

The Edgar Allan Poe Afterlife Radio Show

A RADIO PLAY BY

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Playscripts

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Cast of Characters

EDGAR ALLAN POE

THE CAT

PLAYERS, three or more wandering spirits.

Poe and The Cat are visible throughout. The Players portray the following:

Scene One: Opening

ANNOUNCER (may be an offstage voice)

Scene Two: The Cask of the Amontillado

MONTRESOR

FORTUNATO

Commercial Break One

BOB

ROB

DEB

Scene Three: The Fall of the House of Usher

DEVIN

RODERICK USHER

LADY MADELINE USHER

Scene Four: The Raven

MISS DELORES TERIOUS

Commercial Break Two

WIFE

HUSBAND

STEAK

RECEPTIONIST

Scene Five: The Tell-Tale Heart

TAYLOR

OLD MAN

OFFICER 1

OFFICER 2

Scene Six: Ending

Setting

The Edgar Allan Poe Afterlife Radio Show studio. Has the feel of an otherworldly 1930s radio station in a foggy cemetery, or a nether realm beyond our mortal reach.

Production Notes

This radio play can be performed as an audio-only piece or as a live radio play onstage.

The stage directions are purposefully minimal so as to create the radio atmosphere; however, directors should feel free to add more interactions between the Players in the space as they see fit.

The set can be minimal with microphone, sound props, music stands, and chairs. Productions that choose to recreate a 1930s radio station should incorporate some otherworldly elements too.

Sound effects may be performed live by a foley artist visible at a table throughout, or recorded sound effects may be used.

The commercials are written to be advertising/sponsorship opportunities for real businesses in a theatre's community. The commercials are written so that any restaurant or hardware store can be inserted. Groups are welcome to make slight changes to the script if necessary to add in additional information for the real businesses, however, if at all possible, the use of website addresses should be avoided. If a group chooses not to use real businesses for any of the ads, they can insert any made-up restaurant/ hardware store names and use "555" phone numbers.

Casting Notes

This show can be produced with a minimum of five actors and as many as twenty (not counting the Foley Artist).

The Announcer can be offstage, prerecorded or live, given to one of the Players, or read by the Foley Artist.

Gender roles are suggestions only. Feel free to change any pronouns to accommodate your casting.

Suggested Doubling Scheme for Six Actors (3M, 3F)

POE, M

THE CAT, F

PLAYER 1, M: MONTRESOR, BOB, DEVIN, STEAK, OFFICER 1

PLAYER 2, M: FORTUNATO, ROB, RODERICK USHER, HUSBAND,
OLD MAN

PLAYER 3, F: TAYLOR, DEB, LADY MADELINE USHER, WIFE

PLAYER 4, F: MISS DELORES TERIOUS, RECEPTIONIST, OFFICER 2

To cast with 5 actors, PLAYER 4's roles may be divided up. OFFICER 2 may be combined with OFFICER 1 and played by PLAYER 1, and MISS DELORES TERIOUS and RECEPTIONIST can be played by PLAYER 3.

For Perusal Purposes Only

THE EDGAR ALLAN POE AFTERLIFE RADIO SHOW

by Patrick Greene and Jason Pizzarello

Scene One: Opening

(Lights up on a mysterious radio studio. Or is it a cemetery? Or is it a foggy, dim nether realm beyond our mortal reach?)

(There are two microphones and two chairs center stage, another pair of each stage right, and another pair of each stage left.

(Music stands holding scripts are optional, and may be placed by each chair if desired.)

(If you choose to use a foley artist to perform live sound effects, a foley table with a microphone and a number of props for creating effects may be placed upstage left. Otherwise, recorded sound effects may be used.)

(If you choose to use foley sound effects, the foley artist enters and takes their position at the table. Think animated mortician. They remain visible throughout.)

ANNOUNCER. *(Offstage:)* And now, ladies and gentlemen, we bring you something new, and dare I say, dangerous. Our next program comes to you live, from a place beyond the living, a region beyond our mortal understanding. Welcome to the Edgar Allan Poe Afterlife Radio Show . . .

(SFX: Thunder.)

(NOTE: Should you choose, transitions like this can be filled with a simple score – an organ perhaps, or another solitary instrument.)

(In the silence after the thunder, footsteps are heard before their creator is seen – EDGAR ALLAN POE enters, looking very, well, Poe-esque – dark eyes, disheveled hair, 1840s garb that is worse for the wear. POE goes to the center-stage mic closer to stage right.)

POE. There is no thunder in death.

(POE turns and gives a look to the foley artist, who just shrugs.)

The written word. *(Pause.)* Is more dead than I. The hands stained with literature's blood belong to none other than radio. The minds of the living have been warped by its waves. *(Pause.)* The written word is dead. But even the dead must adapt, or die anew.

POE. So I, Edgar Allan Poe, shall bring you my tales in the only way your modern minds seem capable of receiving them . . . with sound . . .

(SFX: A gong.)

POE. *(Sighs audibly.)* . . . And through performance . . .

(Three PLAYERS enter, all in muted clothing, not from any time period in particular. They drift, as if spirits gliding carelessly through time. Two PLAYERS take their positions at the stage left mics, the other goes stage right.)

POE. Our player, though wandering spirits themselves, will breathe life into my creations. And you, dear listener, I implore you to open your ears and your minds. Though my tales have been described as macabre and morbid, it is my belief that one can learn more from observing one day in the life of the damned than one could from witnessing a lifetime of the blessed. *(Pause.)* But understand, dear listener, that it is not my purpose to save your soul. I am simply a storyteller . . . In life and in death. That is my lot. The fate of your soul is in your hands, alone.

(Pause. He repositions himself.)

And so we begin . . . In Italy. It is the time of carnival. A time of excess and passion . . .

(From offstage, the meow of a cat. POE turns his head, but only slightly.)

POE. The time is your past, dear listener, but, please understand, though a deed may exist in a long ago time, the impetus is alive and well in your present. *(A brief pause.)* It is a night of much revelry.

(Again, the meow.)

Vile creature, be gone with you!

(A CAT enters. It's best to suggest her costume subtly—the ears, maybe, or a hint of the whiskers. She takes a circuitous route towards POE and the empty spot next to him.)

POE. I say be gone with you!

CAT. You say a lot of silly things.

POE. Ah, I see, a beast come to plague me.

CAT. Who? Me?

POE. Shooing you away will do no good, will it? And by the looks of you, you are no stranger to violence.

CAT. Don't mind me, man. I'm just a cat who is fond of stories.

POE. You are not just a cat, you are a curse. And my name is not man, it is Poe.

CAT. Whatever you say, Mr. Poe.

POE. Being a curse, I know I cannot just wish you away. If you are to stay, I only ask that you remain in silence.

CAT. Silent as a simple saucer of milk.

POE. What does that mean?

