

**"MURDER BY POE"  
AUDITION SCENES**

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WOMAN, USHER, DUPIN

# MURDER BY POE

#1

*In the darkness, we hear voices whispering famous names and lines from the work of Edgar Allan Poe.*

~~VOICES. "Lenore! — Nevermore! — Ligeia! — Nevermore! — Morella! — Berenice! — Nevermore! — Eulalie! — Ulalame! — Madeline! — Nevermore! — Annabel Lee!" (... Etc. The voices abruptly stop. A fragile, haunted Woman suddenly appears upstage center in a light. She speaks the moment the light hits her.)~~

WOMAN. I had been walking through a dark wood and became lost. Long had I traveled through many a fallen tree and ink-black path, following a map given me by a fond, devoted heart. But after many searching hours, I became confused; the map was faulty, the directions untrustworthy. As the darkness grew, at last I came upon a shape, growing larger and more forbidding with each and every weary step I took. A shelter it was! A home! A house! *(Behind her, in what we now see is a doorway, appears a man, Usher, tall and gaunt with wild white hair and a black suit.)*

USHER. *(In agony.)* Please! Not so loud!

WOMAN. *(To us.)* I told him: "I am lost."

USHER. So are we all.

WOMAN. *(To us.)* That I needed shelter.

USHER. This is my home.

WOMAN. *(To him.)* May I spend the night?

USHER. The rooms are filled, filled with beings, howling and unquenchable!

WOMAN. No room at all?

USHER. Quiet! Please! My sensibilities are gossamer. There are many travelers upon the road this night. Each in need of warmth, sustenance, a bed...! *(A howl.) Ohhhhhh! It is too horrible for me!*

WOMAN. *(To us.)* His wail was high-pitched, but hushed, as if he

were calling to the heavens but feared he would be heard in Hell!

USHER. Not so loud!

WOMAN. Sir?

USHER. Your thoughts! They pierce my translucency!

WOMAN. *(To us.)* Was it so? Could he hear my thoughts?

USHER. Yes.

WOMAN. *(To him.)* Good sir, this house, surely there must be one room? It seems huge.

USHER. *(As if in pain.)* Seems does not make it so. This house is a puzzle box. A corridor may seem a thousand miles long, and then turn up short to a blackened mirror, its length but a reflection of the darkness. Sometimes the smallest closet seems to fill the breadth of the universe. We are full to bursting now. How we contain one more without a fall is beyond me, but the decision is not mine.

WOMAN. And then, as if cued by a string snapping or the chime of a bell, there they were. *(The doors of the cabinets spring open and the others enter: a dapper, mustached man [M. Dupin]; a haunted man [Heart]; a sweaty man [Cat]; and a pale girl [Marie] whose look and clothes much resemble Woman's. All in nineteenth-century black.)*

WOMAN. They were haunted creatures, damp, hollow-eyed and sallow as if they had been just recently disinterred from the — !

M. DUPIN. *(Bows.)* Madame.

WOMAN. Sir?

M. DUPIN. I shall take this opportunity to welcome you, if no one else will.

WOMAN. Thank you. This place is new to me ... and strange.

M. DUPIN. But perhaps its strangeness has a familiarity?

WOMAN. *(Senses he's right.)* ... Yes.

M. DUPIN. I knew that.

~~HEART. Ugh!~~

~~CAT. Insufferable frog!~~

~~HEART. He's showing off again!~~

~~MARIE. Be quiet, you two!~~

~~WOMAN. May I ask, please, how did you all come to be here on this miserable night?~~

~~CAT. Careful! She will interrogate us!~~

~~HEART. Mind your own business, woman!~~

~~WOMAN. If you do not wish to tell me, I shall not pry.~~

~~HEART. "Shall not pry!"~~

~~CAT. As if you had another reason for being here!~~

~~M. DUPIN. Madame, allow me to apologize for my fellow travel-~~

CAT 1  
WIFE

#2

the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond ... of animals. My parents indulged me with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time and was never so happy as when feeding and caressing them. When I was an adult, I married ... (*A smiling, docile Wife enters and stands next to Cat.*) ... and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. We had birds, goldfish, a fine dog, rabbits, a monkey, and ... a cat. (*Pluto enters. It is one of the female actors in a trim, sleek black velvet suit with a white stiff collar. Pluto sidles up next to cat.*) A remarkably large and beautiful animal. All black with a white band around its neck.

