

The House on Poe Street

by Fengar Gael

(a work in progress)

Representation:

Alexis Williams

Bret Adams, Ltd.

Rosenstone Adams, LLC

448 West 44th Street

New York, NY 10036

Phone: (212) 765-5630

awilliams@bretadamsltd.net

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*“There are moments when even to the sober eye of Reason
the world of our sad humanity may assume the semblance of Hell,
but the imagination of man is no Carathis to explore with impunity its every concern,
but like Demons, must sleep or devour us, be suffered to slumber or we perish.”*

*“Science! True daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.”*

*“All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.”*

Edgar Allan Poe

CHARACTERS:

MENDEL STEINGOLD, a real estate lawyer, age 30

SAMARIA SILVERMAN, Mendel's girlfriend, a teacher age 27

LAWRENCE SILVERMAN, Samaria's brother, a graduate student, age 24

ASTIN RUTHERFORD, Lawrence's friend, a graduate student, age 24

ARGONNE SEABORG, a polymath, raised in London, age 23

FLUORINE SEABORG, her twin sister, raised in London, age 23

LITHIA NICKELS, a psychic medium, 40s

TIME:

The present and recent past

PLACE:

New York City: a stylized set serves as the meeting room of The Jupiter Investment Club, the parlor of a town home on Edgar Allan Poe Street, and William Wilson's Tavern.

ACT I

PROLOGUE

(In a New York City conference room, MENDEL STEINGOLD, an imposing man of thirty, wearing a dark suit and tie, stands at a podium, addressing his audience.)

MENDEL

Good evening fellow members of The Jupiter Investment Club. I'm deeply saddened to be addressing my last meeting. You've requested an account of my experience, but be forewarned: I offer no lucid excuses, no map of safe places to hide, and in an attempt to judge my crimes objectively, I'll speak of myself as the man I once was. So to begin: like most of you, Mendel Feingold was twice blessed: First to be born a boy, and second to have loving parents whose affection he repaid by being obedient, diligent, and graduating with honors from Harvard with a law degree and an avid interest in real estate. He wanted nothing more than to be respected, happily married, known for his wit, wisdom, and the great good fortune to be among the one percent. In Mendel's world, it was perfectly fine for privileged men and women to earn four hundred times the wages of their average mid level employees, so you see, Mendel didn't actively pursue an examined life or the ideals of freedom, justice, equality and the fair distribution of our planet's resources. No indeed, Mendel happily proceeded to fritter away the years at his father's firm of Lanthan, Fermi, and Steingold. Then one day, he was given the keys to the estate of Beryl Seaborg.

SCENE 1

(MENDEL draws forth a set of keys from his pocket and enters a town home decorated entirely in shades of red, containing a sofa, chairs, a harp and bookcase. MENDEL is followed by two striking young women: ARGONNE and FLUORINE SEABORG, who speak with British accents and resemble each other in that both have long dark hair and are attired in black. THEY take a moment to survey the room.)

ARGONNE

We were warned, but it's still so...

ARGONNE

...red.

FLUORINE

Red!

FLUORINE

Bloody red! (*sneezing*) Achoo! Achoo!

ARGONNE

Bless you!

FLUORINE

Christ, the dust!

MENDEL

Sorry. It's probably from the clutter in the halls. We cleared out your mother's office as you requested, but we didn't know where to store the boxes.

ARGONNE

Mummy was paranoid about pharmaceutical cyber spies which is why she wasted reams of paper using obsolete typewriters.

FLUORINE

Let's put a match to the lot! Have a great blazing fire!

ARGONNE

Not to worry; don't believe a word she says.

MENDEL

I assume you'll be staying awhile...?

ARGONNE

Actually, we plan to live here.

FLUORINE

Isn't it perfect how a horror like Mummy lived on Edgar Allan Poe Street? It's not a coincidence, you know; she chose this house for its history.

MENDEL

And all these reds...?

ARGONNE

I assume it's her tribute to "The Masque of the Red Death."

FLUORINE

And the ruby panes of Prospero's windows.

ARGONNE

And the scarlet plumes of Eleonora's birds.

MENDEL

It's very...effective. *(pause)* There are quite a few British expats living here in the city. I'm sure you'll meet some.

FLUORINE

Surely you know we're Americans like Mummy. Our parents met at Columbia and lived in Hudson Heights. We were tiny toddlers when Daddy bundled us up and escaped to London.

MENDEL

Well, yes, but this is still quite a...transition.

ARGONNE

Home is wherever we choose as long as we're...

ARGONNE

...together.

FLUORINE

Together!

MENDEL

Good. *(pause)* Well, I suppose you know the firm's been besieged by calls and e-mails from Columbia's Biochemistry Department. They're requesting access to your mother's papers.

FLUORINE

Please inform Columbia that we're Mummy's heirs and they'll just have to wait!

ARGONNE

Are you going to hand over the keys?

MENDEL

Yes, of course. After you sign these papers, you'll have access to all your mother's accounts and patent royalties. You know, with all her assets, you could sell this house and move to another neighborhood.

ARGONNE

If you mean more posh, no thank you. We'll stay here for now.

FLUORINE

I think a move to New York is cause for celebration! Daddy said Mummy always kept keeping champagne in the fridge.

ARGONNE

I'll take a look!

(ARGONNE departs.)

FLUORINE

We should've come sooner. I feel wretched, though Mummy said she didn't want to be distracted. She wasn't sentimental about dying, and Mrs. Copper assured us she didn't suffer. Did you meet Mrs. Copper?

MENDEL

Yes, briefly, when she showed me the property.

FLUORINE

This house had a strong hold on Mummy. She said it was built on the plot that held the cottage where Poe wrote "The Raven." It's hard to believe these streets were once hilly farmlands with curative country air -- though it didn't cure Virginia, did it?

MENDEL

Well, actually, there's a dispute about the exact location of the cottage.

FLUORINE

Yes, we know, but Mummy was convinced. She said living here inspired her work.

MENDEL

What was her work exactly?

FLUORINE

Revolutionizing the species. Her specialty was molecular endocrinology; that's how genes affect hormones.

(ARGONNE enters with a bottle and three glasses.)

ARGONNE

Is Fluorine telling you all about us?

FLUORINE

She means am I telling you we're transexuals. We were meant to be boys, but Mummy turned us into girls.

ARGONNE

That's enough! Mister Steingold doesn't want to hear about Mummy's experiments.

MENDEL

Please call me Mendel, and actually, I...I am curious.

FLUORINE

Here Mendel, have some champagne!

MENDEL

Thank you.

FLUORINE

(raising her glass) Cheers! Here's to Happy days on Poe Street!

MENDEL

Cheers!

FLUORINE

Yummmmm!

ARGONNE

Lovely.

MENDEL

As I was saying, I'm curious. In fact, everyone in my firm wanted to meet you, so we drew straws to see who'd be bringing the documents and I won, though I was the least informed of your mother's reputation, and certainly didn't realize her daughters were...

FLUORINE

Sons! Y chromosomed, testosteroned, bouncing baby boys!

MENDEL

So you're saying she surgically removed...

ARGONNE

God no! It was done in her womb through potent flutamides, nilutamides, and estrogens, though we still have elevated levels of testosterone which would give us an advantage in sports if we wanted to play -- which we don't.

FLUORINE

Daddy wanted sons so he never forgave Mummy which is why they divorced, but she got her revenge: she refused custody. But even before we became girls, we were genetic anomalies. You're heard of in vitro fertilization?

MENDEL

Yes.

FLUORINE

Mummy simply extracted her own egg and injected Daddy's sperm but also a wee amount of cytoplasm from other women's eggs.

MENDEL

I...I didn't even know that was possible.

ARGONNE

Cytoplasm contains mitochondria with DNA so we have our parents genes plus the genes of four females who were considered sufficiently talented, but then Mummy's eggs formed two zygotes and we became dizygotic male twins.

FLUORINE

Double trouble! Then Mummy did the gender switcheroo, but her colleagues claimed her procedures were unethical, the demise of humanity, and all that eugenics rubbish. They were going to snitch but Mummy paid them off.

MENDEL

Really? She actually paid them?

FLUORINE

In the States money trumps all! It's still illegal to alter the germline -- that's the genetics of one's descendants.

ARGONNE

Shush, Fluorine! We shouldn't be telling a lawyer these things!

FLUORINE

Why not? He's *our* lawyer!

ARGONNE

(to Mendel) You've furrowed your brow, but Mummy only wanted to give us more options.

MENDEL

But it's still eugenics, isn't it -- producing superior offspring.

ARGONNE

Perhaps, but why not? Do we really want more idle illiterates with chronic afflictions, not to mention barbaric tendencies to wreak wars, havoc, and hatred of women.

MENDEL

Well, no, I...I guess not. So what exactly are your talents?

ARGONNE

Although our twinning is fraternal, we share gene variants for extroversion, hyperactivity and novelty seeking, and we're also artistic and musical. We can harmonize, analyze and theorize....

FLUORINE

...philosophize, mathematize and memorize! In fact, we both have eidetic memories which is why we dropped out of Oxford. You see, we don't actually need degrees.

ARGONNE

Fluorine means that with eidetic memories, once we've read something, it's ours forever, and we can recall it instantly. I can see you're skeptical (*to Fluorine*) so shall we demonstrate?

FLUORINE

Of course! Now go to the bookcase and pick any book from any edition we've read.

(MENDEL strolls to the bookcase and selects a book)

MENDEL

Here's something appropriate: The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, published by P. F. Collier and Son, the 1914 edition.

FLUORINE

Good. We've both read that, so pick any page, and tell us where the phrase is located.

MENDEL

Well, let's see: page one hundred and thirty-seven, top of the page.

(Pause as ARGONNE and FLUORINE close their eyes.)

ARGONNE

"Upon the whole, there was much of the bizarre about everything I saw....

FLUORINE

...but then the world is made up of all kinds of persons, with all modes of thought, and all sorts of conventional customs." Now pick another page.

MENDEL

All right. There's the last stanza of a poem on page two hundred and twenty.

