

THE SPRINGVALE ARMADILLO

A New Play

by

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THE SPRINGVALE ARMADILLO

Cast of Characters

- Ruby:** **Age 87.** Ruby, appearing to be younger, maintains the charm of a Southern debutante. She has a youthful beauty that still shines through. Despite everything, she reflects the contentment of a woman who has led a charmed life rather than a tragic one.
- Matthew:** **Age 30.** Matthew has a boyish charm, curiosity and awkwardness that endear him to others. Recently, his life has been shaken. He is troubled and looking for answers. He's not tough enough for the investigative journalism profession which he has chosen for himself.
- Nurse Poole:** **Age mid 50's.** Nurse Poole is a stern, serious woman. *SHE wears a starched white nurse's uniform and cap, sensible white shoes and a stern expression. HER makeup-free face and bobbed hair complete her antiseptic appearance.*
- Young Ruby:** **Age 17.** Young Ruby is a beautiful, young debutante filled with a great enthusiasm for life. While she is the product of years of Southern charm school and proper etiquette training, her grace and charm are as natural as a summer's day. Although flirtatious, her innocence is genuine.
- Preacher:** (Voice on tape) A booming-voiced, hell-fire-and-damnation Southern Baptist preacher.
- Billy:** **Age 18:** (Billy is played by the same actor who plays Matthew.) A poor, backwards and shy southern boy with little education but much passion for life, the future, and most of all, Young Ruby.

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PROLOGUE

NOTE: *The prologue should be pre-recorded as all of the action takes place off-stage and many of the characters are not seen or heard from again. It should start serenely and build into chaos. The characters can talk over each other as they are in a panic. The sounds, music, tension should continue to build adding to the chaos until it reaches a fever pitch just before the final scream.*

SETTING: A bare, dark stage.

AT RISE: *The house goes to black. RUBY, dimly lit at center, sits in her wheelchair staring out. From outside we hear the sounds of a thunderstorm, horse hooves and a carriage arriving first from a distance, then getting closer and then out side the door. Next, men's voices are heard in a distance and then footsteps coming up the walk and approaching the door. We hear a horse neigh. There is a crash of thunder and a flash of lightening, then a loud pounding at an off-stage door.*

TIME: April 1928

(ALL PROLOGUE DIALOGUE IS HEARD FROM OFF-STAGE)

PEARL-AGE 6

Mama, there are ponies coming up the drive.

MOTHER

Clinton, it's them. They're here.

EMMY-AGE 5

There are ponies!?!

MOTHER

Pearl, Emma...go on up to your rooms. Now Emma!

EMMY-AGE 5

But I want to see the ponies!

MOTHER

Adam, I could use some help here.

FATHER

Alice, I cannot allow this!

MOTHER

Adam, enough already! It's done. Marie, let them in.
Amber, take the others upstairs.

FATHER

Alice, don't do this! Why? Why are you doing this?

MOTHER

Adam, we have no other choice. Now step out of the way.
Tom, show them in. She's upstairs... second door on the
right. Sally, be sure the little ones stay in their rooms.

AMBER-AGE 10

Father, you cannot let them take her.

MOTHER

Sarah, Elizabeth, get back to your rooms.

YOUNG RUBY

Father, who are these men? What do they want?

FATHER

Alice, please! Where are they taking her?

YOUNG RUBY

Daddy, please! Mother! No! No! Daddy! Daddy! Help me!

FATHER

Alice! Please don't do this terrible thing!

*(The music and sounds crescendo. We hear RUBY'S final
shrill scream. We hear the carriage pull away. The
music returns to a lower volume and then goes silent)*

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF PROLOGUE)

ACT ONE
Scene 1

SETTING: STAGE-RIGHT: NURSE POOLE'S OFFICE:
There is a large old wooden desk, mismatched wooden chairs, a 1940's radio, a wooden coatrack and a wall map comprise. It looks like it was last remodeled during World War II.

DOWNSTAGE LEFT: RUBY'S WILLOW TREE: A large weeping willow tree on a patch of grass. The sun hits the top of the tree forming shadows on the grass.

AT RISE: *NURSE POOLE sits at her desk doing paperwork. A Mozart's piano concerto is playing loudly on her radio. RUBY sits in her antique wheelchair under the willow. SHE stares out over the audience expressionless.*

TIME: April 12, 1993 3:07 P.M.

(MATTHEW enters. NURSE POOLE ignores him. HE waits to be acknowledged. It doesn't happen. He clears his throat but still, no response. He finally speaks)

MATTHEW

Excuse me. I'm here to see Edith Poole? I'm Mr. Coleman. I'm the writer from The Boston Globe...I'm here to interview one of the patients. I wrote to Edith... I believe she is expecting me.