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WIFE. All black cats are, of course, witches.

CAT. My wife — dear simple child — was a superstitious sort. Pluto, for that was the cat's name, was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed the animal. It attended me everywhere and followed me wherever I went, including some of my more daunting haunts, for my general disposition and good nature had begun to fall prey to that fiend Intemperance. I did imbibe, I blush to confess. I became moody. Irritable. I used intemperate language to my wife!

WIFE. (*Hands to ears.*) Oh! Language!

CAT. And at length I even offered ... personal violence to my pets. (*Gazes at Pluto.*) Not to Pluto, though. I could maltreat a dog, a monkey, a rabbit ... but not Pluto. But then, one night, as I returned to our home from an evening's sojourn at various taverns, I came into the room ... and Pluto was turned away from me. The beast seemed to be ignoring my presence. I reached out ... (*Pluto bites his hand.*) Ahhh! The fury of a demon instantly possessed me! I knew myself no longer! My original soul seemed, at once, to take flight from me, and I took a knife and ... (*He slashes at Pluto's eye. Pluto spins around and when she is facing front again, her right eye is closed tight.*) ... cut the beast's eye. Slashed it. Removed the eye from the socket. (*Pluto shrinks away and cowers.*) Come the morning I was full of regret. At least I seemed human again. The cat healed. At least the beast appeared to suffer pain no longer. (*Cat moves to Pluto. She darts away.*) The purring demon avoided me now, of course. (*Pluto hurriedly exits.*) This grieved that part of my old heart that remained, but ... this feeling soon gave way to irritation. Now I'd like to tell you that what occurred next came about on some other night, some other night ringed in gin or rum, when I did lose my bearing once again. But no. The truth is colder. There

was no motive or sudden factor. Just instinct. And so one morning ... cold sober in cool blood ... I took the cat, slipped a noose around its neck and hanged it from the limb of a tree. (*A dummy of Pluto comes crashing from above, hanging by a noose. It bounces, dangles, swings, twists.*) For a fleeting moment my wife's superstitions flicked across my brain, but I dismissed them. I am no superstitious fool! (*Beat.*) Of course, that night our house caught fire, losing our every possession and we were forced to flee for our lives, but ... The most fascinating thing was that when we perused the ashes, there above where our headboard had been, impressed into the brick wall as if a bas-relief, was the image of a cat, with a noose around its neck.

WIFE. It's a sign. (*Pluto's body is whisked back up to the flies.*)

CAT. Pluto was gone. The tree limb was unadorned. I told my wife: "A neighbor must have seen the flames, saw the cat, and flung the dead carcass through the window to alert us."

WIFE. That's a strange way to alert a house that it's on fire.

CAT. Nonsense! It was the only means at hand! And as for the image ... the impression ... why, when the walls fell in, the cat's body was crushed, impressed into the brick. That's all.

WIFE. Husband?

CAT. Hm.

WIFE. Why was Pluto dangling from the tree?

CAT. (*He hates this dumb woman.*) I had begun to despise my wife.

~~We moved, of course. To a smaller, less pleasant home. My intemperance had driven us further into penury. No more dog, no more monkey, or fish — they'd boiled in the fire. And then one night, sitting in another den of infamy, I looked up to see ... (*Pluto enters. But there's no white collar. She wears a black eye patch now.*) ... a cat. Black, like Pluto. An eye missing. But no white collar. But in every other way the former's direct copy. I reached for the cat ... (*Cat reaches for Pluto. She comes to him, embraces him, caresses him, like a woman. Cat is aroused and gasping for air.*) ... and upon my touching its fur, it came to me, purred, rubbed itself against me, delighted in me. We went home that very moment where we ... continued our caresses. Of course my wife —~~

WIFE. (*Hugs Pluto.*) It is our own dear Pluto! You shall sleep in our bed!