ARGONNE

"The sickness -- the nausea --
The pitiless pain --
Have ceased with the fever
That maddened my brain
With the fever called living
That burned in my brain."

MENDEL

Now the top verse.

FLUORINE

“Thank heaven! The crisis,
The danger is past,
And the lingering illness
Is over at last.”

ARGONNE and FLUORINE

“And the fever called living
Is conquered at last.”

ARGONNE

Had enough?

MENDEL

Yes, I...I’m impressed, bowled over; you could take your show on the road.

FLUORINE

But now that Mummy’s left us a bloody fortune, we can do what we want with our lives.
We could even be boys again if we wanted.

MENDEL

I...I don’t understand. Why did she change you into girls in the first place?

FLUORINE

Desperate people do desperate things, and poor Mummy couldn’t find what she was really
looking for. In fact, it might not exist.

MENDEL

What was it...?

FLUORINE

The empathy gene.

ARGONNE

The empathy gene.

ARGONNE

All anyone’s ever found was a double G genotype which is only a receptor for oxytocin --
that’s the love hormone -- and there’s also variants associated with gratitude that promote
positive attitudes and a tendency towards lasting friendships, but it’s not reliable since it
changes with each person’s circumstance. After all, if you’re the malnourished progeny
of a rape victim, what chance have you got?

FLUORINE

Mummy just wanted to make people kinder and more compassionate.

ARGONNE

By now it's obvious that pacifists and missionaries will never convert the gun toting war mongers of the world, and naturally, Mummy noticed that it's mostly men attacking men, so she thought less men equals less violence, less oppression.

FLUORINE

Less rape, slavery, and decapitations.

MENDEL

So your mother was waging war against war with chemistry?

FLUORINE

Precisely!

ARGONNE

Precisely.

MENDEL

But are you saying she wanted to...to rid the world of men?

ARGONNE

No, not at all, though why not? For centuries the world has rid itself of women through selective abortions and infanticide -- which is why thirty-four million Chinese and seventeen million Indian males are doomed to bachelorhood.

FLUORINE

Women are just not as beloved as you men, are they Mendel?

MENDEL

Well, I...I suppose they're not as powerful, but certainly many are respected and cherished.

ARGONNE

True, and they tend to dislike losing their boys on battlefields, much less wasting resources and ruining the landscape with bombs.

FLUORINE

You see, Mummy was attempting to create a transgendering formula for potentially vicious boys and the ones already wreaking havoc.

MENDEL

You mean like chemical castration?

ARGONNE

Nothing so primitive.

MENDEL

So would a boy go sleep a boy and wake up a girl?

ARGONNE

Perhaps, though he might simply become less alpha and more beta with a shrinkage of aggression and a blooming of benevolence. You're looking pale, Mendel. Does all this strike you as monstrous?

MENDEL

Well, frankly, yes.

FLUORINE

You're not alone. Daddy was furious, called Mummy a female Frankenstein who turned her own precious pups into freaks -- not that we mind. It's great fun being us!

MENDEL

But with all your talents how do you decide what to do with your days?

FLUORINE

Some days nothing at all. Some days we simply slouch about, swiping through trashy trivia, playing video games, or texting corrections to misguided journalists, but now that we're here in New York, we're resolved to be productive.

ARGONNE

Yes, we're determined to be useful, to make a difference in this world.

MENDEL

Well, that's...admirable.

FLUORINE

Of course we haven't yet committed to any particular plan.

MENDEL

Won't you miss your father?

FLUORINE

Not really. He married a slut from Esington who thinks we're insane. So, Mendel, will you be giving us a tour of the city?

ARGONNE

Shush, Fluorine! We can't impose on the poor man.

FLUORINE

Why ever not? He only lives four blocks away.

MENDEL

How did you know that?

FLUORINE

We looked up the resumes of everyone in your firm, so we know you're familiar with the neighborhood.

MENDEL

Well, yes, I...I could take you for a drive. There's Riverside park towards the Hudson River to the west and Central Park to the east, and across the Park on Fifth Avenue is the Metropolitan Museum which rivals the Louvre, and there's the Frick, the Guggenheim, and in midtown there's the Modern Art Museum and all the Broadway theatres.

FLUORINE

Oh, we love the theatre, especially musicals. Do you sing, Mendel?

MENDEL

Not often.

FLUORINE

We noticed you're not married.

MENDEL

No, but I'm engaged.

FLUORINE

What's her name?

MENDEL

Samaria, but everyone calls her Sam.

FLUORINE

So what do you and Sam do for fun?

MENDEL

Well, we go to the theatre and galleries and attend films and concerts, and sometimes we take long walks or drive to my parents house on Long Island.

FLUORINE

Do you have any friends who might like to meet us?

MENDEL

The guys in my firm are all married or divorced, but Sam knows some single men. You do like men, right?

ARGONE

Right.

FLUORINE

Right,...

FLUORINE

...though we're fond of women too.

MENDEL

Sam has a brother, Lawrence, who has friends, and he's around for the summer.

ARGONNE

What does Lawrence do?

MENDEL

He's in graduate school studying history.

FLUORINE

Oh, marvelous, we love history! Why don't you find us dates, then the six of us can meet here for drinks.

MENDEL

Well, I...I could ask. Lawrence would certainly love this house.

FLUORINE

But would he love us?

ARGONNE

For godssake, Fluorine!

FLUORINE

Will American boys find us attractive?

MENDEL

Well,...sure.

FLUORINE

Even though we're unemployed dropouts?

ARGONNE

You can't expect Mendel to speak for all American boys!

FLUORINE

Why ever not? At least he can speak for lawyers. Do you like being a lawyer, Mendel?

MENDEL

Usually. I especially enjoy meeting clients and assessing their estates. Even as a kid I was curious to see the homes where my friends lived with their parents and pets.

FLUORINE

Do you have any pets?

MENDEL

No.

FLUORINE

Mummy had a pussy named Pluto after Poe's cat, though I hope she didn't bury him in the wall. Oh, I can't wait to explore the house! We're told there's crates of wine in the cellar from Mummy's vineyard.

MENDEL

Yes, it's in the Hudson River Valley. You have the deed if you wish to keep it.

FLUORINE

Oh, definitely!

ARGONNE

Now please show us what papers to sign.

MENDEL

Here they are, but don't you want to read them first?

ARGONNE

Of course, then we'll commit them to memory.

FLUORINE

And while we're reading you can peruse Poe's lurid tales. In fact, keep the book as a gift from your grateful clients.

MENDEL

Really? Thanks, I...I haven't read Poe since high school.

ARGONNE

More champagne...?

MENDEL

Well, I...I shouldn't, but this is a celebration.

FLUORINE

A day we shall never forget!

(FLUORINE and ARGONNE seat themselves to read the documents as lights fade.)

SCENE 2

(MENDEL steps forward to continue speaking to members of The Jupiter Investment Club.)

MENDEL

How could I forget, though god knows I've tried, and even that first day, the interior of the house struck me as vaguely oppressive, though it was graced with an exterior of gray Indiana limestone with ornately carved gargoyles. So despite my reservations, that following fateful Saturday, I invited Sam, her brother and his friend to meet...

(As MENDEL continues, he returns to the parlor, followed by SAMARIA, LAWRENCE, and ASTIN.)

MENDEL

...Argonne and Fluorine, may I present my fiancée, Sam, and her brother, Lawrence, and their friend...

MENDEL

...Astin Rutherford.

ASTIN

(offering his hand) Astin Rutherford!

ARGONNE

Hello.

FLUORINE

Welcome!

SAMARIA

It's a pleasure to meet you.

LAWRENCE

Hello.

LAWRENCE

This house is incredible, and red's my favorite color.

SAMARIA

It's not mine, but I love the effect. It makes me feel warm.

MENDEL

Really? You don't find it...unnerving?

LAWRENCE

It makes me thirsty.

MENDEL

For blood?

LAWRENCE

For wine!

FLUORINE

Good! We inherited Mummy's vineyard. Her specialty was a cabernet, and there's crates of it in the cellar. It's quite delicious if you'd like to try it.

LAWRENCE

Yes, by all means.

SAMARIA

I'd love to.

ASTIN

Sounds great.

FLUORINE

Fine, I'll fetch it!

(FLUORINE departs.)

ARGONNE

So Sam, are you a lawyer as well?

SAMARIA

No, I teach poetry at City College, so I'm very happy to be sitting where Poe composed "The Raven."

ARGONNE

Poor old Poe, a pity he had to die to make a living.

SAMARIA

Yes, but my students love him for it.

MENDEL

Nothing like the attraction of a debt laden depressive.

SAMARIA

It's true. They've romanticized him, and they can relate to his financial struggles.

ARGONNE

(to Lawrence) Mendel told us you were studying history.

LAWRENCE,

Yes, my thesis is on the collapsed societies of the twentieth century, why even some wealthy, stable countries can go astray. In other words, is there any real proof of moral progress in the world.

ASTIN

Well, I can answer that: there isn't.

SAMARIA

You're such a cynic, Astin.

ARGONNE

(to Astin) Are you studying history as well?

ASTIN

Yes, in a way since I'm learning Arabic and majoring in political science, but I'm not sure what I'll wind up doing -- maybe working at the U.N.

LAWRENCE

Or spying for the army; they've already tried to recruit him.

ASTIN

They'd disguise me as an Arab and force me to grow a beard.

SAMARIA

I think you'd look dashing in a beard.

ASTIN

Thanks, but I don't want to wind up dodging bullets.

ARGONNE

Good luck with that since you Americans love war.

ASTIN

Not all Americans.

ARGONNE

Then why has your country amassed one thousand six hundred and seventy-two nuclear missiles, two hundred and eighty three battleships, nine thousand four hundred and sixty seven planes? And your military spends more on weapons than the armies of the next twelve nations combined.

MENDEL

Argonne and Fluorine have eidetic memories; they remember everything they've ever read.

LAWRENCE

You're kidding? That's amazing.