CAT. Nothing, Mr. Poe . . . Tell your stories. Make us weep. Make our souls shiver. Go creep . . . creep . . . creep . . .

POE. (*Another audible sigh.*) As I was saying, we are in Italy, on a night of much revelry . . .

Scene Two: The Cask of the Amontillado

(*SFX: Party sounds, glasses clinking, indecipherable chatter [from the players], laughter.*)

POE. It is dusk. The madness of carnival season is at its zenith. Within this haze of drinking and laughter is a man with a singular purpose . . . revenge.

(*PLAYER 1 stands stage right and dons a carnival mask. This is MONTRESOR.*)

MONTRESOR. Fortunato . . . Fortunato . . . Fortunato . . .

POE. The eyes of this man, burn through the holes in his mask as he whispers the name of his enemy.

MONTRESOR. Fortunato . . .

POE. Who is this Fortunato? A nobleman, certainly, but history has shown us that such titles mean very little with respect to the character of a man. So I ask again, who is this Fortunato? A connoisseur of wines, absolutely. A mason, yes. A jovial man, bombastic, crude, a quack, a charlatan, a friend, a son . . . These are words that can be applied to many countless individuals. So does it matter who Fortunato is? To burning eyes behind the mask, staring into the soul of Fortunato, he is but one thing, a man who once uttered an insult. Sometimes that is all it takes. And now, this man, this Fortunato wanders down the street, alive with wine, dressed as a jester, bells and all. The eyes are waiting.

(SFX: *Jingling of bells.*)

(PLAYER 2, *stage left, rises. This is FORTUNATO.*)

FORTUNATO. Well, well, well, what do we have here? I know those eyes. Warm eyes, indeed. I have always said that about you, my friend. Ask anyone, they will tell you I say, "That Montresor has such warm eyes."

MONTRESOR. My dear Fortunato, how lucky I am that you have stumbled my way.

FORTUNATO. Lucky, you say. Can I be of some service?

MONTRESOR. I have recently received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, but I have my doubts.

FORTUNATO. How? Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of carnival.

MONTRESOR. You're absolutely right. I've been defrauded. And I was silly enough to pay full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. I confess, I am a fool. But you were not to be found and I was fearful of losing a bargain.

FORTUNATO. Amontillado! Really?

MONTRESOR. I have my doubts. Serious doubts, which your reaction only but confirms.

FORTUNATO. Amontillado!

(FORTUNATO *sneezes.*)

MONTRESOR. More than likely not, I'm afraid. But please, put it out of your mind. The night is young for you. And as for me, I must be off. I am on my way to Luchesi. If anyone has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me—

FORTUNATO. Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from sherry!

(FORTUNATO *sneezes again.*)

MONTRESOR. And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own.

FORTUNATO. Come!

MONTRESOR. What say you?

FORTUNATO. We must go, Montresor.

MONTRESOR. Whither?

FORTUNATO. To your vaults.

MONTRESOR. My friend, no. I will not impose upon your good nature. You have other engagements tonight. And Luchesi can more than—

FORTUNATO. I have no engagements . . . come!

MONTRESOR. My friend, please, my vaults are insufferably damp and you clearly are suffering from a severe cold.

FORTUNATO. This cold is nothing. Let us go.

MONTRESOR. As you wish.

FORTUNATO. Luchesi . . . *(A long sigh . . . and then a sneeze.)*

(SFX: Footsteps on stone.)

POE. And so the two men walked to Montresor's home where all of the attendants had been given the night off. Through the silent rooms they walked. At the entrance of the vaults, Montresor provided his guest with a flambeaux. Montresor took one as well and led the way down. Fortunato jingled with each step.

(SFX: Jingling of bells.)

FORTUNATO. Now, where is this pipe?

MONTRESOR. It is further on . . . but observe the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls.

FORTUNATO. Nitre?

(FORTUNATO has a coughing fit.)

MONTRESOR. Nitre, indeed. How long have you had that cough?

FORTUNATO. It is nothing.

MONTRESOR. Come, we will go back, Fortunato. Your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi—

FORTUNATO. Enough! I shall not die of a cough.

MONTRESOR. True. But you should use all proper caution. A drought of this Medoc will defend us from the damp.

(SFX: Uncorking a bottle.)

Drink.

FORTUNATO. I am much obliged. I shall drink to the buries that repose around us.

(SFX: Gulping/drinking.)

MONTRESOR. And for your long life.

FORTUNATO. These vaults are quite extensive.

MONTRESOR. The Montresors were a great and numerous family.

FORTUNATO. I forget your arms.

MONTRESOR. A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent whose fangs are imbedded in the heel.

FORTUNATO. And the motto?

MONTRESOR. *Nemo me impune lacessit.*

FORTUNATO. Good!

CAT. (*Whispering loudly:*) What is that?

POE. Quiet, Cat.

CAT. Those weren't words.

POE. They are words . . . Latin words.

CAT. Oh. Okay.

POE. Apologies. Continue . . .

CAT. (*Whispering loudly again:*) What do they mean?

POE. It means death to all felines. Now shut up!

CAT. I don't think that's what it means.

POE. Nevertheless . . . Montresor and Fortunato passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs.

FORTUNATO. Some more of the Medoc, Montresor.

(SFX: *Gulping/drinking.*)

POE. Fortunato finished off the bottle and proceeded to gesticulate in a matter that Montresor did not understand.

FORTUNATO. You do not comprehend?

MONTRESOR. I can't say I do.

FORTUNATO. Then you are not of the brotherhood?

MONTRESOR. How's that?

FORTUNATO. You are not of the masons.

MONTRESOR. Yes, yes . . . I am . . .

FORTUNATO. You are a mason? Impossible!

MONTRESOR. It's the lighting. Too dim down here, you see. I couldn't see you fully.

FORTUNATO. Show me a sign.

MONTRESOR. How that?

FORTUNATO. Show me a sign that you are a mason, Montresor.

MONTRESOR. I . . . well . . . There is this . . .

POE. From beneath his coat, Montresor produced a trowel.

CAT. Who walks around with a trowel in their coat?

POE. Will you be quiet and listen to the story!

CAT. (*Under her breath:*) It's a silly thing to carry is all.

POE. The men descended further still, until they reached a deep crypt. Through the foul air they continued to the end of the crypt where there appeared another, smaller crypt. Three of its walls were lined with human remains. From the fourth wall, the bones had been displaced and had been piled up against one of the walls. Where the bones had been there was now an opening . . . enough for a single man to enter.

MONTRESOR. Here we are.

FORTUNATO. Where?

MONTRESOR. Through that opening lies the Amontillado.

FORTUNATO. Better have a look then.

MONTRESOR. As you wish.

(*SFX: Stepping on stones.*)

POE. Fortunato stepped inside the opening. Montresor was right on his heels. Fortunato reached for the wall to guide his way in the dim light. And in an instant, Montresor grabbed the awaiting irons, and clasped them around the wrists of an unsuspecting Fortunato.