CAT. She spoils everything. (*Wife sits and Pluto is made to sit on her lap. Pluto gazes at Cat.*) The cat ... who was never before such a favorite ... the cat now obsessed my wife. And by doing so, I

HEART &  
OLD  
MAN

#3

~~HEART. He been telling you his pitiful tale? (*Mocks him.*) "I had walled up the monster within the tomb!" Ooooo!~~

~~CAT. (*Stamps his foot.*) Shut up!~~

~~HEART. Dangling cats and witchcraft. A story with its pants down. Not deserving a room, if I may say so.~~

~~CAT. Here now — !~~

~~WOMAN. But he was mad! He had lost his reason! Any murder in such a fashion ... surely it is madness!~~

~~HEART. Must it be? Madness, my dear, is not a disease. It is a refinement of the senses.~~

~~M. DUPIN. And you should know.~~

HEART. ~~True~~. Nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous, I had been and am! But why will you say that I am mad?! The disease has sharpened my senses, not destroyed, not dulled them! Above all is my sense of hearing! It is impossible to tell when the idea first entered my brain. I loved the old man. (*An Old Man enters with a chair and a newspaper. We see but one side of his face.*)

OLD MAN. My boy.

HEART. His voice, his demeanor, so kind, so warm. It was not for his gold, no, nor for any wrong he had done me. It was his eye. (*Old Man turns. We see he has a pale white eye.*)

OLD MAN. Let me look at you.

HEART. Yes, that pale, cold eye, blue and gray, dead yet seeing. Like a vulture's. When it fell upon me, my blood ran cold! And so by degrees, I made up my mind to take the old man's life ... and rid myself forever of that eye. (*The Old Man sits, covers his chest with the newspaper, then closes his good eye, and snores.*) I was never kinder to the old man than in the week before I killed him. And every night at midnight I looked in on him, with my lantern casting just a slash of light ... to see if the eye was open. But it was not. And for that I could not do the deed, for it was not the old man who vexed me. But that eye. On the seventh night, I opened the door. The wind blew, blowing out the flame.

OLD MAN. (*Sits up straight.*) Who's there?!

HEART. I stood there, motionless for an hour, in the dark. Not a breath.

OLD MAN. Is it the wind in the chimney? A mouse across the floor?

HEART. His eye was open. No wind, no mouse, but Death, old man. And as I crept toward the bed, I heard the sound ... (*Heart-beat sounds. They get louder as the next speech progresses.*) ... a low, dull sound, quick such as a watch swathed in cotton. It was the old

man's heart. It increased my fury, like the beating of a drum moves the soldier to courage. The beat was louder now, faster. How extreme was the old man's terror! And yet at that dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of the house, so strange a noise as his heart excited me to uncontrollable terror! *(Beats overwhelmingly loud now. Heart pulls the Old Man off his chair and throws him to the floor. He sits on top of him, strangling the old man.)*

OLD MAN. AH! *(Heartbeats still crashingly loud.)*

HEART. Stop! Stop! I can still hear you ... beating beating beating...! *(Beats start to subside. Like a climax reached and now receding. His body shudders.)* ... There, there, there ... It was stopped. No beat. No pulsation. His eye would trouble me no more. *(Heart stands and looks at Woman. He is panting, sweating.)* I had to dispose of the body, of course. And in this I was careful and precautious. *(A cabinet opens, and an arm hands Heart a saw.)* I had to dismember the corpse. *(Heart and Dupin dispose of the body in the "window seat.")* I put the old man in a tub and began my work ... first the arms ... then the legs ... then the torso ... The blade cut through the old man's sinew and muscle, bit through the bone, splintering it, cracking it, the tearing of the leathery flesh, so resistant, until the sudden capitulation of the soft and steaming viscera. Last, of course, was the head. I then took up three planks from the floor of the chamber ... and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cunningly, so cleverly that no human eye, not even his! Could have detected any wrong. There was nothing to wash out, no stain, no blood. The tub had done for that. When it was done it was four o'clock. Still dark as midnight. ~~At which point~~