ARGONNE

It's useful in recalling battle casualties, popularity polls, mathematical and medicinal formulas. We can always match names with faces; know the titles and trends of novels, films and fashions; the music, art, and architecture of every age, not to mention interest rates, travel routes, and recipes.

LAWRENCE

Christ, you'd be great historians!

ASTIN

And spies!

SAMARIA

And teachers! Imagine remembering every poem you've ever read.

LAWRENCE

Or the dates of dynasties that ruled the world.

ASTIN

What about foreign languages?

ARGONNE

We read French, German, Spanish, Chinese and Hindi, and can recall every conversation we've ever had -- verbatim.

ASTIN

I'm impressed.

LAWRENCE

Holy shit.

SAMANTHA

(pause) So now that you're settling in, do you and your sister have any plans?

(FLUORINE enters holding a tray laden with glasses of wine which she passes.)

ARGONNE

That's what Mendel asked and now we have an answer. Should we tell them, Fluorine?

FLUORINE

Why ever not? *(pause)* We're going to turn this house into a museum and give guided tours featuring all things Poe, complete with skulls and coffins.

SAMARIA

And a pit and pendulum...?

FLUORINE

Of course! We plan to enlarge the front window and depict scenes from his poems and stories.

ARGONNE

We'll hire actors to play characters such as Roderick Usher.

FLUORINE

And Annabelle Lee.

SAMARIA

That's wonderful! I'll bring my students. Will you charge admission?

ARGONNE

Only what people can afford; Poe wouldn't approve of excluding paupers.

MENDEL

I hate to rain on your parade, but this end of the street isn't zoned for businesses.

FLUORINE

Which is why we need you, Mendel -- to find the loopholes, change the laws, or pay off the right people.

MENDEL

Easier said than done, and your neighbors might object to the traffic.

ASTIN

So you think they'll get traffic?

SAMARIA

Of course! Poe's an American icon, the American Shakespeare.

ASTIN

Hardly.

SAMARIA

But he is! Everyone loves Poe.

ASTIN

I don't, he's too depressing.

MENDEL

I agree.

SAMARIA

You haven't read enough to judge.

MENDEL

Actually I have. The twins gave me a book of his entire works. I'm half way through, and frankly, I find him morbid, rambling, and constantly referring to arcane obscurities.

ARGONNE

He was paid by the word.

MENDEL

Well, that explains it.

ASTIN

(pause) Given all your talents, will managing a small museum really be fulfilling?

ARGONNE

It won't be small. If our museum succeeds, we'll purchase the houses on either side and break through the walls. Then we'll have room enough to recreate Prince Prospero's ballroom.

FLUORINE

And the dining room of Tarr and Fether's asylum, which could serve as our cafe. Mendel will see if they owners are willing to sell.

MENDEL

Their names are public record, but lots of these houses are owned by people who need them as investments, so they're not likely to give them up, and we still have to determine if a museum is legally feasible -- though it sounds more like a carnival fun house, and what happens if you get bored with all?

FLUORINE

Oh, we plan to do other things -- like continuing Mummy's work.

MENDEL

You mean the chemistry...?

ARGONNE

We're going to become oenophiles, connoisseurs of fine wine.

FLUORINE

We'll expand the vineyard which Mummy named Nevermore as a tribute to Poe.

LAWRENCE

It certainly is delicious.

SAMARIA

And intoxicating. I'm already feeling its effect.

LAWRENCE

So am I.

ASTIN

Me too.

FLUORINE

But it's a good effect, isn't it?

SAMARIA

Definitely.

LAWRENCE

Oh, yeah.

FLUORINE

The wines could be our own peace keeping mission. Drink Nevermore and you'll never more make war.

LAWRENCE

Because you'll be too wasted to move much less aim a rifle, ha, ha!

ASTIN

You'd have more converts with tea and coffee since Muslims, Mormons, and plenty of people don't drink.

FLUORINE

They'll drink Nevermore.

MENDEL

How? Will you force it down their throats?

FLUORINE

We'll make a medicinal version to sell in our gift shop! We're also transposing Poe's poems to music which we'll perform in harmony for group tours. We've already composed "The Bells." Would you like to hear it?

ARGONNE

Shush, Fluorine! They didn't come to hear us sing!

SAMARIA

I'd love to hear it.

LAWRENCE

So would I.

FLUORINE

*Hear the sledges with the bells --
Silver bells!*

FLUORINE and ARGONNE

*What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
In the icy air of night!
While the stars that over sprinkle
All the heavens, seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically swells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells!*

(SAMARIA, LAWRENCE, ASTIN and MENDEL
applaud.)

LAWRENCE

That's great! You could make videos to advertise the museum.

MENDEL

You've only lived here a week. Are you sure you want to stay?

ARGONNE

Of course.

FLUORINE

We love New York!

MENDEL

I don't mean the city; I mean the house. If you're really going to run a museum, you'll have strangers traipsing through the place, so you might want to live somewhere else, somewhere more upscale with modern appliances.

ARGONNE

Nonsense, we're already feeling an attachment, though it's true the house has suffered from harsh winters, corroded pipes, faulty wiring, and the floors are warped from the feet of former tenants.

FLUORINE

Mummy didn't bother with renovations; she loved it as it was, and surely with your experience, you know that as houses age, they seem to grow hearts, minds, and souls of their own, and every corner of every room tells a tale that beckons to be heard -- and besides, Virginia wants us to stay.

LAWRENCE

Who's Virginia?

ARGONNE

(to Fluorine) I thought we weren't going to mention...

FLUORINE

She's a ghost!

SAMARIA

You mean Virginia Poe?

FLUORINE

Yes!

SAMARIA

(to Lawrence and Astin) She was Edgar's wife.

FLUORINE

Her maiden name was Virginia Eliza Clemm and she died of tuberculosis.

SAMANTHA

So you think she's a...presence here?

FLUORINE

Yes!

ARGONNE

No.

ARGONNE

Fluorine's being presumptuous, but we sometimes hear noises as if someone's pacing or creeping up and down the stairs.

MENDEL

Old houses make all kinds of noises from settling or expanding and contracting with the seasons.

ASTIN

There could be rodents in the walls.

(As MENDEL speaks, LAWRENCE starts thumbing his smartphone.)

MENDEL

Don't forget that plenty of occupants lived and died here, and there's still speculation about the exact location of the Brennan's original house. *(to Astin and Lawrence)* They're the family that took in the Poes, *(to Argonne and Fluorine)* and in case you missed it, there are two other buildings in close proximity with plaques claiming to be Poe's residence.

FLUORINE

So now there'll be three, but ours will welcome visitors, and there may be skeptics, but why else would Virginia's spirit be here if this wasn't her home?

MENDEL

Why would her spirit be anywhere? Wasn't life in the flesh miserable enough?

ARGONNE

Fluorine's convinced the ghost is Virginia because of the coughing. When we follow the sounds, she comes down to this room and sits *(pointing)* there, but all we see is a slight indentation in the cushions. I'm skeptical because if the ghost is Virginia why doesn't she play the harp? She played when she was alive, but there it sits -- untouched.

FLUORINE

I think she's too weak. She was fragile in life, so in death she can't quite summon the spiritual energy to strum the strings from one dimension to another.

MENDEL

If she does show herself, what would you say to her?

FLUORINE

I'd say, my dear Virginia, I'm so sorry that you suffered from consumption, a disease we now call tuberculosis and can cure with Isoniazid, Rifampicin, Pyrazinamide Ethambutol and Streptomycin. But never think you lived in vain. Your husband adored you and your brief life inspired immortal poems.

SAMARIA

I wonder since you sense traces of her presence from the past, did she sense the possibility of your presence in the future, and did she know that all the people who followed her here would keep her harp.

MENDEL

How do you know it's her harp?

ARGONNE

We don't really, but it's an antique, dated 1838, so it's possible it belonged to Virginia.

LAWRENCE

(looking up from his phone) Uh oh, bad news: There's already an Edgar Allan Poe museum. In fact, there's several, but a cottage in the Bronx is listed as a historic landmark and was the last place he lived in the city. *(displaying his screen)* Look, here are pictures of the rooms.

ASTIN

God, they're small.

SAMARIA

But quaint and cozy.

LAWRENCE

(reading his screen) There's also a walking tour of the places the Poes lived in boarding houses, and where he worked as an editor.

ARGONNE

Naturally we've done our research, and are aware of other claims, but this could be where Poe wrote "The Raven."

LAWRENCE

Actually, there are three other houses that claim that distinction.

FLUORINE

Now there's four! But this must be where Virginia spent her last hours.

LAWRENCE

(reading his screen) Sorry, but it says here she died in the Bronx cottage and was buried in Fordham Cemetery. *(reading)* "Thirty-eight years after her death, her bones were exhumed and reburied in Baltimore at the Westminster graveyard next to Poe's coffin. Virginia was only twenty-four when she died. She and Edgar were first cousins and married for eleven years."

MENDEL

What...? Are you saying Poe married her when she was thirteen?!

FLUORINE

Yes.

MENDEL

How old was he?

FLUORINE

Twenty-seven.

MENDEL

So he was an incestuous pedophile...?

ASTIN

Lots of people in other cultures marry first cousins. Mohammed even encouraged it.

MENDEL

Oh, great, nothing like marriage advice from a polygamous lunatic.

SAMARIA

Mendel!

ARGONNE

It's called consanguinity, and it's a form of social control, a way of keeping wealth within families, and of breeding offspring with genetic mutations and low IQs -- which explains why they're susceptible to a religion that requires cloth coverings on women.

FLUORINE

Rampant inbreeding's one of the reasons Mummy was drawn to the genetic sciences.

SAMARIA

Poe's biographers claim they were more like brother and sister. Poe even called Virginia Sissy, so their marriage might not have been consummated -- which explains why they didn't have children.

ARGONNE

All we really know about Virginia is that she enjoyed gardening, played the harp and piano, and sat by Edgar while he wrote.

FLUORINE

She kept his pens in order, and read his manuscripts, but for now all she does is leave her effluvia.

LAWRENCE

Her what...?