(NURSE POOLE turns off radio and slams down her file folder. SHE is irritated that HE has interrupted her)

NURSE POOLE

I'm Nurse Poole.

MATTHEW

Oh. How do you do? I'm Matthew Coleman.

NURSE POOLE

So you said.

MATTHEW

I have come to...

NURSE POOLE

You have come to see Miss Ruby.

MATTHEW

That's right...

NURSE POOLE

You're late.

MATTHEW

But I thought we said three-o'clock.

NURSE POOLE

We did say three-o'clock. It is now 3:07. I have been expecting you. I was just expecting you at three. I will take you to her. Grab your things. Quickly now! I don't have time to waste with lollygagging.

MATTHEW

Have I come at a bad time?

NURSE POOLE

Yes, you actually have, but frankly, Mr. Coleman, what with all the strangers traipsing through here these days... most times are bad. We are still a hospital after all!

MATTHEW

Well of course you are! What kind of strangers?

NURSE POOLE

Lawyers, social workers, reporters... trudging through here... rummaging about... *disturbing things*. Ever since the Governor announced the closing of Springvale, we've become a target for these types. No offense.

MATTHEW

None taken. I actually learned about Springvale from an article in the business section of the Globe.

NURSE POOLE

The business section?

MATTHEW

Yes, it discussed the value of the property and whether the government should sell the land to a shopping mall developer or change the zoning laws to allow for industry.

NURSE POOLE

Yes...a shopping mall or a Chevrolet plant. And it was from this business section article that you learned about her?

MATTHEW

Yes, the article briefly discussed her and the other remaining patients. It mentioned how they have been here their most of their long lives and how they have no families...no place to go.

NURSE POOLE

Yes, and imagine that. The fate of these old souls being reduced to an article on the value of the property in the business section. And how was it you specifically choose her to write about?

MATTHEW

I don't know. I don't have all the details...but I guess her story just hit me the hardest.

NURSE POOLE

Well, you must be anxious to meet her... to fill in the blanks. I will take you to her. Follow me.

(She leads him out. They cross to RUBY)

The staff here was quite surprised that you chose Miss Ruby as your subject.

MATTHEW

Why is that?

NURSE POOLE

Because she is a loner. She talks to no one. She has no friends...

MATTHEW

But surely, after all of these years, she must have...

NURSE POOLE

No. None at all. It's not surprising as she's not the friendliest one among us. Fortunately, she's not "among us" all that often. Miss Ruby lives in her own world... a world with only one occupant. Every day she sits all alone, for hours on end, under a tree on the north lawn. She sits there... silently... dazed...staring out at nothing.

MATTHEW

She never speaks?

NURSE POOLE

Oh, she occasionally mumbles incoherently. I've tried to make out what she's says, but I never can. It's almost like she's talking to the ghosts who haunt her past.

MATTHEW

Maybe she is. Does she know I'm coming?

NURSE POOLE

We told her and it didn't seem to register, but then, this morning, she got up with the sun and immediately went to her mirror and started primping... primping and preening like a schoolgirl on prom night.

MATTHEW

Perhaps she's hoping someone is coming to take her away...

NURSE POOLE

No, Ruby feels quite at home here. It has been her home for over 70 years. It's all she really knows.

(THEY walk towards stage left to RUBY)

Are you ready to meet her?

MATTHEW

Yes. Yes, I am.

NURSE POOLE

Here we are. Miss Ruby? Miss Ruby, it's Nurse Poole, Miss Ruby. I've brought you a visitor. A Mr. Coleman who has come all the way from the North. He drove down all the way from Boston...Boston, Massachusetts... in an automobile... just to see you.

(RUBY doesn't move)

Well, there you have it! She's in her "not among us" state. She can stay like this for weeks on end. I'm afraid you have wasted your time in coming here Mr. Coleman.

MATTHEW

She must have been an incredible beauty in her youth. I mean she still is! Even at her age, her beauty is still there. And her eyes... they still sparkle.

NURSE POOLE

Well, beauty or not, she's not speaking. Come, I'll see you out Mr. Coleman.

MATTHEW

No wait. Please, couldn't I sit with her anyway? I did come from such a distance after all.

NURSE POOLE

Suit yourself but I'm telling you, you're wasting your time. I, on the other hand, must get back to work. Stop by the office when you are ready to leave. Don't be long. She needs her rest.

(Louder to Ruby)

We need our beauty rest, don't we Miss Ruby?

MATTHEW

Thank you Nurse Poole.

(NURSE POOLE exits. RUBY continues in her trance-like state until NURSE POOLE is off stage)

RUBY

Is she gone?