(*SFX: Iron restraints/chain.*)

There stood Fortunato, chained to the wall, still too astounded to understand what was happening.

MONTRESOR. Are you quite comfortable, Fortunato?

FORTUNATO. What say you?

MONTRESOR. Pass your hand over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is *very* damp. Once more, let me implore you to return . . . No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power.

FORTUNATO. But . . . the Amontillado!

MONTRESOR. Ah, yes, the Amontillado.

POE. Montresor bent down and threw aside the pile of bones revealing a quantity of building stones and mortar. He once again retrieved the trowel from his coat.

CAT. I'm starting to think maybe he planned all this and that maybe the trowel wasn't such a random thing to be carrying.

POE. (*Sighs in response.*) Quite methodically, Montresor began to wall up the entrance of the opening.

(SFX: *Stone on stone.*)

FORTUNATO. This is all very amusing, my friend.

(SFX: *Stone on stone.*)

I'm starting to wonder if there was ever any Amontillado.

CAT. You think?

POE. Quiet!

FORTUNATO. I say, Montresor, this really is quite a laugh.

(FORTUNATO *attempts a laugh.*)

(SFX: *Bells jingling. Chains rattling. Stone on stone.*)

POE. Like a dedicated craftsman, Montresor built his wall, stone by stone, without a word.

FORTUNATO. I am all for a joke, my friend, but you see, I do have this cough.

(FORTUNATO *coughs.*)

And it is rather late . . . (*Shouting:*) And also I am in chains!

(SFX: *Chains rattling.*)

Let me out, I say!

(SFX: *Stone on stone.*)

POE. At last, the determined man neared the end of his project. One stone left to be placed.

FORTUNATO. I do understand, you see, this really is a most excellent jest. We shall all laugh about it at the palazzo over wine.

MONTRESOR. The Amontillado!

FORTUNATO. (*Laughing:*) Yes, of course, the Amontillado. They're all awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest. Let us be gone.

MONTRESOR. Yes . . . let us be gone.

FORTUNATO. For the love of God, Montresor!

MONTRESOR. Yes . . . for the love of God.

POE. And with that, Montresor applied the final stone.

(*A muffled SCREAM from FORTUNATO.*)

MONTRESOR. Fortunato?

(*Another muffled SCREAM.*)

Fortunato . . .

(*SILENCE.*)

POE. Bone by bone, the determined man re-erected the old rampart. All of this occurred more than a century ago. No one has disturbed those bones, nor the ones they have helped to hide. *In pace requiescat!*

CAT. (*Whispering loudly:*) Is that Latin again?

POE. Yes.

CAT. What does it—

POE. Rest in peace.

(*PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 take their seats.*)

CAT. Oooh . . . creepy. Is that end? What happens to Montresor? Did he ever find out if it really was Amontillado? Maybe he went to the Luchesi guy. What does Amontillado taste like? Also, does anyone like any wine enough to be willing to go deep into a bone-filled crypt? (*Silence.*) Well . . .

POE. What?

CAT. I have questions.

POE. And I have no answers for you, Cat. I found none in life, nor have I found any in death.

CAT. Can I ask one more question?

POE. No.

CAT. Please.

POE. What?

CAT. Do you have anything to eat? I am terribly hungry.

POE. I have not a crumb.

CAT. So you're saying . . . you don't have anything?

POE. That's what I said.

CAT. Okay, okay. You just said it in a weird way.

POE. Unless you have any more nonsense which you insist on interrupting us with, it is time for—

CAT. Another morbid story?

POE. No. A commercial.

Commercial Break One

(PLAYER 1 rises and goes to his stand. He is BOB, who is rather cheerful. PLAYER 2 rises and goes to his stand. He is ROB, who is rather . . . grim.)

(SFX: Birds tweeting, wind blowing lightly.)

BOB. Hey there, Rob, mighty fine weather we are having today?

ROB. We are experiencing weather, Bob.

BOB. Right . . . so I was wondering if you happen to have a hammer that I could borrow?

ROB. How else would I drive nails, Bob?

BOB. I . . . don't know . . . So you have one.

ROB. I will retrieve it for you.

(SFX: Birds tweeting. Then hammering.)

BOB. Hi there, Rob.

ROB. Greetings, Bob.

BOB. I hope it's no trouble, Rob, would you by any chance have a hand saw that I could borrow?

ROB. Will a bone saw do?

BOB. Um . . . More like a saw for wood.

ROB. *(Long sigh.)* So be it.

(SFX: Birds tweeting. Then sawing, and hammering.)

BOB. Hello again, Rob.

ROB. I will not be offering you greetings yet again.

BOB. Um. Okay.

ROB. Are you finished building your coffin.

BOB. I'm not building a coffin.

ROB. Oh . . . Never mind then.

BOB. I was, however, wondering if you had maybe a spare bird-house or bench or table or anything like that lying around.

ROB. I don't understand, Bob. What exactly are you building?

BOB. Oh, I'm not building anything, Rob. That's the trouble. I told my wife I was making something to get out of doing housework. I've made all this racket, but I've got nothing to show for it. So what have you got for me, friend?

ROB. I have nothing for you.

BOB. Nothing?

ROB. Save for a name?

BOB. A name?

ROB. Yes, a name . . . *[insert hardware store name]* on *[insert hardware store address]*. They have great prices, a friendly and knowledgeable staff and all the tools you'll need for coffin building . . . or other things.

BOB. But I don't need tools, Rob, I need a bird house.

ROB. I believe they sell birdhouses, too. Now, please return my tools, Bob, and make your way to *[insert hardware store name]* and if you say, "Rob, the coffin guy, sent me," I'm sure they'll knock off *[insert promotional deal info]*.

BOB. Well, thanks, Rob, I guess.

ROB. Just being a good neighbor . . . Bob . . .

(PLAYER 3 rises and goes to her stand. She is DEB.)

DEB. It sounds like your little project is over, dear. Why don't you come inside and help me finish the housework?

BOB. Sorry, darling, I've got to head on down to *[insert hardware store name]* over on *[insert street name]*. The project is just getting started.

DEB. I'm sure your little dollhouse can wait.

BOB. It's a coffin . . . I mean a birdhouse!

ANNOUNCER. Whether you are building a coffin, a birdhouse or building an excuse, [insert hardware store name] has all of your hardware needs. Call [insert phone number] or come on down to [insert address] any time [insert store hours].

Scene Three: The Fall of the House of Usher

(The PLAYERS once again take their seats. POE stands.)

POE. It's in our nature to build things. To put up walls. But even as we seek to create our own shelter, we sometimes construct our own demise.

CAT. I don't think we heard the same commercial.

POE. I'm not talking about the commercial.