FLUORINE

Last Wednesday Argonne left an empty tea cup on the coffee table, and the next morning it was filled with...

ARGONNE

Please, Fluorine must you...

SAMARIA

What? Tell us!

FLUORINE

It's some sort of fluid.

MENDEL

Like the cherry red drops that fell from nowhere into Lady Rowena's goblet?

FLUORINE

No, no! You're referring to Poe's tale of Ligeia, but it has a denser, opaque viscosity as if it came from lungs instead of veins.

LAWRENCE

You mean like phlegm?

FLUORINE

Sputum laced with blood.

ARGONNE

It's disgusting!

MENDEL

Is she trying to infect you?

FLUORINE

It smells salty like the sea, and every time we leave a cup or glass overnight, it's filled by morning. We plan to analyze it ourselves in Mummy's lab in the cellar.

SAMARIA

I have a friend who claims to know a respected medium. If we invite her here, she might be able to determine if the ghost is really Virginia.

MENDEL

I didn't know you believed in ghosts.

SAMARIA

I'm open to the idea, aren't you?

MENDEL

Well, yes, but you claim to be an atheist.

SAMARIA

Just because I don't believe in god doesn't mean I don't believe in ghosts. *(to the twins)*
In fact, I've been wondering: couldn't the ghost be your mother?

FLUORINE

Mummy died in hospital of uterine cancer, but this ghost coughs and weeps, and Mummy rarely had a cold or shed a tear, and why haunt us in death when she didn't want much to do with us in life?

SAMARIA

Oh, I...I'm sorry. How sad.

ARGONNE

Not really. She was destined for a life of science, and we were just another experiment gone awry.

LAWRENCE

What do you mean *awry*? You're both so talented and...beautiful.

ASTIN

You have so many more options than the rest of us.

FLUORINE

But we couldn't make Mummy love us now, could we?

SAMARIA

That's not your fault; most mothers feel a natural maternal bonding.

FLUORINE

Not Mummy.

ARGONNE

Shush, Fluorine!

FLUORINE

Even her milk dried up. Daddy said that's why she was seeking the empathy gene -- because she lacked it in herself.

SAMARIA

But my god, if she'd succeeded! Imagine if people really cared about caring, if caretakers were more important than bankers or politicians; if nurses, teachers and the artists were valued as much as celebrities and corporate billionaires.

ASTIN

Right, if there was more empathy, people wouldn't be driven out of their own countries by psychotic leaders who don't give a damn about them.

MENDEL

But even if "Mummy" had found the gene, what then? Even if she figured out how to synthesize and manufacture it, how would she get it to the right people?

ASTIN

Right, they're hiding out in jungles or bunkers or cities.

SAMARIA

You'd have to give it to women to use on men -- like mace.

ASTIN

Or put it in their perfumes.

LAWRENCE

Or salt shakers.

ARGONNE

Or a universal vaccine.

MENDEL

Or a virus, then ticks and mosquitos could spread it, but how would you know it's working?

ARGONNE

Obviously, the most violent cases would no longer be compelled to fight, rape, loot or pollute. They'd prefer light to darkness, peace to violence, creation to destruction, and men wouldn't murder each other in wars.

MENDEL

Not all men who kill in wars are murderers. Some are defending the ideals of liberty and freedom.

FLUORINE

Mummy didn't believe that, but what does it matter? She failed and she's gone, and now Argonne and I have to live in the present and relinquish the past.

ASTIN

With your memories, that must be a challenge.

MENDEL

Good point. How can you relinquish the past if your museum's dedicated to a poet who lived a hundred and fifty years ago? And your mother may be gone, but she's still making news. You do read the Times, don't you?

SAMARIA

(to Mendel) Maybe they don't want to discuss this.

FLUORINE

Oh, we don't mind, *(to Argonne)* do we?

ARGONNE

Go on, I know you're dying to tell them.

FLUORINE

There's an investigation at Mummy's clinic. It seems she changed boy fetuses in utero to girls without the parents' consent, so the clinic's being sued by outraged parents who already had four girls. They'd seen their boy on the sonogram so they knew somebody pulled a switcheroo, and of course Mummy was the culprit.

LAWRENCE

But why? Why would she switch them?

FLUORINE

Hasn't Mendel told you about Mummy?

MENDEL

Not everything; I didn't want to scare them off.

FLUORINE

Mummy thought the greatest threat to civilization was the Y chromosome.

ARGONNE

The major source of misery seems to be monoamine oxidase A, also known as the warrior gene which infests one out of three males and is linked to competitive alpha aggression.

ASTIN

Really? I don't think I have it.

LAWRENCE

Neither do I.

SAMARIA

Oh, yes you do! You fought like a rabid dog all through grammar school, and in high school you played football.

LAWRENCE

Yeah, well, I guess I'm over it.

ASTIN

What about Mendel? Does he have the warrior gene? I can't imagine him ever striking anyone; he's too well dressed.

LAWRENCE

But he's competitive.

SAMARIA

And contentious.

MENDEL

And invisible! I hate it when you talk like I'm not here.

LAWRENCE

Sorry, man.

ASTIN

Sorry.

ASTIN

(to Argonne) So what about this warrior gene? Are chemists trying to eliminate it...?

FLUORINE

I suppose, but since it's not yet possible, Mummy thought a gender imbalance favoring girls would improve things. In other words...

FLUORINE

...a girl world!

ARGONNE

A girl world!

ASTIN

A girl world?

LAWRENCE

But didn't "Mummy" notice that when women wind up in power, they behave as aggressively as men. Look at Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, or queens like Isabella of Castille...

MENDEL

Bloody Mary!

LAWRENCE

Catherine the Great, the Dowager Longyu...

ASTIN

Who?

LAWRENCE

A power crazed empress from the Qing Dynasty. And let's not forget Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher, but the point I'm making is that women can behave as violently as men.

ARGONNE

All those women were raised in patriarchal systems and succumbed to its pressures. It's what they knew and they didn't have the insight or support to change things.

ASTIN

But are we really all that different?

ARGONNE

Actually yes: Male brains are larger, but female brains are denser, especially the hippocampus which is where the neuron and synapse circuitry for language and emotions is located. That's why women speak approximately ten thousand more words a day than men, and aren't all wars are a failure of language?

LAWRENCE

Is that really true -- about the number of words?

ASTIN

Not for you, Lawrence.

SAMARIA

Shhhhh! (*whispering*) Did you hear that?

MENDEL

Hear what...?

SAMARIA

I thought I heard footsteps. Do you suppose it's the ghost?

(The lights flicker.)

SAMARIA

Oh, my god!

LAWRENCE

Hah!

ASTIN

Whoa...

FLUORINE

That's never happened before.

(The lights flicker again.)

FLUORINE

(*whispering*) What if she's signaling us? Let's ask her questions. One blink for yes and two for no.

(The lights blink once.)

FLUORINE

Great! I'll ask first: Are you Virginia Clemm Poe?

(The lights blink once.)

SAMARIA

Hah!

FLUORINE

I knew it!

FLUORINE

Do you mind that we're living here?

(The lights blink twice.)

FLUORINE

Thank heaven! *(to Argonne)* Your turn.

ARGONNE

Do you mind if we turn this house into a museum to honor Edgar?

(The lights flicker once.)

ARGONNE

Oh...? So you do mind?

(The lights flicker once.)

ARGONNE

If you mind, is it because you don't want strangers milling about?

(The lights flicker twice.)

SAMARIA

I know! Do you mind because the museum should also honor you?

(The lights flicker once.)

SAMARIA

(to Argonne and Fluorine) You could call it the Edgar and Virginia Poe Museum.

MENDEL

I have a question: Are you for real or a trick of the twins?

SAMARIA

Mendel!

FLUORINE

(pause) Are you still here?

SAMARIA

(pause, to Mendel) Now look what you've done! You've chased her away!

FLUORINE

Virginia, are you still here?

MENDEL

(long pause) Virginia, were you ever here to begin with?

(Suddenly the harp strings burst into loud, echoing trills.)

LAWRENCE
Holy shit!

SAMANTHA
Oh my god!

FLUORINE
Ah hah!

ASTIN
Jesus Christ!

Shhhhh!

ARGONNE

(The harp plays a few bars of music, then ceases.)

FLUORINE
That was lovely, Virginia; please play some more.

ARGONNE
(*long pause*) I suspect she's gone.

LAWRENCE
That was awesome; I actually saw the harp strings move!

SAMARIA
Is it my imagination, or was there a slight floral scent of..?

SAMARIA
...roses.

FLUORINE
Roses!

LAWRENCE
Come on, Mendel, admit it, that was pretty damn convincing.

MENDEL
Okay, sure, I'm impressed, (*to Fluorine and Argonne*) but I wouldn't it past you to be playing parlor tricks, installing ghoulish gadgets like floating skeletons and fog machines.

FLUORINE
Oh, bollocks! We're creating a respectable museum, and the presence of a genuine ghost will draw thousands of visitors.

SAMANTHA
What's with your attitude? Why are you being so negative?

MENDEL
Sorry, I didn't mean to destroy the mood. Look, there's plenty of restaurants around here. Is anyone hungry?

ASTIN

Famished!

FLUORINE

Yes, let's dine and then go dancing.

LAWRENCE

I know a club in midtown that has a great band.

SAMARIA

(to Mendel) We haven't danced in ages.

MENDEL

There's a reason for that.

FLUORINE

Mendel, you haven't touched your wine.

MENDEL

Someone has to stay in control.

FLUORINE

Wait! Listen! Did you hear that swooping sound?

(Wing flapping sounds are heard.)

ARGONNE

It's upstairs.

LAWRENCE

It sounds like a bird's flown in.

ARGONNE

(to Fluorine) Did you leave a window open?

FLUORINE

Oh, damn! I'll go check!

LAWRENCE

Let me help!

(FLUORINE and LAWRENCE depart, then FLUORINE shouts.)

FLUORINE

Quick! Come up! You won't believe this! It's a raven! A raven!

(As FLUORINE shouts, ARGONNE and ASTIN depart,
and SAMARIA start to follow.)