MATTHEW

What!?!?

RUBY

Nurse Poop...is she gone?

MATTHEW

Yes, why yes she is!

RUBY

Good riddance!

MATTHEW

My God! You startled me!

RUBY

Oh, I am sorry Mr. Coleman.

MATTHEW

So you heard everything?

RUBY

Everything that was important to hear.

MATTHEW

Miss Ruby, is this whole dazed thing an act?

RUBY

Yes. Yes, it is. But don't think poorly of me. I just can't stand that woman! It's easier to fade out than to have to deal with her. So you think I'm a natural born beauty Mr. Coleman?

MATTHEW

Yes, Miss Ruby, I do...although I may not have been quite so forthcoming if I'd known you were just playing possum.

RUBY

Tis a pity that one can only say what one thinks, even the good things, when they think no one else can hear them.

MATTHEW

Now I'm embarrassed. You are absolutely right.

RUBY

I *used* to be a beauty. My Daddy used to say I could make the trees blush just by walking by them.

MATTHEW

I'll bet you could. I'll bet you still do.

RUBY

No, not any more.

MATTHEW

No, you're wrong...I think you're still a beauty. You know I do... you heard me say it. And you can see me blushing.

RUBY

And I didn't even have to move!

MATTHEW

Wow, it's really something out here. It is so beautiful. It's so peaceful and serene. If I lived at Springvale, I'd spend every possible moment right here in this very place.

RUBY

I do. I do spend a great deal of my time right here. Most of every day, right underneath this tree. It's my tree.

MATTHEW

Your tree?

RUBY

Yes! It and I are the two oldest things at Springvale. Of course, everything is old here, but most of everything else has been renovated at one time or another...except for my tree and me. It too is a natural beauty, don't you think?

MATTHEW

Indeed it is.

RUBY

I remember it as a baby tree. The year it was planted. I was nineteen years old. It was two years after I arrived here at Springvale.

MATTHEW

What year was that?

RUBY

Why Mr. Coleman! You are trying to discover my age!

MATTHEW

I know...I was just...

RUBY

Don't they teach you Boston boys not to ask a lady's age?

MATTHEW

Yes, of course. I'm sorry.

RUBY

Northerners! Apology accepted. I'm eighty-seven... as of last week. I turned eighty-seven last Thursday.

MATTHEW

Yes, to be honest...I knew that. Happy belated birthday.

RUBY

You knew it? Why you rascal!

MATTHEW

Yes, I knew it. As a matter of fact I know a great deal about you. Did they tell you why I'm here?

RUBY

They didn't tell me...not their fault...I was playing possum again. But I did overhear something about a newspaper...The World? The Earth?

MATTHEW

The Globe.

RUBY

Yes, that's it! The Globe!

MATTHEW

Yes...I'm a writer for The Boston Globe and I'm here to write about you. I want to tell your story.

RUBY

My story! Imagine that! Well, tell me something Mr. Coleman...why on earth would the good people of Boston want to read the story of an old woman from the South?

MATTHEW

Your story is a fascinating one... although if you don't mind me saying so, a terribly sad one.

RUBY

(Angrily)

Sad? Whatever do you mean?!? How dare you judge!

MATTHEW

Oh, Miss Ruby, I didn't mean...

RUBY

You know Mr. Coleman...you can't tell much about a chicken pie until you get through the crust!

MATTHEW

I'm sorry Miss Ruby... I really didn't mean anything by that... but...well, how would you describe your life here at Springvale?

RUBY

I've been here nearly my whole life. It's really the only life I've ever known. I have nothing to compare it to.

MATTHEW

No, of course. I Understand and I am sorry that I...

RUBY

It is true, it would be a happier place without Nurse Nasty, and it does get tiring seeing the same old, *old* people day in day out...but, I don't know that your life is any less humdrum, or anyone else's for that matter.

MATTHEW

No, maybe not.

RUBY

After a while, one just gets used to just about anything.

MATTHEW

And in all those years...those 70 plus years, you never wanted to get out...to leave Springvale?

RUBY

Once. Once I did leave.

MATTHEW

You did! I didn't know that! When...when did you leave?

RUBY

We tried it. We couldn't make it. But we tried.

MATTHEW

We? Who is we?

RUBY

Now, just hold on a minute! You say you know so much about me, but I don't know a thing about you. I don't think that's fair, do you?

MATTHEW

No, I suppose it's not. Okay, what would you like to know?

RUBY

Well, let's see...Nurse Cranky said you drove down here. "Drove all the way from Boston...Boston, Massachusetts... in an automobile", she said. Well, if it was Boston, I assumed it was Massachusetts...and if you drove, I assumed it was in an automobile.