CAT. Oh.

POE. Our next tale is that of a home. Of family.

CAT. That sounds nice.

POE. A story of the cracks in the walls, seen and unseen . . .

CAT. Oh . . . maybe not so nice.

POE. Beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of affecting us in a deeply horrifying way. Yes, in fact, inanimate objects may produce terror. In one particular case, it was a house that brought upon such an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—and torture of the soul. It was the House of Usher.

CAT. Sounds wonderful. Probably lots of great mice. I'd love to see it some time.

(PLAYER 1 goes to the mic. He is DEVIN.)

POE. The story is *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

CAT. Oh . . . Well, let's hear it, Poe.

POE. Some stories are best told by those managed to survive. Let's listen.

(SFX: Wind. Horse clops.)

DEVIN. (Narrating:) During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in this past autumn, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as

the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? Shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered.

I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

(PLAYER 2 goes to his mic. He is RODERICK.)

Once inside, I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all. I wondered if Roderick, the master of the house, so full of life in my memories, would resemble the man I once knew. It was worse—

(SFX: A door creaks.)

RODERICK. Devin, old friend? Is that you? Have you come at last?

DEVIN. I have, Roderick. As fast as I could after receiving your letter.

RODERICK. Thank you. It's been too long, old chap. You look the same, unless my eyes have deceived me. Have you not aged?

DEVIN. You're kind. I have aged quite a bit. Or so I'm told by my honest friends.

RODERICK. You have friends. That is something. More than can be said for myself. Except for you. You may be my oldest friend. And what about me? How do I look? It's probably better not to answer.

DEVIN. (Narrating:) What could I say? That he had a cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve, a ghastly pallor of the skin . . .

(To RODERICK:)

You look . . . well.

RODERICK. You lie.

DEVIN. Maybe you look a little tired.

RODERICK. Ha—yes. A little tired. And you speak of honesty. I'll tell you this. Physically I'm sick. But my soul fares worse. Much worse. What I have is an intolerable agitation of the soul.

DEVIN. Then I'm glad I came.

RODERICK. Yes, as am I. For many reasons. Unmentionables. But I'll get to them.

(A jittery laugh.)

Yes, your face is a very welcome sight.

DEVIN. Next you shall visit me. It'll do you good.

RODERICK. Visit you? You mean leave?

(A burst of laughter.)

Leave the House of Usher?

(A long laugh, and then serious:)

Don't you know I am a slave to this place. I shall perish . . . I *must* perish in this deplorable folly. Then I shall be truly lost. My friend, I dread the events of the future.

DEVIN. Why is that? What do you think it will bring?

RODERICK. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident . . . I have no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. It has me unnerved. It's a pitiable condition, really—one that will only be over when I abandon life and reason together. It's the struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.

(PLAYER 3 goes to her mic. She is LADY MADELINE.)

(SFX: Another door creak. Footsteps.)

DEVIN. Who's there?

RODERICK. Don't recognize her, do you?

DEVIN. I'm afraid not.

RODERICK. Madeline!

(LADY MADELINE gasps.)

DEVIN. Your sister?

RODERICK. My sole companion.

MADELINE. Who is this?

DEVIN. Lady Madeline. I'm sorry to frighten you.

RODERICK. It's you who is frightened. You're as pale as us. Almost.

MADELINE. I don't know you.

RODERICK. You do.

DEVIN. You used to. I'm—

(LADY MADELINE gasps again, almost a scream.)

MADELINE. You don't know what you've done coming here. You must leave.

DEVIN. No, I—

MADELINE. Take me with you!

RODERICK. You're not going anywhere!

MADELINE. No I will die here! Just like you! But I won't be dead. Don't be fooled. I'm not dead.

DEVIN. Not at all.

MADELINE. You don't understand. I'm not dead. I'm alive. Don't you believe me?

DEVIN. I do.

MADELINE. (*Breaking down sobbing:*) I'm alive! I'm alive. I'm alive.

(*The sobbing abruptly stops.*)

DEVIN. Madeline, are you all right?

MADELINE. (*Extremely calm:*) What?

DEVIN. Are you all right?

MADELINE. Who are you? You shouldn't be here.

(*SFX: Quick footsteps and a door slam.*)

(*PLAYER 3 takes her seat.*)

RODERICK. Don't worry you won't be seeing her again.

DEVIN. That's what I'm worried about.

RODERICK. Her disease. Her disease will leave me the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.

DEVIN. What is it, that's wrong exactly?

RODERICK. The doctors are usually just as baffled as you or I and can only offer an unusual diagnosis. They say she has a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character.

DEVIN. Cataleptical?

RODERICK. Catatonic usually. Muscles rigid and unmoving. I didn't expect her to respond to you all. You must have triggered something in her. A last pathetic flicker of life before the flame is extinguished forever.

DEVIN. Poor Lady Madeline.

(Narrating:)

For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself. And during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his guitar.

(NOTE: If you choose to have PLAYER 2 perform the following on guitar, he should enter with the guitar at the top of the show.)

(A wild guitar jazz session. Controlled, yet on an emotional journey.)

RODERICK. And this one I call “The Haunted Palace:”

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once fair and stately palace—
Radiant palace—reared its head.
But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch’s high estate;
Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.
And travelers now within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows, see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more.

(SFX: The guitar fades over the following.)

CAT. Beautiful melody. How uplifting. It was catchy, you know. I think it will stay with me that one.

POE. Yes it will haunt me.

CAT. Ha! Was that a joke, Edgar?

POE. I . . . don’t know.

CAT. It *was* a joke, you old dog you.

POE. I am not without a sense of humor.

CAT. Could have fooled me.

POE. So be it.

CAT. Get it? Your sense of humor could have *fooled* me?

POE. I get it. And I shall laugh myself into the grave if you keep it up.

CAT. There ya go. Had to bring death into it, didn't you.

POE. Death is always present.

CAT. Hilarious.

POE. May we return to the tale, now, Cat?

CAT. Please.

(SFX: The guitar string breaking.)

DEVIN. You don't think this house is really haunted, do you, Roderick?

RODERICK. Not at all—

DEVIN. That's a relief—

RODERICK. I know we're haunted *by it*. This is not a tale of my mind—don't you see—it is the enduring plague of the Ushers through our entire history. Picking us from our tree and devouring us one by one. And now another is gone. My sister.

DEVIN. Lady Madeline?

RODERICK. She is no more.

DEVIN. What? When? Where is she?

RODERICK. We'll preserve her corpse tonight. There's a vault in the basement which shall protect her from the doctors and their obtrusive and eager inquiries. These medical men are sinister in their core, do you understand?

DEVIN. I—

RODERICK. Good.

DEVIN. (Narrating:) Who was I to question how he should handle his sister's death? It seemed harmless, at best, and by no means an unnatural precaution. So that night I aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest.