MENDEL

(grasping Samantha's arm) Psssst! Sam! Don't go up there!

SAMARIA

What...? Why not?!

MENDEL

(whispering) Because they're batshit crazy, that's why!

SAMANTHA

(whispering) You're the one acting crazy! I thought you liked them.

MENDEL

My lawyer's intuition's kicking in, and you're drunk on that wine. You don't know what's in it.

SAMARIA

It's only wine for godssake.

MENDEL

Their mother was a chemist!

SAMARIA

I know the taste of wine and it's fine!

MENDEL

Please, come on, let's get the hell out of this madhouse!

SAMARIA

Don't be silly! I'm going to see the raven.

(SAMANTHA marches off, leaving MENDEL alone.)

SCENE 3

(MENDEL steps forward to continue addressing The Jupiter Investment Club.)

MENDEL

The bird was deemed a good omen and flew away. Then somehow through dinner and dancing Fluorine lured Lawrence into her web while Argonne snagged Astin, and Samantha volunteered as a tour guide to the city's cultural treasures. Meanwhile I pursued the zoning legalities of turning the house into a museum which wasn't as difficult as I hoped. Oh, yes, I was counting on the usual bureaucratic roadblocks to discourage the twins so they'd fly back to London on their broomsticks. Instead, the ease with which everything was falling into place was uncanny! Naturally, I was civil in their company which I tried to avoid, but one day I received a text requesting that I join Sam and the twins for tea.

(As MENDEL continues speaking, SAMARIA follows HIM to the parlor to join FLUORINE who pours tea while ARGONNE serves cake.)

MENDEL

It seems the twins had received...

MENDEL

...a purloined letter!

FLUORINE

A purloined letter!

FLUORINE

Before Mummy died, she gave it to Mrs. Copper to deliver personally, but the silly bitch slipped it in her coat pocket, then flew to Jamaica. She forgot all about it till she wore the coat again and (*waving an envelope*) here it is.

SAMARIA

Well, don't keep us in suspense. What does it say?

(ARGONNE snatches the letter and reads.)

ARGONNE

(*reading*) My Dearest Daughters, I'm not expected to live much longer and intend to leave you all my assets, but I must warn you: there's something strange about the house on Poe Street.

MENDEL

(*mumbling*) No shit.

ARGONNE

(reading) I recently noticed the sound of footsteps and someone strumming the harp that was left here when I purchased the house. In fact, I took lessons and seem to possess a natural gift, though it's too late to achieve mastery, but I digress.

SAMARIA

How sad.

FLUORINE

Poor Mummy.

ARGONNE

(reading) Although I never believed in consciousness surviving postmortem, I feel certain there's a spiritual presence in this house, and her floral scent tells me it's a woman. She may have been here for years and I couldn't perceive her till I was closer to death myself, and lately I sense her hovering while I work. *(to Mendel and Samaria)* The rest of the letter is personal and won't be of interest.

SAMARIA

Of course it's of interest! I mean, if you're willing to share it, we'd love to hear it, wouldn't we, Mendel?

(MENDEL starts to respond as FLUORINE snatches the letter from ARGONNE and continues reading.)

FLUORINE

Beyond the mysteries of the house is the mystery of motherhood. While I couldn't bathe you in unconditional love, at least I endowed you with inbred advantages, so I hope you'll become scientists and succeed where I've failed, transforming this war ravaged planet to one of verdant glories for all. With love, Your Mother, Beryl Seaborg.

SAMARIA

(pause, she sighs) Well, she certainly confirmed your feelings about the house being haunted, and it sounds like she wants you to continue her work.

FLUORINE

Which is why we've purchased new electron microscopes, but Mummy's formulas are daunting, vial after vial of hormonal brews and blends! But we've also been analyzing the slushy goo our ghost leaves in our tea cups and porridge bowls. We've been storing it in metal containers.

ARGONNE

It appears to be made of tears that look like crystallized salts, but there's also a substance unknown to our knowledge of molecular biology. All we know is that it's not related to any zoonotic virus or bacteria, and while it's unlikely, it might be an unknown element.

FLUORINE

Which is why we're calling it Virginium! But I call it Poe glow because when it's chilled it emits a weird iridescence. Argonne's been feeding it to the rats she traps.

SAMARIA

Does it affect them?

ARGONNE

Not really, or not that we can discern. What we need are healthy human subjects.

MENDEL

That's illegal. Sorry, but you're not a licensed pharmaceutical company; you're not even doctors. You'd need consent forms, and what if this Poe glow stuff is fatal?

ARGONNE

That's why we need you -- to compose appropriate forms that cover liability.

MENDLE

That's not my field of expertise.

SAMARIA

But you know hundreds of lawyers.

MENDEL

Well, yes, I can make inquiries, but assuming the ghost is Virginia, what if this Poe glow is coming from infected lungs or worse, what if it's related to your mother's research? Will your volunteers start singing with the sopranos?

ARGONNE

We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?

MENDEL

Just don't try it on me.

ARGONNE

Too late for that; it's in the tea you've been drinking.

MENDEL

(leaping up) What?!

FLUORINE

Relax, Mendel! She's joking, ha, ha!

MENDEL

(to Argonne) You have a sick sense of humor!

SAMARIA

Oh, calm down, sweetie.

MENDEL

Have you tried it yourselves?

FLUORINE

No!

ARGONNE

No.

MENDEL

So now that you're dabbling in chemistry, are you still determined to pursue your museum?

FLUORINE

Oh, yes, full throttle all the way, but since there are already so many museums dedicated to Edgar, we're calling ours the Virginia Clemm Poe Museum. We're making copies of her portraits and we'll feature her brief history, but also those of Poe's fictional women. We'll have rooms depicting Lenore, Helen, Berenice, Morella, Ligeia, Annabelle Lee, and poor Madeline in her blood stained gown.

MENDEL

But why create a museum that features weaklings? Sorry, but Poe's women were passive victims who died young or were murdered.

ARGONNE

Exactly -- which is why they'll serve to remind us of the injustices of the past. Naturally, we're eager to communicate with the spirit again, so Samantha, do you recall mentioning your connection to a respected medium?

SAMARIA

Of course. I'll get her contact numbers from my friend, Ruth. *(drawing forth her phone)* I'll text her now.

(SAMARIA starts texting.)

MENDEL

Are you going to hold a seance?

ARGONNE

No, we'll invite the medium here so she can speak directly to our spirit.

FLUORINE

Argonne still isn't convinced she's Virginia.

ARGONNE

It could be any number of people. This house has been the home of nine families and eighty-three known occupants. The city's records show twelve on site deaths including a minister, two merchants, a doctor, banker, a sexton, and the remaining six were women listed as wives or daughters.

FLUORINE

The sexton worked in the Fordham cemetery where Virginia was first buried.

MENDEL

What I don't understand is if your ghost can play the harp, why can't she wield a pen and write answers to your questions?

FLUORINE

Oh, we've tried to get her to write or tap the keyboard, but she doesn't respond.

MENDEL

Maybe she's illiterate.

FLUORINE

Not, if she's Virginia! She wrote poems of her own. In fact, she wrote a love poem to Edgar that we've put to music. Want to hear it?

MENDEL

(mumbling) Later maybe...

SAMARIA

Yes, oh, please!

FLUORINE and ARGONNE

*Ever with thee I wish to roam
Dearest my life is thine.
Give me a cottage for my home
And a rich old cypress vine.
Removed from the world with its sin and care,
And the tattling of many tongues,
Love alone shall guide us dear
And heal my weakened lungs.
And heal my weakened lungs.*

(Lights dim as the SISTERS and SAMARIA depart.)

SCENE 4

(MENDEL turns to continue addressing The Jupiter Investment Club.)

MENDEL

As Sam and I escaped the loon sisters to the safety of a nearby bar, I realized the source of my negative attitude was two fold: first was the house itself. As a real estate lawyer, I've dealt with everything from condemned rattaps to the outrageously opulent, but even with the ongoing renovations, the house on Poe Street remained dark, dank and depressing.

(As MENDEL continues, he and SAMARIA seat themselves at William Wilson's Tavern.)

MENDEL

Secondly, the twins were subtle arsonists, always igniting fires between Sam and me. To Sam the sisters were...

MENDEL
...courageous.

SAMARIA
Courageous,...

SAMARIA
...and fascinating! I see them as creative idealists.

MENDEL
Well, I see them as egomaniacs who belong in an asylum for the criminally insane.

SAMARIA
At least they're willing to use their resources to raise consciousness and fight all the misery. What are we doing? Nothing! Absolutely nothing!

MENDEL
That's not true. You teach future poets, but you could quit and join the Peace Corps, fly to the Sudan and convince the tribes to stop fighting feuds that go back centuries. But I know you, Sam; you're not going to give up your job, your family, your Prada purses and Gucci shoes. Well, are you?

SAMARIA
(*pause*) Probably not.

MENDEL
Look, I agree it's tragic that we're still a barbaric species, and even though I like to think I'm civilized, I know I can be crushed watching videos of the latest bloodbath, then two minutes later discuss the cost of condos in Cancun.

SAMARIA

But we've had such privileged lives, we should be doing more. That's why I admire the twins; they actually have a plan.

MENDEL

If you mean Mummy's hormones, that's not a plan; that's aggressive phalluscide.

SAMARIA

Phalluscide...?

MENDEL

That's what I'm calling it.

SAMARIA

I'd call it machocide, and why not? Nothing else is working! Why do we keep letting armed fanatics turn civilized countries into a police states? They're ruining life for everyone! What's wrong with slipping these guys a pill to soften their hearts?

MENDEL

Because it's not just their hearts they'd be softening?! They're still men for godssake.

SAMARIA

They're not men; they're cowardly assassins, slaughtering anybody who doesn't believe what they believe. You heard them: the twins know compassion isn't enough; they know we need weapons of our own, so why not hormonal ones?

MENDEL

God, the Nazis would have loved you.

SAMARIA

Thanks.

MENDEL

You've changed; you've let the twins radicalize you.