~~... *(The planks have been replaced, and the same two policemen enter.)*~~

~~POLICEMAN 2. Knock.~~

~~HEART. A knock!~~

~~POLICEMAN 2. Knock again!~~

~~HEART. Officers!~~

~~POLICEMAN 1. A neighbor heard a shriek, sir. May we come in?~~

~~HEART. What had I to fear? Come in, officers! Feel free to look about, but I fear you'll find nothing.~~

~~POLICEMAN 1. No, sir?~~

~~HEART. The shriek, I fear, was mine. A nightmare.~~

~~POLICEMAN 1. You live here alone?~~

~~HEART. No. As I am sure you have been told. The old man is absent in the country. Search! Search well! All is in order, safe and sound.~~

~~POLICEMAN 1. Only our jobs, sir.~~

WILLIAM  
WILSON  
#4

HEART. (*Stares a long beat.*) ... The woman's mad. (*Cat comes back in.*)

CAT. She's right, you know.

HEART. What d'ya mean, she's right?! *You think people throw cats into houses to rouse them from their sleep!*

WOMAN. You two! You're the same!

HEART. What?

WOMAN. It's the same story.

CAT. No, it's not! *My story has a CAT!*

WOMAN. Your cat is his heart. The thing that gives him away. They are both crimes of passion and fear and guilt. The eyes of the cat, the eyes of the old man ... blind but seeing.

CAT. What are you, a critic?

HEART. She has overstayed her welcome!

M. DUPIN. What else do you see?

WOMAN. God's eye. From which one cannot escape.

CAT. Pretentious nonsense!

HEART. Big secret, dear: THERE IS NO GOD!

WOMAN. If we smite Him, we are left only with ourselves. And which is worse? ... I think they loved you.

HEART. Who?

WOMAN. The cat, the old man. And you loved them as well. The old man, was he your father?

HEART. We do not say.

WOMAN. Was he your landlord, a friend?

HEART. Dupin, restrain her, she's not playing by the rules!

WOMAN. A man you loved? (*To Cat.*) And you, whose devotion was returned and made anathema. You also loved something that was — how to put it? — not strictly "acceptable."

CAT. I may be mad, but I am not of the perverse!

WOMAN. What happens when love becomes a sin? When the awareness of one's own crimes becomes too much to bear?

M. DUPIN. There is an answer to that, as well.

WOMAN. What do you mean? (*A cabinet swings open and a dandy [William Wilson] steps forward from it. In the cabinet behind him is a full-length mirror, which he uses during the speech.*)

WILLIAM WILSON. (*In a rush.*) Let me call myself William Wilson from my earliest recollections I knew that I had a propensity for taking what could be construed as the "easy path" and did not think twice about taking unfair advantage of my fellows upon this earth it was when I was at school that this propensity became