(SFX: The lighting of a torch.)

RODERICK. Down here. Watch your step.

(SFX: Footsteps on a stone stairway.)

In here. Help me with the door.

(SFX: An old iron door scraping against the floor.)

There. And lift. Mind your back.

DEVIN. Mind her body.

(They huff as they heave the coffin.)

(SFX: The coffin being set on the vault. And then creaking open.)

RODERICK. There she is.

DEVIN. Her cheeks still have color.

RODERICK. And a lingering smile. Like mine, do you think?

DEVIN. A striking similarity.

RODERICK. Twins are similar in mind as well.

DEVIN. You were twins?

RODERICK. Yes, and one half of my soul is gone. Soon, the other. Close the casket I can't stand it any longer.

(SFX: The coffin closing.)

RODERICK. Seal it tight.

(SFX: The coffin is screwed shut.)

DEVIN. *(Narrating:)* After some days of bitter grief had elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—At times when vagaries of madness took hold, I beheld him gazing vacantly for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified—no, that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic superstitions.

(SFX: Wind howls. An approaching storm. The house creaks.)

It was, especially, upon retiring to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after we sealed Lady Madeline in her tomb, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch—while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to—

(SFX: A slow knocking on a door.)

(SFX: A door opening.)

DEVIN. Roderick. You're awake. As am I.

(RODERICK mumbles something unintelligible.)

DEVIN. (Narrating:) There was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—

(To RODERICK:)

Are you all right?

RODERICK. Have you have not seen it?

(SFX: Thunder rolling.)

DEVIN. Seen what?

RODERICK. You have not then seen it? But, stay! you shall.

(SFX: A window opening.)

(SFX: A furious gust of wind blowing in, continuing over the following:)

DEVIN. (Narrating:) The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had collected its force in our vicinity; and the exceeding density of the clouds did not prevent our perceiving, under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as on all terrestrial objects immediately around us . . . a glowing in an unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.

RODERICK. (Truly overtaken by his madness:) ISN'T IT BEAUTIFUL?? LOOK AT IT! LOOK AT THE LIGHT! IT'S NOT THE MOON —NOR THE STARS, IT'S, THE HOUSE IT'S ALIVE!

DEVIN. Get away from the window! GET AWAY! Don't look at it!

(SFX: The window slams closed.)

(SFX: RODERICK slamming down into a seat.)

RODERICK. You saw it. Say you saw it. Say it!

DEVIN. Roderick. Please. These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank fog of the lake. Stay in your seat.

(SFX: Shutters closing.)

DEVIN. Don't open the window. The air is chilling and dangerous to your sickly condition. Here let us read something. One of your favorites. *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canning. . . . That was a joke, Roderick, or my attempt at one. Okay, I will read, and you shall listen; —and so we will pass away this terrible night together.

(SFX: A book slides off the shelf, and the pages flip.)

(RODERICK can still be heard breathing heavily.)

(SFX: As the wind of the storm can still be heard whipping outside, over the following.)

DEVIN. Here. We'll start here. Our hero Ethelred, unable to make peaceful admission into the dwelling of the hermit, tries to enter by force:

"And Ethelred, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling there-with sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest."

(SFX: A dull cracking and ripping sound.)

(DEVIN pauses after hearing the sound.)

DEVIN. *(To RODERICK:)* Did you hear that?

RODERICK. I hear everything.

DEVIN. It must have been the storm. A coincidence I'm sure.

RODERICK. Yes. Yes. Continue.

DEVIN. "But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the malicious hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend enwritten—

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin;
Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.

And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it—"

(SFX: A low but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound.)

(SFX: *The winds and rumbles of the storm also increase.*)

DEVIN. What . . . what was that . . . ? Roderick . . .

(DEVIN *laughs to himself—the laugh of a madman—which turns into incoherent mumbling.*)

DEVIN. (*Can't help himself but continue:*) "And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound."

(*As the words are spoken:*)

(SFX: *The shield falling upon the floor: a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation.*)

DEVIN. Roderick, Roderick are you hearing this?

(RODERICK's *mumblings have continued until they form some words:*)

RODERICK. Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! —I dared not— I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! And now—to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangour of the shield!—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? MADMAN! MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS WITHOUT THE DOOR!

(PLAYER 3, *as LADY MADELINE, goes to her mic.*)

(SFX: *A door flinging and crashing against the wall.*)

(*A low moaning scream from LADY MADELINE who has now entered the room.*)

DEVIN. Lady Madeline! It . . . can't be . . .

RODERICK. Yet it is.

DEVIN. (*Narrating:*) How was it, her white robes were covered in blood and, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. My eyes were surely deceiving me until she moved toward us . . .

(*SFX: Lady Madeline's trembling footsteps into the room.*)

For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro, hovering above her brother and then emitted an awful sound from beyond . . .

(*LADY MADELINE emits a low moaning cry.*)

DEVIN. . . . Before falling on him in her final death agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

(*SFX: Roderick's body hitting the floor.*)

No! Nooooo! Nooooooooo!!!!

(*Narrating:*)

Then she turned to look at me and I managed, somehow miraculously, to unstuck my feet from the floor and rush, aghast, out of the room.

(*SFX: Devin's footsteps running from the room, and slamming the door behind him.*)

(*SFX: The terrible storm still brewing over: Roderick, running out of the house, slamming doors.*)

(*PLAYER 2 and PLAYER 3 take their seats.*)

(*SFX: Devin's horse neighs. And then galloping.*)

DEVIN. (*Narrating:*) I fled the mansion and crossed the old causeway when suddenly there shot along the path a wild light. I turned around to see its source for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me.

(*SFX: A beam of light.*)

The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon which now shone vividly through a fissure extending from the roof of the building, in a zig-zag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—

(*SFX. A whirling wind and the crack of a house coming apart over the following. Then screams being drowned out by rushing water.*)

DEVIN. —there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank lake at my feet closed sullenly and silently—

(SFX: And then absolute silence.)

—over the fragments of the “HOUSE OF USHER.”

(PLAYER 1 takes his seat.)

CAT. You sure are a barrel of laughs, Poe.

POE. Thank you.

CAT. I was . . . I think you missed . . .

POE. Yes?

CAT. Oh, never mind.

Scene Four: The Raven

(A woman wanders onstage. She wears a black dress. She heads to one of the mics stage right. This is PLAYER 4. She is MISS TERIOUS. POE doesn't seem to notice her, but the CAT does.)

CAT. Poe.

POE. What is it now?

CAT. There's a lady.

POE. Is this the beginning of another joke?

CAT. No, look over there. Some lady just wandered on.

(POE looks over at MISS TERIOUS.)

POE. You're wrong.

CAT. I'm pretty sure that is a lady over there.

POE. That is not just “some lady,” that is Miss Terious.

CAT. Her name is Mysterious?