SAMARIA

You're the one who introduced us.

MENDEL

A huge mistake! I wish they'd never come here.

SAMARIA

They're not insensitive; they know you hate them.

MENDEL

I don't "hate" them, I just wish they'd fly away, but it's not just the twins; it's the house -- it gives me the creeps. It's hard to explain, but some houses have negative atmospheres; they don't just stink of dust and decay; they're like...

SAMARIA

The House of Usher...?

MENDEL

Exactly what I was thinking! Poe knew; he'd seen them; he felt them, and they're hard as hell to sell. It doesn't mean they stay that way. Sometimes the right buyers come along and open the windows. They let in enough sunlight so the rays reach the rooms and wash away the darkness and sorrow. But the twins house is beyond sorrow; it's...malevolent.

SAMARIA

No, it's not!

MENDEL

The minute I enter the premises, it feels like there's less oxygen and the walls start closing in.

SAMARIA

(she sighs) Oh, Mendel...

MENDEL

I'm serious! I'm like poor Fortunato who loved Amantillado and was buried alive. And what's with all the ravens popping up? Do they capture and stuff them?

SAMARIA

Of course not; they order them on line. You know, maybe you should stop reading Poe. It's affecting your mind; nobody else feels creeped out or smothered. Lawrence loves the house.

MENDEL

(pause) So he's still seeing Fluorine?

SAMARIA

Yes, though it's just a summer hook up -- nothing serious.

MENDEL

What about Astin? Is he still seeing Argonne?

SAMARIA

As far as I know.

MENDEL

I don't get it. What's the appeal? It's a good thing Mummy left them rich since she's made them totally unfit to function in the world.

SAMARIA

I don't agree and neither does Lawrence. He predicts they'll have their own reality show someday.

MENDEL

Really? He thinks they're prodigies just waiting to be discovered?

SAMARIA

Yes, and I agree.

MENDEL

Well, I think they're ridiculous! But they're also victims who don't seem to realize that what "Mummy" did to them was indefensible.

SAMARIA

Why? They're not unhappy. In fact, they're good natured and Lawrence and Astin enjoy their company.

MENDEL

Just tell them to be careful: not to eat or drink anything on the premises.

SAMARIA

Tell them yourself.

MENDEL

All right, I will!

(SAMARIA marches off.)

SCENE 5

(MENDEL faces his club members as LAWRENCE and ASTIN appear in different areas at presumably different times, holding bottles of beer.)

MENDEL

On different days at different times, I met with Astin and Lawrence who frequented Wilson's Tavern where I asked each one: How's everything going between you two?

ASTIN

Great.

LAWRENCE

Great,...

LAWRENCE

...it's like dating a human encyclopedia.

ASTIN

She even learning Arabic.

MENDEL

Is she hot and horny? Did "Mummy" pump the girls full of pheromones?

LAWRENCE

What...

ASTIN

What...

ASTIN

...are you asking?

MENDEL

Are you...intimate? I mean, have you actually slept in the house?

ASTIN

Sure.

LAWRENCE

Sure,...

LAWRENCE

...Fluorine's like hooking up with an acrobat.

ASTIN

Argonne's a contortionist -- absolutely fearless.

MENDEL

But you're not serious, are you?

ASTIN

No.

LAWRENCE

No.

MENDEL

Good. You'd risk spawning some freaky master race!

ASTIN
Very funny.

LAWRENCE
Ha, ha!

MENDEL
Do you ever think that you're being...exploited?

LAWRENCE
Like how?

ASTIN
Like how?

MENDEL
I assume she's served you food and drinks.

LAWRENCE
Sure.

ASTIN
Sure.

MENDEL
Well, have you noticed anything weird about yourself lately?

ASTIN
Like what?

LAWRENCE
Like what?

MENDEL
Are you more...fastidious. You know what I mean?

ASTIN
(smiling) Yes.

LAWRENCE
(smiling) Yeah,...

LAWRENCE
...I stopped watching football.

ASTIN
I've been craving chocolate.

LAWRENCE
Notice how my voice seems to be *(squeaking)* getting higher -- just kidding, Mendel.

ASTIN
Jesus, get a grip, man!

(Now the THREE MEN stand together at the same time.)

LAWRENCE
What's your problem, Mendel?

ASTIN

His problem is the twins; he resents them.

MENDEL

That's right, I resent how they've lured Sam into their man hating cult.

LAWRENCE

You're being paranoid; Sam's the same as she ever was.

MENDEL

She's always there. What if they're bisexual nymphomaniacs?

LAWRENCE

No way.

MENDEL

She's obsessed; she's even writing stories to impress them.

ASTIN

So what? Isn't that a good thing? She's being creative; she's inspired.

LAWRENCE

I've read them; they're great.

MENDEL

Have you read the one about the real estate lawyer who sounds exactly like me?

LAWRENCE

No.

ASTIN

You should be flattered!

MENDEL

He's an overpaid plutocrat with a club foot! He even looks like me! *(pause, he sighs)* Now I know how Virginia must have felt.

ASTIN

You mean you feel used?

MENDEL

And abused!

ASTIN

Sacrificed on the altar of art...?

MENDEL

Right, except Virginia was exalted; I've been distorted and commodified -- packaged and sold! She's putting together a book for potential publishers.

ASTIN

Really? They're that good?

MENDEL

No.

LAWRENCE

Yes!

LAWRENCE

They're great, I've always liked ghost stories -- especially now that I know they exist.

MENDEL

But why do they exist? Are they stuck on Earth or is there a final destination?

ASTIN

Buddhists claim they're all around, waiting to be reborn under better circumstances.

LAWRENCE

Even Pythagoras believed in the transmigration of souls.

MENDEL

So did Poe. One of his ghosts entered her own daughter's body.

LAWRENCE

Cool.

MENDEL

Her name was Morella and she waited till the daughter was older, then once she'd taken over, she tormented the girl's father, her former husband.

LAWRENCE

I prefer ghosts who haunt houses -- like Virginia.

MENDEL

So I assume you'll be attending the seance?

ASTIN

It's not a seance, Mendel; it's an attempt to mediate communication.

MENDEL

So are you going?

ASTIN
Yes.

LAWRENCE
Yes.

MENDEL
Then so am I!

SCENE 6

(Lights dim as MENDEL turns to speak to members of his club while the a middle aged woman, LITHIA NICKELS, appears in the parlor, followed by ASTIN, LAWRENCE, and SAMARIA.)

MENDEL
Not only was I in attendance, but the medium requested my assistance, hauling her gadgets. Her name was Lithia Nickels and she came equipped with state of the art cameras, audio recorders, and an electromagnetic field detector. She was all business, explaining about...

MENDEL
...infrasound.

LITHIA
Infrasound...

LITHIA
...waves of twenty hertz or less are inaudible to human ears, but we still sense vibrations, creating feelings of unease escalating to chills, goosebumps, and palpitations -- all neurological manifestations of mystical experiences.

FLUORINE
We've never seen her, but we think the ghost is a woman named Virginia Clemm Poe.

LITHIA
(*pause*) Oh, yes, there's a presence here.

(The lights start to flicker.)

SAMARIA
Oh, god.

LAWRENCE
Whoa...

ARGONNE
Shhhhhh!

(A RAVEN caws as lights dim to black.)

End of Act One

ACT II**SCENE 7**

(In dimmed light, MENDEL, SAMARIA, ARGONNE, FLUORINE, LAWRENCE and ASTIN sit in the parlor while LITHIA circles the room.)

LITHIA

Yes, there's definitely a presence.

ARGONNE

A woman...?

LITHIA

I can't tell yet. All I know is this spirit doesn't seem...benign.

FLUORINE

Are you sure?

ARGONNE

Shush, Fluorine, let her do her job.

LITHIA

(pause) Ah, she's still shadowy, but definitely a woman, and she's angry.

FLUORINE

Well, of course, she died young.

MENDEL

And married a pedophile.

LITHIA

Ah, yes, I see her more clearly now. Her hair is dark and pinned behind her neck in a bun.

FLUORINE

Is she slender with large eyes?

LITHIA

Yes, and she's pointing there.

ARGONNE

At the bookcase?

LITHIA

The wall next to it. Now she's pointing further down, to the floor.

(FLUORINE approaches the area and bends down.)

FLUORINE

Here?

LITHIA

Yes.

FLUORINE

There's a loose board; I've noticed it before.

ARGONNE

Try to lift it.

FLUORINE

I'm trying.

(FLUORINE leaps back.)

FLUORINE

Bloody hell!

ARGONNE

What...?!

FLUORINE

Sorry, it's just a beastly beetle, but christ, it's huge!

SAMARIA

(stepping back) Yuck!

LAWRENCE

Jesus, it's a big mother.

MENDEL

It's The Gold Bug! Poe would be pleased.

(LAWRENCE stomps on the beetle.)

LAWRENCE

Now it's The Dead Bug! (to Fluorine) Are you okay?

ARGONNE

Oh, for godssake, you're such a ninny! Move aside!

LAWRENCE

Let me help.

(LAWRENCE and ARGONNE pry the floor board loose.)

LAWRENCE

There's a box.

MENDEL

Ah, The Oblong Box.

LAWRENCE

What...?

SAMARIA

Shush!

MENDEL

Poe wrote about an oblong box.

(ARGONNE retrieves a small rectangular box.)

ARGONNE

Shall I open it?

FLUORINE

Of course!

SAMARIA

Yes!

LAWRENCE

Yeah.

ASTIN

Sure.

(Pause as ARGONNE opens the box.)

ARGONNE

There are two canine teeth and six small bones that came from fingers: two metacarpals, two proximal phalanges, and two distal phalanges.

FLUORINE

We can extract the DNA, then compare our analysis with her buried bones -- assuming they let us exhume her casket.

ARGONNE

Not bloody likely.

SAMARIA

(to *Lithia*) Can't you just ask her?

LITHIA

She hears you and she's smiling.

ARGONNE

Perhaps the sexton who unearthed her bones and reburied them in Baltimore was the same sexton who lived in this house -- so he kept some mementoes.