most acute cheating on examinations playing at cards games of chance that sort of thing when one day a new boy was admitted to the school a new boy distinctly familiar in face and form the mirror image of myself in fact and named as it would happen "William Wilson" this oddity this coincidence of chance was never remarked upon by my schoolmates although the other William Wilson and myself were quite aware we finished school together and he would visit often at my home as I did manage to cajole and borrow money from my foolish parents my foolish parents who too ignored good William for he was good seemed good which infuriated me but since I could not banish him what could I do he seemed to follow me everywhere in my university days as well where my habits of old continued but again no classmates made note of him nor did my acquaintances at leaving school and going into the wider world where I did employ my talents at the card table in more Byzantine and clever ways than even before I did enjoy in youth as well as in my dealings with landlords tavern keepers moneylenders women women women and other fools who crossed my path there again was the other one the other Wilson William to drop by my lodgings or hang over my shoulder at the club or share a moment with me in the pub or boudoir he was never commented upon but then his quietude was exemplary as quiet as his face was impassive and again so like my own that it unnerved me even as I began to notice changes in it its face was young and ruddy like my own had fallen pale its eyes though always wide and open seemed weary now and sometimes sometimes I would swear to heaven transparent but that could not be and then one night at playing cards and winning as was my wont a card fell from my sleeve and my partners at the baize were silenced, knowing now what they had, I supposed, always suspected and I looked up and there unbidden again was William Wilson I stood up from my chair and pointed You! You have too long baited me hounding every step and I chased him chased William Wilson from the room until I did corner him in a small anteroom of the club where there was a mirror and I put my hand upon his thinning throat and squeezed! (*Beat.*) At the last of his breath he looked at me and said, "You have conquered and I yield yet henceforth art thou also dead, dead to the world to heaven and to hope in me didst thou exist — and in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself." (*Pause. William Wilson steps back and the cabinet closes.*)

~~WOMAN. Conscience!~~

QUEEN,  
DUPIN &  
PREFECT

#5

a political cataclysm.

M. DUPIN. Why?

~~PREFECT. Because the contents are of a personal nature. (The Queen enters.)~~

M. DUPIN. Majesty!

QUEEN. M. Dupin. (*Sits.*)

PREFECT. The queen's presence is not official, as you can imagine.

M. DUPIN. Her Majesty is not here. Neither am I.

QUEEN. Since we are both phantoms, then, monsieur, let me tell you: it is vital that the king not discover the contents of that letter.

M. DUPIN. How was it stolen?

PREFECT. It was taken in full view from Her Majesty in the royal chambers.

M. DUPIN. How?

QUEEN. The renowned gentlemen, the Minister for —

M. DUPIN. No names. We are speaking of affairs of state.

WOMAN. I see.

QUEEN. The minister was visiting my chambers. The letter in question, the contents of which he was aware, was on a table between us. When the king entered the room, the minister calmly picked up the letter, knowing I could not protest without causing the explosive missive to be the object of undue attention. Thus was the minister able to remove it from its place.

M. DUPIN. What are the consequences of its contents?

PREFECT. The minister is blackmailing the queen.

M. DUPIN. Is it to do with the crisis in — And here I named a foreign capital whose antagonism towards the nation could not be exaggerated.

QUEEN. Your intellect serves you well, monsieur. Yes. I have been told by the minister that I must persuade the king to make a decision favorable to that antagonistic nation in this crisis.

PREFECT. I need hardly add, Dupin, that this decision, were the king to acquiesce, is counter to national policy and would create a cataclysm for ourselves and our allies. It proves, for once and all, that the minister is, as many have supposed, an agent of that country!

M. DUPIN. And the letter was written by...? (*The Prefect hesitates.*)

QUEEN. By me.

M. DUPIN. Intended for?

QUEEN. (*Looks down.*) A gentleman.

M. DUPIN. Have accusations regarding your ... friendship with this gentleman been made as yet?

PREFECT. There have been suspicions. A letter, in Her Majesty's script, would provide proof.

QUEEN. Monsieur Dupin, the letter must be returned!

M. DUPIN. Say no more. *(The Queen, overcome, exits with dignity.)* Monsieur Le Prefect, who knows of this affair?

PREFECT. Only the queen, myself, and trusted agents of my secret service.

M. DUPIN. How do we know the letter has not been taken out of the country?

PREFECT. The letter is not out of the *city*, Dupin. The moment the minister exited the queen's chambers, my men were on his trail. He was followed to his hotel.

M. DUPIN. And...?

PREFECT. And has been there ever since.

M. DUPIN. Then his rooms —

PREFECT. Have been turned over, top to bottom.