POE. Miss. Terious. Of the Terious family out of Baltimore.

CAT. Friend of yours.

MISS TERIOUS. Edgar.

POE. Delores.

CAT. Her name is Miss Delores Terious?

POE. Ignore the cat.

MISS TERIOUS. I always do.

CAT. Hey!

POE. What shall it be tonight?

MISS TERIOUS. You know, Poe.

POE. No.

MISS TERIOUS. I must.

POE. I forbid it.

CAT. Um . . . What is going on?

POE. Nothing. Miss Terious is going to perform. "The Bells" for us.

MISS TERIOUS. No.

POE. Fine. Miss Terious will perform "Annabel Lee."

CAT. These are more of your sad stories.

POE. Poems.

CAT. Oh, good, so creep us out in rhyme. Wonderful.

MISS TERIOUS. I will be performing—

POE. Don't say it.

MISS TERIOUS. "The Raven."

POE. No.

CAT. Mmmm. Birds. Delicious.

POE. There will be no "Raven" tonight.

CAT. Why not?

MISS TERIOUS. Tell her, Edgar.

CAT. Yeah, Edgar, tell me.

POE. I . . .

MISS TERIOUS. Go on.

POE. Delores was an actress. She played up and down the East Coast, but I met her in Baltimore. Her talent was prodigious, but her luck, not so. I merely suggested—

MISS TERIOUS. You practically insisted.

POE. I mildly implied that she would find some success performing my poem, "The Raven." I knew the manager at a small theater. I wanted to help.

MISS TERIOUS. You did help.

POE. She was a hit.

MISS TERIOUS. We were a hit.

POE. Until the one-hundredth performance.

CAT. What?

MISS TERIOUS. Oh, nothing . . . I simply went mad and walked myself into the harbor.

CAT. Oh . . . All right . . .

POE. Reciting the poem as she waded into the waves.

CAT. And now you want to perform it again.

MISS TERIOUS. I do.

POE. I don't.

CAT. And I say let her.

POE. I've carried the guilt ever since. My words drove you insane.

MISS TERIOUS. Come off it, Edgar. Your words are mighty, but madness was my own.

CAT. Yeah, Edgar, come off it.

POE. Quiet, you.

MISS TERIOUS. Please, Edgar.

(A brief silence.)

POE. As you wish . . . But if you shall go mad again.

MISS TERIOUS. It shan't matter much now.

POE. Proceed.

(MISS TERIOUS takes a breath and gathers herself. POE and the CAT don't take their eyes off of her.)

MISS TERIOUS.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—

(SFX: Light tapping.)

Only this, and nothing more."

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow: —vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
"Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—
This it is, and nothing more."

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I opened wide the
door;—

(SFX: A door opening.)

Darkness there, and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering,
fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream
before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word,
"Lenore!"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word,
"Lenore!"

Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping, somewhat louder than before.

"Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—
 'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed
he;

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I said, "art sure
no craven,

Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!"

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as “Nevermore.”

Till I scarcely more than muttered, "Other friends have flown
before—

On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before."

Then the bird said, "Nevermore."

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
 "Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store,
 Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
 Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
 Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
 Of 'Never—nevermore.'"

But the Raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust
and door;

Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird of
yore

Meant in croaking “Nevermore.”

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamplight gloated o’er,
But whose velvet violet lining with the lamplight gloating o’er
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an
unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
“Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he
hath sent thee

Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here
ashore,

Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above, us—by that God we both
adore—

Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name
Lenore.”

Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked,
upstarting—

“Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!

Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off
my door!"

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on
the floor;

And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

(MISS TERIOUS finishes and takes a slight bow. POE wipes away a tear.)

POE. Miss Terious, would you be so kind as to join us for the rest of the program?

MISS TERIOUS. It would be my pleasure, Poe.

CAT. Is that a tear? Are you crying, Poe?

POE. It's an affliction of the eye. Leave me alone!

CAT. Are you sure because—

POE. I believe it's time for a commercial. Yes . . . commercial.

(MISS TERIOUS crosses to POE and hands him a handkerchief. She crosses back and takes her seat stage right.)

Commercial Break Two

(PLAYER 3 rises stage left. She goes to her mic. She is WIFE.)

WIFE. This dinner looks delicious, darling.

(PLAYER 2 rises and goes to his mic. He is HUSBAND.)

HUSBAND. Thank you, dear.

WIFE. I am so lucky to have a husband who will cook an entire meal from scratch for my birthday.

(PLAYER 1 rises and goes to his mic. He is a piece of STEAK. Note: He can be whatever type of food suits the commercial.)

HUSBAND. Yes, well, I just wanted to show you how much I care.

STEAK. *(Whispering:)* She knows.

HUSBAND. No she doesn't.

WIFE. What's that, dear?

HUSBAND. Nothing.

(Note: The foods and descriptions to follow can all be changed depending on the restaurant that is chosen.)

WIFE. This salad looks so fresh.

HUSBAND. Nothing but the best for my love.

STEAK. *(Whispering:)* She knows.

HUSBAND. Quiet.

WIFE. Excuse me?

HUSBAND. Nothing, dear, the steak is definitely not talking to me.

(SFX: Sounds of silverware on a plate.)

WIFE. This steak is so juicy and delicious. Cooked to perfection.

HUSBAND. I just . . . followed the recipe.

STEAK. *(Whispering:)* She knows.

HUSBAND. She doesn't know anything!

WIFE. Who doesn't know anything, darling?

HUSBAND. Never mind, dear. Let's just eat.

(SFX: Sounds of silverware on a plate.)

WIFE. Earlier it smelled like something was burning, but this sauce is cooked to perfection.

HUSBAND. Burning . . . uh, no, nothing like that. Must have been from outside.

STEAK. *(Whispering:)* She definitely knows.

HUSBAND. Enough! Enough! I can't stand it any longer.

WIFE. Can't stand what, darling?

HUSBAND. The whispering of the steak.

WIFE. Is that the name of the sauce? I quite like it.

HUSBAND. You know, don't you?

WIFE. Know what?

HUSBAND. That I ordered in. I burned the meal I was planning to make so I ordered from *[insert restaurant name]* down on *[insert street name]* and tried to pass it off as my own.

WIFE. Oh, I know dear.

STEAK. (*Whispering:*) I told you.

HUSBAND. Quiet, Steak.

WIFE. No one makes steak as good as *[insert restaurant name]*. I knew this couldn't be your doing, darling.

HUSBAND. Are you mad?

WIFE. Mad? Hardly. *[insert restaurant name]* is my absolute favorite. And with their great prices, I know my darling got a great deal. What did you order for dessert? (*Doesn't have to be dessert. Can be any other item.*)

HUSBAND. Oh, no, I forgot dessert.

WIFE. Don't fret, my darling. With their speedy service, *[insert restaurant name]* will have a piece of warm apple pie (or any other dessert or item) here in no time. Let's call them.