FLUORINE

Mementoes of a muse!

SAMARIA

Yes! Maybe that's why Virginia's haunting the house! If some of her remains were hidden here, maybe she wants them returned and reunited with her bones in Baltimore.

ASTIN

But why? What difference does it make if you're dead?

ARGONNE

Bones and teeth are authentic physical remains; they'll be featured as relics in our museum.

MENDEL

And they'll remind visitors of Berenice who wasted away till all that was left were her blood stained teeth.

LAWRENCE

Gross.

ARGONNE

Berenice was fiction, but Virginia was real, and Poe claimed she possessed more innate goodness than anyone he knew.

ARGONNE

They say she was lovely, gentle, and kind, a talented musician and gardener: the feminine ideal of her time. *(she sighs)* If only we could replicate her DNA.

LITHIA

Oh, dear, I'm afraid she's fading...

(ARGONNE takes out her phone and displays a picture.)

ARGONNE

Just to confirm: did she resemble this painting?

(Pause as LITHIA stares at the screen.)

FLUORINE

Poe wrote that her skin was like porcelain.

ARGONNE

Her cheeks flushed from consumption.

LITHIA

No, that's not her.

FLUORINE

What...?

ARGONNE

Are you certain?

(ARGONNE swipes and displays another picture.)

ARGONNE

Look, here's another painting.

LITHIA

I'm sorry, but she was...older.

FLUORINE

You said her hair was dark and in a bun.

LITHIA

But parted on the side, not the middle. And her nose was longer, her lips thinner, and she had wrinkles around her eyes.

(ARGONNE swipes to another picture.)

ARGONNE

Did she look like this?

LITHIA

Yes! Yes, that's her.

FLUORINE

It's Mummy! Oh, bloody hell, was it Mummy all along?

ARGONNE

Her letter claimed there was a ghost when she lived here, so could there be two?

LITHIA

I only saw one.

FLUORINE

The two of them must have met. Can one ghost replace or even consume another ghost?

LITHIA

They're all individuals, and we prefer the word "spirit" or "soul."

FLUORINE

But what was Mummy trying to tell us? Was she the one who's been filling the tea cups?
Oh, why why why can't she speak?!

LITHIA

Most of them don't. It takes enormous energy for spirits to communicate. They have to have a very good reason.

MENDEL

Oh, Mummy has a reason all right.

FLUORINE

(to Lithia) Can't you bring her back?

LITHIA

No, I can only make myself available in case she chooses to reappear.

ASTIN

I'm curious: Is there a god involved in all this?

LITHIA

I've never seen any evidence.

MENDEL

Speaking of gods, have the the twins told you about the lab in the cellar? That's where they're brewing weapons of mass castration.

FLUORINE

Oh, bollocks!

MENDEL

Just don't forget the house on Poe Street.

SAMARIA

Oh, shush!

MENDEL

This is where it's happening: the beginning of the end!

SAMARIA

Mendel has a warped sense of humor.

(Suddenly MENDEL begins to tremble, his eyes bulging,
his mouth agape.)

SAMARIA

Mendel, what's wrong?

ASTIN

What the hell..?

LAWRENCE

Oh, Jesus...

ASTIN

Look at his eyes!

(MENDEL slowly strolls towards the harp.)

LITHIA

Don't touch him!

SAMARIA

Mendel...?

LAWRENCE

Holy shit.

LITHIA

Move out of his way!

(MENDEL sits and plays the harp as if in a trance. Then
HE ceases playing and faints to the floor as SAMARIA
rushes to his side.)

SAMARIA

Oh, dear, oh, Mendel, can you hear me?

LAWRENCE

Christ man...

ASTIN

Hey, look at me!

FLUORINE

Oh, poor darling.

ASTIN

Mendel, can you stand?

LAWRENCE
Here, let me help.

FLUORINE
I'll fetch some water!

(FLUORINE dashes off as LAWRENCE and ASTIN help
MENDEL stagger to a chair.)

(*pause*) Can you speak?

LITHIA

(*whispering*) Yes.

MENDEL

What the hell happened?

ASTIN

(*breathless*) I...I felt a chill at the base of my neck. Then it was like...

MENDEL

Go on.

LITHIA

Like the blade of a knife was thrust through my back.

MENDEL

Do you remember playing the harp?

LITHIA

What...?

MENDEL

You played the harp!

SAMARIA

Awesomely.

LAWRENCE

(*to Lithia*) What's going on?

MENDEL

Her spirit passed through you.

LITHIA

ARGONNE

How thrilling.

MENDEL

Thrilling?! It was terrifying! (*shivering*) My...my skin's still prickly.

LITHIA

Did you see anything?

MENDEL

No.

LITHIA

Did you feel her leaving you?

MENDEL

Yes, like my lungs tried to squeeze past my ribs.

(FLUORINE returns with a glass of water.)

LITHIA

Try to calm down, take deep breaths.

MENDEL

Fuck! What grisly game is she playing, and why me?!

ARGONNE

Why do you think? She feels your hostility and she's proving her powers.

MENDEL

(*to Lithia*) Where is the bitch? Where did she go?!

LITHIA

She's no longer here.

MENDEL

You're sure?

LITHIA

(*pause, closing her eyes*) Yes, she's gone.

FLUORINE

Here, Mendel drink some water.

MENDEL

No thanks.

LITHIA

I think you've experienced what's known as a sensory meridian response, a spectral stimulation of your brain's left anterior insula, although it's usually not so traumatic and rarely leaves any physical evidence.

MENDEL

My palms are sweaty, my heart's racing, I'm itching from this fucking fur, and I swear something slid down my throat, something slimy.

ARGONNE

Fear causes excess salivation.

MENDEL

Did she slip something inside me? Can she do that?

FLUORINE

Maybe you swallowed The Conquerer Worm.

MENDEL

No!

ASTIN

The what...?!

LAWRENCE

What's The Conquerer Worm?

FLUORINE

It's a poem -- one of our favorites. Argonne adapted it to music. *(bursting into song)*
Behold the desk where Poe once wrote...

ARGONNE AND FLUORINE

*His tales of hopes and fears,
While Virginia on her harp
Played music of the spheres.*

*But while the angels romped about
There came a crawling shape;
A slimy thing that squirmed around
And left a bloody wake.*

MENDEL

How can you sing while I'm suffering!?

FLUORINE

Oh, rubbish, we're attempting to cheer you up!
(singing) It writhes!- it writhes!- with mortal pangs!

FLUORINE and ARGONNE

*Our guests declared it rude,
 And seraphs sobbed as vermin fangs
 Devoured them for food.*

*Now the angels, all pallid and wan,
 Uprising, unveiling, affirm
 That the victim of life is tragic man
 And it's hero the Conqueror Worm!*

MENDEL

I'm out of here!

SAMARIA

Wait! Where are you going?!

MENDEL

To the hospital! To see if the witch poisoned me!

(MENDEL dashes off as lights dim to black.)

SCENE 8

*(In the conference room of The Jupiter Investment Club,
 MENDEL continues speaking.)*

MENDEL

Three hours later, after being poked, prodded and drained, a doctor declared me free of worms and toxins of any kind. After leaving the hospital, I realized I'd left my briefcase in the parlor of the house I swore I'd never enter again. But first I went home to shave, shower, and pour myself a whiskey. Then I returned to Poe Street where Sam was nestled in the arms of the demonic duo.

(MENDEL has entered the parlor where SAMARIA is seated on the sofa between the TWINS. SHE leaps up.)

SAMARIA

Oh, sweetheart, are you all right?

FLUORINE

Mendel, welcome back!

ARGONNE

So you weren't poisoned after all?

MENDEL

Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm fine.

FLUORINE

Thank heaven!

MENDEL

I'm not here to stay. I came to retrieve my briefcase, then I'm leaving and never coming back.

FLUORINE

No!

SAMARIA

Mendel...?

MENDEL

I'll recommend another lawyer to handle your affairs.

FLUORINE

But we want *you*, Mendel!

MENDEL

I'm no longer available.

FLUORINE

Oh, please stay! *(to Samaria)* Make him stay! I'll get some wine.

(FLUORINE departs as SAMARIA pulls MENDEL down onto the sofa.)

SAMARIA

Sit here, next to me. So what did the doctor say?

ARGONNE

Did you explain...?

MENDEL

Oh, yes, I told him all about the house, Mummy's ghost, and *(to Argonne)* your scheme to emasculate the world.

ARGONNE

Did he respond?

MENDEL

He prescribed a sedative and recommended a psychiatrist.

ARGONNE

No offense, but that's prudent advice.

MENDEL

Offense taken. *(to Samaria)* Where's your brother and Astin?

SAMARIA

Lawrence has to study, so they both left.

MENDEL

Smart move! This house is a danger zone, *(to Argonne)* and if I were you I'd hire an exorcist then get the hell out!

ARGONNE

Nonsense, the house is feeling more and more like an old friend holding us close.

(FLUORINE breezes in with a tray of wine filled glasses.)

FLUORINE

And we can't abandon Mummy who serenades us to sleep.

MENDEL

So the harpy plays her harp at night?

SAMARIA

Must you always be so negative?

MENDEL

Yes, I must! I'm the one she attacked! Even your medium said she was "not benign," and let's not forget how she deceived us all into thinking she was Virginia.

FLUORINE

Oh, rubbish, we deceived ourselves.

MENDEL

Before I leave, I have to ask: does it ever occur to either of you to resent your mother?

ARGONNE

Not really.

MENDEL

It doesn't bother you that she wasn't willing to accept you as you were or would've been?

ARGONNE

We believe she was well intentioned, and what good would resentment do now?

FLUORINE

It's too late to be anyone but ourselves, besides when Mummy plucks the harp strings, it's so sweet, so enchanting, we know she can't be harmful.

ARGONNE

Her tones vary in frequency and pitch, but we can feel them affecting our cellular configurations.

MENDEL

Your what...?