M. DUPIN. Is the minister aware that his rooms have been searched?

PREFECT. He watched. His person was searched as well. He smiled. A victor's smile. Do you know the minister, Dupin?

M. DUPIN. He did me a bad turn once in Vienna. I told him I would remember it.

PREFECT. He bested you, Dupin! I am astonished. I have never thought highly of the minister's intellect.

M. DUPIN. But why?

PREFECT. "Why?" Because he is a poet!

M. DUPIN. The minister is also, if my memory serves, a mathematician.

PREFECT. Poet or mathematician, the point is this: If the queen is not to jeopardize either her position with the king or the fate of the nation, the letter must be found within the next three hours.

M. DUPIN. I understand.

PREFECT. Then you will go to the minister's hotel?

M. DUPIN. I have already ordered the cab. ~~*(An actor takes away the chair as the Prefect exits. The Minister enters. He wears a brocade dressing gown. He's very silky, a strange "double" of Dupin. Two Waiters bring in a table and two chairs. It has a green baize top. There are letters on it. A cabinet opens, revealing a grandfather clock.)*~~

MINISTER. My dear Dupin!

M. DUPIN. My dear minister!

MINISTER. How long has it been?

MARIE,  
DUPIN,  
MADAME  
ROGET

# 6

WOMAN. Why we are here ... What is the third story?

M. DUPIN. *(Turns away.)* ... I am no longer interested in entertaining you.

WOMAN. If you claim the room, you must tell the story!

M. DUPIN. What has given you this newfound vigor?

WOMAN. Tell it!

M. DUPIN. No.

WOMAN. Why not? Does no one die?

M. DUPIN. *(Sad.)* Oh, yes ... But it is not a "story" ... in the sense you mean. *(Marie enters. We realize again how much she looks like Woman. When she speaks it is with an affectless tone.)*

~~WOMAN. You mean, it is not a "fiction"~~

MARIE. *(To us.)* My name is Mary Rogers —

M. DUPIN. No!

MARIE. *(Same delivery.)* ... My name is Marie Roget.

M. DUPIN. Oui.

WOMAN. *(Mocking him.)* It is better if it takes place in France. Further remove. Distance helps.

MARIE. My name is Marie Roget and I lived in Paris. With my mother. *(Madame Roget enters. She is the same actress who played Madame L'Esplanaye. Similar clothes.)* ... Who read palms and took in laundry.

WOMAN. This has the ring of the familiar.

MARIE. I worked in a parfumerie in the sixth arrondissement and went missing one Sunday, never to return. When I had been missing six days, a call went out. Searchers. Police. My mother was distraught. *(Madame Roget weeps.)* And then ... they found me. *(A cabinet opens — this time slowly. All the other times have been fast for shock effect. This time the scene is "revealed." A body seems to "float" in a blue-green void. The river. It is a "Marie" dummy. Only her face is chewed away, her clothes ravaged. Her hair swirls. Her clothes swirl. She is drowned.)* In the river, in the shallows. I had been dead a long time. *(The cabinet slowly closes as two men enter with a wheeled gurney. The nude body [dummy] is on it, exposed, decayed. A Doctor examines it. Madame Roget weeps.)* I had been strangled. Then stabbed. No water in my lungs. No weights on my legs to hold me below the waves. I had been thrown into the water, dead, then caught amid the pilings and the rushes and the mud and the filth. And then slowly rose again as my flesh putrefied.

M. DUPIN. Stop! *(The gurney and the Doctor go off.)*

MADAME ROGET. My daughter and I were inseparable. We

lived together all our lives. We were poor, but we knew right from wrong. We knew what men were like.

M. DUPIN. The mother had been dealt hard hands by life.

MADAME ROGET. The man who insinuated himself into our rooms.

WOMAN. What man?

M. DUPIN. She's babbling, she means nothing.

MADAME ROGET. Men. They seek solace in our arms. "Pity me, Mother. Dry my tears."