(*SFX: Phone being taken off of receiver.*)

HUSBAND. Okay.

STEAK. (*Whispering:*) Dial *[insert restaurant's phone number]*.

(*SFX: Phone dialing.*)

(*PLAYER 4 rises and goes to the mic. She is RECEPTIONIST.*)

RECEPTIONIST. Thank you for calling *[insert restaurant name]* this is *[insert name]* speaking. How can I help you?

HUSBAND. Hi, I'd like to place an order for delivery . . .

ANNOUNCER. Don't pass off that special birthday dinner as your own. She'll know. Order in from *[insert restaurant name]* on *[insert street name]* and mention Edgar Allan Poe to receive *[insert promotional information—optional]*. Just call *[insert phone number]*. *[insert any restaurant tag line, etc.]*

(*PLAYER 1, 2, 3, and 4 take their seats.*)

Scene Five: The Tell-Tale Heart

POE. Welcome back, dear listeners. Though you may be contemplating the sustenance needed to maintain your mortal frames, I implore you to first consider the nourishment of your souls. And I know of no better meal for your ineffable quintessence than a hearty tale.

CAT. Question.

POE. Quiet.

CAT. Can we order in?

POE. No.

CAT. But I'm so hungry. Why don't you ever feed me?

POE. Must have slipped my mind.

CAT. A slippery mind at that.

POE. Mind your slip of the tongue.

CAT. My tongue has a mind of its own. Feed me, Edgar.

POE. First we feed on this.

CAT. You're mad.

POE. We're all mad. Can be mad, —go mad, that is—under the right circumstances.

(PLAYER 3 goes to her mic. She is TAYLOR.)

TAYLOR. True! But I am not.

CAT. Who are you?

POE. You are the accused.

TAYLOR. Accused. Always accused. I've been known the nervous type. But not mad. Actually the disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them.

CAT. What disease? Is it contagious?

POE. Let our guest finish.

CAT. Guest??

TAYLOR. Yes, the disease gave me, above all, the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?

POE. You have a story.

TAYLOR. I have one that will seize you.

POE. I've been insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.

CAT. Such people should not be allowed to own pets.

POE. But how? How does one go insane?

TAYLOR. I'm not insane. You could say I'm nervous. Dreadfully nervous. But listen! Observe how calmly I can tell you the whole story. It started with an idea.

POE. We're listening.

CAT. I'm napping.

POE. The insane ones are napping. The sane are listening.

TAYLOR. It's impossible to say how the idea first entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. I loved the old man, I did. I was very kind to him. You have to believe me.

POE. Go on.

TAYLOR. It's very important.

POE. We believe you.

TAYLOR. In fact, I was never kinder to him than during the whole week before I killed him.

CAT. I bet you killed him for money.

TAYLOR. No!

POE. I thought you were napping.

CAT. And sleep through this?

POE. Then shush.

TAYLOR. It wasn't gold or any object.

CAT. Passion then.

TAYLOR. No! He had never wronged me. Not even an insult. It was . . . his vulture eye.

(PLAYER 2 goes to his mic. He is OLD MAN.)

(SFX: The scream of a bird of prey.)

CAT. Yummy—another bird.

TAYLOR. One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a cloudy film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold. I couldn't stand it. It haunted me in my dreams. And so, finally, I made up my mind to rid myself of the eye, and the old man, forever. (Pause.) Every night, about midnight, I turned the latch—

(SFX: A latch moves on a door.)

—Of his door and opened it—

(SFX: Creaking of a door.)

—ever so gently. I put in a dark lantern, and moved it ever so slowly so as not to disturb the old man's sleep. I undid the lantern so that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. But it was closed, and I couldn't do the work. This I did for seven long nights. Upon the eighth night, I was more than usually cautious in opening the door.

(SFX: A long, slow creak of a door.)

TAYLOR. A watch's minute hand moves more slowly than did mine.

(SFX: A quiet ticking of a watch [continues over the following].)

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out—

OLD MAN. Who's there?

TAYLOR. I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

(The OLD MAN groans.)

His groan, although slight, I knew was a groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no! —it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own chest, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I'm not mad— I just say I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been trying to comfort himself but it was all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim.

(SFX: Ominous wind.)

And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to feel the presence of my head within the room. When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye. It was open!

(SFX: The vulture's cry.)

—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones.

(SFX: Bones rattling.)

TAYLOR. And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses? —now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.

(SFX: A slow, dull beating heart.)

I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

(SFX: The beating heart goes faster [continues over the following].)

And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst.

(SFX: The beating heart is louder still.)

A new anxiety seized me! The loud drum of his heartbeat would be heard by a neighbor! The old man's hour had come! I threw open the lantern and leaped in the room.

(The OLD MAN's desperate cry.)

TAYLOR. His shriek was met by me as I dragged him to the floor—

(SFX: The thump of a body hitting the floor.)

And pulled his own heavy mattress over him. The heartbeat continued on with a muffled sound . . .

(SFX: The heartbeat straining.)

Until finally it ceased.

(SFX: The heartbeat comes to an abrupt stop.)

I removed the mattress and examined the corpse. The old man was dead! Stone, stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more. *(Pause.)* If you still think of me mad—

(PLAYER 2 takes his seat.)

CAT. No not at all. Well, you've been a lovely guest—

POE. Then what did you do with the corpse?

TAYLOR. I took the wisest precautions.

POE. I'm sure.

TAYLOR. I had to conceal the body.

POE. Logical.

TAYLOR. So I dismembered it.

CAT. Nothing mad here at all.

POE. Let us hear the rest.

CAT. Please don't.

TAYLOR. Thank you. I started by cutting off the head.

(SFX: Awful sawing of flesh and bone.)

And then the arms and legs. Next I took up three planks from the floor.

(SFX: Wood boards being pried off.)

And deposited all of him.

(SFX: The thud of body pieces being dropped.)

Then I replaced the boards—

(SFX: Wood boards being nailed in.)

—so cleverly that no human eye—not even his—could have detected anything wrong.

(SFX: Four chimes of a clock.)

TAYLOR. It was four o'clock in the morning—still dark.

(SFX: Knocking on a door.)

Knocking? At this hour? I went down to open it with a light heart, for what did I have to fear?

(SFX: A door opening.)

(PLAYERS 1 and 4 rise and go to their mics. They are OFFICER 1 and OFFICER 2, respectively.)

OFFICER 1. Good morning.

TAYLOR. Good morning, Officers.

OFFICER 2. Sorry to disturb you at such an hour. A neighbor of yours heard a shriek during the night.

TAYLOR. Oh really? I didn't hear a thing.

OFFICER 1. No? She said it sounded like it came from your apartment.

TAYLOR. A shriek, you said?

