog raincoats for themselves. In a city full of needy people and animals, it was the most useless charity

imaginable. No one in the Sullivan family understood why Puppy Ponchos was more deserving of Almighty's money than they were. After all, hadn't they put up with her for all these years? Didn't that count for something?

"If the offending party submits the proper confession in time," Almighty continued, "I will reinstate the family in my will. Or at least consider it."

Almighty had spoken. And if Almighty wanted a confession, a confession she would get.

When the torturous dinner was finally over and the Sullivans had returned to their house, they gathered in the kitchen for a family meeting.

"Who could have offended Almighty so much?" St. John asked. "Which one of us could it be?"

"One of the girls," Sully said.

"One of the girls," Daddy-o repeated.

"Definitely one of the girls," Ginger concurred.

Almighty had always been tough on the girls. And each of them had recently done something to upset their grandmother, no question about that.

And so it was agreed that the three girls — Norrie, Jane, and Sassy — would spend their Christmas break writing out a full confession of their crimes, to be handed to Almighty by midnight on New Year's Eve.

After that, they would have to hope for the best.