M. DUPIN. Her senses are lost now.

MADAME ROGET. She was a good girl. We were both good, it was life conspired to corrupt us.

WOMAN. What is she talking about?

M. DUPIN. (*Glares at Madame Roget.*) She is discussing things not within the bounds of the tale! ... A crime is terrible for more than the act itself. It puts the glare on so many things. Small failings, lapses in moral finery. It's like killing her twice.

MARIE. Who killed me?

WOMAN. Who did?

M. DUPIN. Marie knows, and no one else but he who did it. I began an investigation into the case as it was known. I worked out how long it took to walk from her work to her lodgings. Where she could have gone on the day she died. Who could have seen her. How long the body could have remained below the surface of the waves before the gases within forced it to the top. Every bit of science and mathematics and poetry — yes — the passions and the motives — all applied to this one story. I tried to become the killer. Find his motive. Robbery? Rampage?

~~WOMAN. Love?~~

~~M. DUPIN. Or too much of it. I imagined a walk after work, a discussion of the heart. Emotions felt ... or not. Attractions tendered and repulsed? The threat of murder is always there. (*Beat.*) I published my "findings," my evidence and conjectures.~~

~~WOMAN. And...?~~

~~M. DUPIN. I failed. The police were not stirred. No one came forth. I could not save her.~~

~~WOMAN. But she was already dead.~~

~~M. DUPIN. (*Stares at Woman.*) I meant to say I could not "solve" her. And so ... the beast remains at large. It is one thing to construct a puzzle and then reveal its hidden meaning. Another to stare into the darkness and try to find the pattern.~~

DUPIN/  
POE  
WOMAN

#7

M. DUPIN. As many as there are stories. *(A cabinet swings open. Tortured Man 1 steps forward.)*

TORTURED MAN 1. I had buried her alive! *(A cabinet swings open. A Not Quite Dead Woman steps forward.)*

NOT DEAD WOMAN 1. He buried me alive! *(Another cabinet swings open. Tortured Man 2 steps forward.)*

TORTURED MAN 2. She was dead! *(Another cabinet swings open. Not Dead Woman 2 steps forward.)*

NOT DEAD WOMAN 2. She was not dead! *(The two Not Quite Dead Women advance on the tortured men.)*

TORTURED MAN 1. Her lips!

TORTURED MAN 2. Her eyes!

TORTURED MAN 1. Her skin!

TORTURED MAN 2. They were her bones!

TORTURED MAN 1. Her skull!

TORTURED MAN 2. Her teeth!

USHER. SILENCE! *(They all step back into their cabinets and the doors shut. Only M. Dupin and woman remain.)*

M. DUPIN. The chambers are filled with these stories: a haunted man, his love, dead before her time. Sometimes the woman is his wife, sometimes his sister, his ... *(Breaks down.)* ... She wastes away, she dies! ... Or she is buried, sealed in her tomb before her time! And of what does she die? Her proximity to him! *(Looks at Woman.)*

WOMAN. *(Unsettled.)* ... Why do you look at me like that?

M. DUPIN. Why torture us?

WOMAN. "Us?"

M. DUPIN. Madame —

WOMAN. Why do you call me "madame"? You have called me so all evening! Why?

M. DUPIN. *(Moves to her.)* My sweet —

WOMAN. Don't touch me! *(Woman slaps him away. He falls. His hair becomes wilder. His coat pulls open. He is becoming more disheveled.)* I am not married! Surely I am young! Surely I am a maiden still?

M. DUPIN. Maiden still and virginal in your purity! Come to me! It is almost dawn. Our time is nearly up.

WOMAN. No!

M. DUPIN. Oh, you are pale, exhausted, your brow damp like fever — ! You should have rejected me! You should have sought another suitor!

WOMAN. I seek no one!

M. DUPIN. You sought shelter in my heart! (*Grabs her.*) WHY DID YOU SEEK SHELTER IN SUCH A PLACE, SO FILLED WITH HATE AND HORROR!