OFFICER 2. That's right. There's an older gentleman living here?

TAYLOR. Yes. Well, not at the moment, but yes. He's, he's absent. In the country. At the moment.

OFFICER 1. Mind if we take a look around just the same? Orders, you see.

TAYLOR. Sure, please. Come in.

(SFX: A door closing. Footsteps on stairs. A door opening.)

I let them search all over the building, in every room. I showed them the old man's room. I showed him his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and they were happy to have a rest. I placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

(To the OFFICERS:)

Like I said, I love the old man dearly. Did I say that? I'm very kind with him, but it's good he's gone. To the country, that is. Fresh air is good for the soul, wouldn't you agree?

OFFICER 1. Not for me, it's not. Allergies.

TAYLOR. Oh, haha. Sorry to hear that. Well—

(SFX: The sound of the beating heart, soft and slow, but growing [continues over the following].)

(TAYLOR gasps.)

OFFICER 1. Are you all right?

TAYLOR. You heard that?

OFFICER 1. Heard you gasp, yes.

TAYLOR. Yes, I gasped. That's right. That's all. Sometimes I find myself without breath. A mild condition.

OFFICER 2. So there wasn't anyone else?

TAYLOR. *(Distracted by the noise:)* Huh?

OFFICER 2. Any other neighbors who might have made a noise like a scream?

TAYLOR. Now that I'm thinking of it I might have made a shriek in my dream.

OFFICER 1. In your dream?

(SFX: The heartbeat is louder [continues over the following].)

TAYLOR. *(Speaking louder to be heard over the sound of the heartbeat:)* In my dream?

OFFICER 2. You scream in your dreams?

TAYLOR. Sometimes.

OFFICER 1. Wouldn't it be a nightmare if you were screaming?

TAYLOR. Yes, I suppose. Like a night terror.

OFFICER 2. So you had a nightmare and screamed out and that's what the neighbor heard?

TAYLOR. I don't know. I don't know what the neighbor heard. Do you mind if I stand? I've been sitting all night. Or laying rather. In my bed. Where I sleep.

(SFX: The heartbeat is now much faster.)

TAYLOR. *(To herself, with increased torment:)* Oh God! How can they not hear? They must hear it? Shut up! Should I ask them if they hear it? They must! No! Don't ask! What if they don't? No! They heard. The suspect. They know!

(SFX: The heartbeat continues to speed up [continues over the following].)

(TAYLOR is breathing rapidly.)

OFFICER 1. So how often do you have these nightmares?

OFFICER 2. When did you say the old man is coming back?

OFFICER 1. Do you always scream in your sleep?

TAYLOR. I'm going to scream now that's what I'm going to do!

OFFICER 2. You're going to scream? Why are you going to scream?

TAYLOR. I didn't mean to say that. Sorry! It's just so loud!

OFFICER 1. What's so loud?

(SFX: The heartbeat is at its loudest.)

TAYLOR. You mock me! You know! You and your hypocritical smiles. There—it's louder still!

OFFICER 2. Maybe you should sit down.

TAYLOR. Villains!! Torment me no more! I admit the deed!

OFFICER 1. What deed?

TAYLOR. Here here!

(SFX: Wooden boards being torn up.)

Here it is! See for yourselves! The beating of the hideous heart!

(SFX: The scream of the bird of prey.)

(PLAYERS 1, 3, and 4 return to their seats.)

CAT. I love happy endings, don't you?

POE. I like endings, period.

CAT. What happened to your guest?

POE. Our guest is no more. Everyone meets their end sooner or later.

Scene Six: Ending

CAT. What about your ending?

POE. What do you mean?

CAT. Nothing . . . Do you have anything to eat? I'm very hungry.

POE. I . . . No, I don't have anything for you.

CAT. You never do.

POE. What is that supposed to mean?

CAT. Nothing.

POE. What are you getting at?

CAT. I'm simply trying to get at a meal, Poe. That's all I've ever wanted from you. I gave up on affection a long time ago.

POE. I truly do not know what you are talking about.

CAT. How did you die?

POE. I don't remember and that's the honest truth.

CAT. What do you remember?

POE. I remember a room in Baltimore. I remember a story that haunted me. That I couldn't complete.

CAT. What else?

POE. There's nothing else. I was found in a ditch and a few days later I died. How I got there, I don't know.

CAT. Were you alone in this room?

POE. Yes.

CAT. Are you quite sure?

POE. Of course. It was just I . . . No one else was there. I sat and I wrote and I drank and . . . (*A memory returns.*) I took in a stray . . . for some measure of company.

CAT. Yes, you did.

POE. You.

CAT. Yes.

POE. And you know how I came to parish?

CAT. I do.

POE. Foul play or mine own doing?

CAT. A little of both. You see, I was so hungry. At first you were quite generous and dare I say, loving. I was fattening up, for sure. But the more you worked on the story, the less attention you paid to me. You kept forgetting to feed me. First it was a meal here and there and then a whole day. Then more than a day. I was getting desperate. You didn't leave. You wrote and drank. At the very least I needed you to open that door. On the shelf above your desk there was a bottle. Some sort of medicine. You would only take a spoonful at a time.

POE. Laudanum.

CAT. Yes, that's it. You had . . . You had passed out. I was nearly starved. But I had enough strength left to push your glass into position on the desk. There was a bit of whiskey left in it. I tipped it over and much of it poured into your glass on the desk below, some of it spilled onto your papers.

POE. You poisoned me.

CAT. You awoke some time later and drank from your glass without looking. And I was right, you did become sick and you did have to leave. You went to the door, struggling to get your coat on. I was ready to bolt out. You gave up on the coat and tossed it aside. It landed on me. By the time I worked myself out from under it, you were out the door. I can still feel the wind on my whiskers as it slammed shut on my face.

POE. You killed me.

CAT. You killed you. I'm just a cat trying to get a meal. A meal that never came. How do you like that ending?

POE. It fits.

CAT. You sure you don't have anything to eat?

POE. I'm sorry, I don't.

CAT. Okay, Poe.

POE. But maybe we can scrounge something up.

CAT. You are full of surprises, Edgar . . . And hey . . . Sorry for killing you and whatnot.

POE. We must all meet our end, one way or another, but if we're lucky we leave behind stories—told by friends and family, shared through time. I am luckier still, for my tales have been carried through generations, now shared with you, dear listeners. Once a week, through sound and performance, I will share with you my soul. Good night all. . . . Sleep well.

CAT. That was really creepy, the way you said, "Sleep well." Sort of like you expected the opposite.

POE. It was not creepy.

CAT. It definitely was . . .

(POE and CAT's conversation continues in the background as the ANNOUNCER comes on.)

ANNOUNCER. Tune in next week for more chilling tales from the master of the morbid, Edgar Allan Poe.

CAT. And his dead cat!

(Lights fade.)

End of Play

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