(MATTHEW laughs)

That old bat drives me crazy!

MATTHEW

Yes, I can see that.

RUBY

But regardless, tell me Mr. Coleman... why would you drive down here, when you can fly? I know the airplanes come down here. I see them flying overhead all day long.

MATTHEW

Well, I had the time to make the drive and I needed to clear my head. I was going through some things. I had just lost someone I was very close to...

RUBY

Oh, I am sorry.

MATTHEW

Thank you. Anyway, I needed to think some things out. I thought the peace and tranquility of America's countryside would do me good, and it did. It was a beautiful drive.

RUBY

What's it like?

MATTHEW

What do you mean?

RUBY

What's it like to just get into an automobile and drive through this great country of ours?

MATTHEW

I can't really describe it. It's freedom, fresh air, and clear mind kind of stuff. I can't really put it into words.

RUBY

But you must. Come on! You're a writer for goodness sakes! You must try. I have always wondered about it. I have never really talked to anyone who has taken such a trip. Tell me about it. Where did you start? What did you see?

MATTHEW

Well, as you know I started in Boston...and I drove through Rhode Island...

RUBY

No, no, no! Much too fast! Where in Boston? I mean what street? Is it your street? I want to know all the details. I've never been to Boston...I've never really been anywhere.

MATTHEW

Never? Not even as a child...a family vacation maybe?

RUBY

No. Father was so busy with his work there wasn't really time, and then there was my grandmother who was very ill. Father promised one day we'd take a great trip, but that someday never came.

MATTHEW

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

RUBY

Coming to Springvale was the farthest trip I've ever taken. It took about three and a half hours... but that was at night and by horse and carriage. I don't know how long it would take by automobile.

(Pause as SHE reflects back)

But never mind that now! Go on, tell me about Boston!

MATTHEW

O.K. Boston is a really beautiful town. Some parts are very colonial still, with cobblestone walks. And there are many historical sites to see...the North Church, Paul Revere's House...and we're not far from Salem...you know, where the witch trials took place.

RUBY

The Salem witch trials. Another example man's atrocities towards his fellow man... just as it's been throughout history! These used to be more rare...every decade or so... Hitler, McCarthy, the Ku Klux Klan, but now, in 1993, CNN brings us fresh examples almost everyday. But, back to Boston. So, where do you live?

MATTHEW

I live on a small street called St. Matthew, as it turns out. It's a pretty little tree-lined street with brick row houses and some shops dating back to the 1790's.

RUBY

That really does sound lovely. So you left your cozy little tree-lined street and headed where?

MATTHEW

Well, I headed to Rhode Island, then into Connecticut...

RUBY

The Constitution State...

MATTHEW

That's right! It says so on their license plates. And then on through New York...

RUBY

The Empire State. George Washington referred to New York as the "seat of the Empire" in 1785.

MATTHEW

Wow! How do you know that? I am flabbergasted!

RUBY

Oh, don't be. I was the best in my class at naming the states and their nicknames and although that was a number of years ago, it has stuck with me until this day.

MATTHEW

New Jersey?

RUBY

The Garden State.

MATTHEW

Pennsylvania.

RUBY

The Keystone State. I know that, but I've no idea what it means.

MATTHEW

That is absolutely amazing!

RUBY

Yes it is, isn't it! The fact is, I can remember nearly everything from my school days, and yet I can't remember what I had for lunch yesterday.

MATTHEW

Well, that happens.

RUBY

It's like a brick wall was built around my brain when I arrived at Springvale. A towering barricade meant to retain everything I'd learned up to the age of seventeen, and to prevent any new learning from getting in.

MATTHEW

But to know all those things about our history, and with CNN you seem to be keeping up with current world affairs.

RUBY

I know what I know from textbooks and a TV set, but I've never seen anything in person? I've only seen Springvale?

MATTHEW

But you did leave once. You said, "we left...we tried it on the outside." When was this...?

RUBY

I'm sorry Mr. Matthew, but I'm getting rather sleepy now. Yes, I think I need to have a lie-down.

MATTHEW

But Miss Ruby...I have so many questions...

RUBY

Mr. Coleman, I am an old woman. I haven't a lot of energy. And I still don't know why your readers back in Boston would want to read my story anyway...terribly sad or not.

MATTHEW

I'm sorry, Miss Ruby. Have I upset you? Is that it? I am sorry if my words or my questions have upset you.

RUBY

Mr. Matthew, you are a very young man. I understand your life is still full of dreams, hopes and great expectations. I'm not offended by your words or your questions. My life to a young man probably does seem a pity...a series of misfortunes.

MATTHEW

No...I mean...I didn't mean...