WOMAN. (*Pulls away.*) Keep away from me! I am not a murderer! (*Runs to door.*) Help! Let me go! HELP ME, I BEG OF YOU!

M. DUPIN. You live with all of us now. And more. More considered but never put down on paper. It is a vast darkness you will live with.

WOMAN. NO! (*Woman grabs up the letter opener and stabs Dupin. They are locked in an embrace.*)

M. DUPIN. (*Pain and ecstasy.*) Ahhh! (*Silence.*) ... You have won ...

WOMAN. No! No, I didn't mean to — No, don't, please — !

M. DUPIN. You have your place at last. A chamber in my heart. You see? The others are gone. The storm has passed. The light of day is sometimes more harsh than the fires of the night.

WOMAN. What has become of your accent?

M. DUPIN/POE. What accent? My dear!

WOMAN. Edgar! (*Dupin is now Poe. His accent and manner has changed. He straightens. The letter opener has disappeared.*)

POE. (*Holds her.*) My sweet. Is your fever broke?

WOMAN. My fever...?

POE. No. No. It has not. Still damp. What are you doing down here? You have been awake all night?

WOMAN. I couldn't sleep ... My head ... You said I could read ... your stories ... your poems ...

POE. Quite a lot to read in one sitting.

WOMAN. So many of your characters ... they're murderers. What is it like to spend your days concocting ways of killing, and ways of getting caught?

POE. There's really not so much "concocting," my dear. They just "come."

WOMAN. But a mind so engulfed —

POE. Shakespeare wrote *Titus*, a far more diabolical and bloody play than anything I have ever dreamed, and he, I doubt, was fond of children in his pie.

WOMAN. But I wondered, Edgar, as I read: Is there room for me? How vanquish all that lives within your mind? How separate the beautiful from the demonic?

POE. It cannot be separated. Nor can we.

WOMAN. I shall accept your offer, Edgar. I shall marry you.

POE. Cousin, we have been married eleven years.

WOMAN. What?

POE. Virginia, it is the fever. Just the fever. We must get you back to bed. To the room above.

WOMAN. What?

POE. Your room. You have a room, you know.

WOMAN. I have a chamber in your heart ... *(The Woman closes her eyes. Poe stares at her. Then he gasps. He shakes her. He staggers back. He weeps. Then he slowly crumples to the floor with her body. He caresses her, kisses her full on the lips, a passionate kiss. Mrs. Clemm enters. It is the woman who played Madame L'Esplanade and Madame Roget.)*

MRS. CLEMM. Eddie?! Virginia was not in her room! I ...

OHH! No! Is she...?

POE. Yes, Aunt. She's dead. Your daughter is dead. My wife is dead! *(Poe picks up the Woman and takes her off. Mrs. Clemm weeps. As she sobs, she speaks.)*

MRS. CLEMM. I saw it in the cards. When she was in fever, I read her palm. I saw her death. Your love, my child, Virginia! What shall become of us?! What shall become of us, Eddie? EDDIE! *(Poe returns. He is cold now.)*

POE. Go, Aunt. Make arrangements with the undertaker. Not soon though. We shall not bury her at once. We'll keep her in her room for a while. Just a while. A few days at least. Not much more. Not so very much. Leave me in peace now. I have to write. *(Mrs. Clemm exits. Poe sits and stares off. Then he begins to write. The upstage center door opens and the Woman, in a spot, appears.)*

WOMAN. I had been walking through a dark wood and became lost. Long had I traveled through many a fallen tree and twisted path, at first following a map given me by a fond, devoted heart. But after many searching hours, I became confused; the map was faulty, the directions untrustworthy. As the darkness grew, at last I came upon a shape, growing larger and more forbidding with each and every weary step I took. A shelter indeed! A home! A house!

POE. Please! Not so loud. *(Woman looks at Poe. Poe writes. Lights fade to black.)*

**End of Play**