ARGONNE

Surely even you know the electrons and atoms in our bodies aren't just particles of matter but waves of energy that ripple out, expanding in patterns of light. The resonating vibrations of the harp strings affect those patterns, and when Mummy's playing, they're intense enough to penetrate to the outer less enlightened shell so it cracks apart, making way for the deeper, soulful self.

MENDEL

I see, so have the vibrations penetrated you? (*turning to Fluorine*) Is Argonne more soulful, and sensitive, or is she more cracked?

FLUORINE

I haven't noticed, but what a pity that music isn't the means to Mummy's ends, but how can her soulful sonatas be heard above the gunfire?

ARGONNE

Exactly! Which is why we still need biological solutions, though we know you don't approve.

MENDEL

That's right, I don't; it's illegal, immoral, and insane.

FLUORINE

What's the matter, Mendel? You liked us at first, admit it, you did!

MENDEL

That was before I realized you don't want the same world I do.

ARGONNE

You mean a world where men are men and women are women?

MENDEL

Something like that.

ARGONNE

That usually means a world where women are expected to do what men want.

SAMARIA

Mendel respects the status quo, and why shouldn't he? He's always lived in his privileged bubble with his doting mother, private schools, daddy's law firm -- not to mention his Yacht Club, Harvard Club, and Investment Club.

MENDEL

You're doing it again: talking like I'm not here.

SAMARIA

I'm just saying that you have every reason to like the world as it is, but the twins and I want a better world, a world without wars.

MENDEL

I'm afraid such a world is very unlikely.

ARGONNE

And unprofitable since your investment club has shares in phallic weaponry -- you know, guns, grenades,...

ARGONNE

...torpedoes.

FLUORINE

Torpedoes.

SAMARIA

That's not true, is it?

MENDEL

Well...

SAMARIA

You're kidding...?

FLUORINE

Oh, tsk, tsk, tsk.

MENDEL

We have mutual funds that include shares in Northrop, Boeing, and General Dynamics.

ARGONNE

Where they recently manufactured seven thousand, four hundred and twelve light armored military tanks in Lima, Ohio.

FLUORINE

Good lord...

SAMARIA

Tanks!

SAMARIA

You invested in tanks!

MENDEL

They employ ninety thousand people! We also have stock in Raytheon and they make...

MENDEL

...missiles.

ARGONNE

Missiles.

FLUORINE

Boom, boom.

SAMARIA

Missiles...?

SAMARIA

Why can't they build bridges instead? Or houses and trains and storm barriers to save our cities from floods. How can you sleep owning stocks that depend on our being at war?

MENDEL

Because that's how our country finances its army so we can kill the bastards before they kill us.

SAMARIA

That's exactly the mentality that keeps the madness going on and on.

MENDEL

Look, think what you like, but we're still the wealthiest, most productive economy in the world.

ARGONNE

An economy of Darwinian entrepreneurs who prefer war to peace, computers to people, and the bloody, bullying patriarchal world that you apparently support.

MENDEL

If you hate us so much, why are you here? You're here because Mummy made you rich!

SAMARIA

Oh, shush, Mendel!

MENDEL

(approaching Argonne) You came to where you're safe and envied, to join the huddled masses who think we live like gods and because we encourage bright men and women to invent cars, phones, the internet, and we launch missions to outer space -- which is where you must be from if you think you can change human nature. *(to Samantha)* Stop looking at me with such contempt!

SAMARIA

It's because I'm beginning to realize who you really are. You and your investment club are what's turned this country into a corporate controlled oligarchy full of greedy materialistic consumers.

MENDEL

You want materialistic, then look in the mirror! You're the one wearing the Chanel jacket, the Bulgari watch -- not to mention the Tiffany engagement ring.

SAMARIA

Here, take it back!

(SAMARIA pulls off her ring and thrusts it into Mendel's hand!)

MENDEL

Sam...?

SAMARIA

And take your watch back too!

MENDEL

Let's continue this someplace else.

ARGONNE

Why? I'm enjoying myself.

FLUORINE

Me too.

MENDEL

You would! You're the devils who seduced her!

SAMARIA

What?!

MENDEL

They turned you against me!

FLUORINE

Oh, bollocks!

MENDEL

What's with all this hugging and hand holding?

SAMARIA

Just what are you implying?!

MENDEL

It's bad enough you've bewitched Lawrence and Astin, but leave Sam alone!

ARGONNE

Why Mendel, are you jealous?

MENDEL

And just so you know: I'm going to do everything I can to sabotage your ludicrous museum and Frankenstein laboratory! I'll find every legal and illegal means to ruin any hopes of your House of Horrors ever seeing the light of day! *(to Sam)* Now, come on, let's go somewhere we can talk!

SAMARIA

There's nothing to talk about; we're through! Now get the hell out!

MENDEL

What...? Wait! Wait a minute! Look, Sam, I...I spoke in anger...

SAMARIA

I'm glad! I need to know who you are before I make the mistake of marrying you! I should have realized you seemed too...

MENDEL

What...?!

FLUORINE

What?!

ARGONNE

What?

MENDEL

(to Fluorine and Argonne) Go away!

SAMARIA

No, stay!

ARGONNE

(to Samaria) You were saying he seemed too...?

SAMARIA

Perfect! His looks, his charm -- even my parents approved -- but now I know I'd never have grown if we'd married. It's not his fault; he was programmed to be who he is.

MENDEL

And who's that?

SAMARIA

A privileged, predictable, supercilious snob!

MENDEL

Thanks.

SAMARIA

To be fair, you're also generous and appreciate the arts.

MENDEL

(approaching her) Look, I may not be the most astute, well read, or introspective person, but I know what I feel, so please, let's not let politics or other people ruin our relationship. My feelings for your having nothing to do with your views, so let's not quit trying; let's keep talking.

SAMARIA

I'm sick of talking; just leave me alone!

(SAMARIA marches off as MENDEL turns to the TWINS.)

MENDEL

Now look what you've done! I finally find someone I could spend the rest of my life with...

FLUORINE

Then go after her!

MENDEL

Why? What can I say?!

ARGONNE

Tell her you'll quit the investment club.

MENDEL

What?! Quit my club...?

ARGONNE

Why ever not?

FLUORINE

Go on, Mendel, hurry!

(MENDEL dashes off as the TWINS are enveloped in darkness.)

SCENE 9

(Once again, MENDEL steps forward to address members of his Investment club.)

MENDEL

I hurried, but Sam had escaped in a cab. After that she ceased taking my calls or responding to texts and e-mails. Six months later I was still so depressed, my cousin suggested three weeks of a monkish retreat in the Catskills where all electronic gadgets were forbidden and the library was blissfully free of Poe's Tales of the Grotesque. The day after I returned, Sam texted me to meet her at Wilson's Tavern. She was already seated when I joined her, and we each asked the other,...

MENDEL

...how have you been?

SAMARIA

How have you been?

(Now MENDEL is seated at the tavern across from SAMARIA.)

SAMARIA

Teaching mostly, and you?

MENDEL

Not great. I've somehow reached a point where all the houses, all the apartments, all their interiors -- even all my clients -- were starting to look alike, which is why I'm leaving the firm to try something else -- not sure what or where. I could quit my clubs, liquidate my assets, and leave the city -- maybe the country.

SAMARIA

So you're still with your investment club?

MENDEL

Why should I quit if you're determined to leave, though you'll be glad to know I sold my defense stocks. *(pause)* So has the museum opened?

SAMARIA

No, but they painted all the rooms in shades of red -- from scarlet to crimson. They asked me to write monologues based on Poe's poems for the actors they were planning to hire. I was going to play Helen.

MENDEL

"Was?" So you're not going to play Helen...?

SAMARIA

I'm not involved at all.

MENDEL

Oh? Have you and the twins had a falling out?

SAMARIA

In a way. *(pause)* Stop looking so smug.

MENDEL

Sorry, I...I'm not feeling anything really, though I never believed the museum would be more than a tawdry front for their freaky experiments.

SAMARIA

You were right. Behind the museum they were furnishing a secret clinic where they planned to continue testing the Virginium.

MENDEL

"Continue testing...?" So they found volunteers?

SAMARIA

Only two that I know of. They're joining us now.

(LAWRENCE and ASTIN have entered to join them at the table. THEY are feminized: their movements graceful; their hair and clothing altered.)

MENDEL

Jesus... What...?

LAWRENCE

Side effects.

ASTIN

So far a tendency to lose facial hair, grow breasts, and weakened bone density has caused us to shrink in stature. We're feeling all the feminine clichés, and Larry's taken up gardening and I'm learning to play the piano, so maybe there's some of Virginia in the Virginium.

MENDEL

But how...? Did they spike the wine?

LAWRENCE

No, it was an accident. They were experimenting, cooking the Virginium in a pot on the stove and it became a colorless gas that filled the house.

SAMARIA

None of us knew its effects until they started manifesting symptoms, but the best endocrinologists in the city are treating them.

ASTIN

Apparently, whatever infected us has a hormonal gene drive, a mechanism that can propagate traits through generations. It's legally used to control insects by spreading sterility to kill them off, but it's feminizing us, fulfilling "Mummy's" dream of a domesticated planet.

MENDEL

Jesus, what if they send this stuff up the chimney?! What if it infects the entire city?! Did you call the Health Department? The police? The FBI?

LAWRENCE

Hell, yes, we called everyone, and the FBI called the CDC, but by the time they sent investigators, the twins had taken off.

MENDEL

You're kidding?! They're gone? When did this happen?

LAWRENCE

While you were in the Catskills without your phone.

LAWRENCE

You missed all the fun, Mendel.

MENDEL

Well, where are they? Where did they go?

ASTIN

The FBI tracked them as far Mexico City. They shipped the Virginium there, collected it, then left without a trace.

LAWRENCE

All we know is that they planned to spray clouds of the stuff from planes like crop dusters. Fluorine said they'll fly over South America, Africa, the Middle East, parts of Europe -- wherever they find guys with guns in their hands and hate in their hearts.

MENDEL

Is there any proof they've been effective?

ASTIN

Nope, none. There's still plenty of brutality: the usual bombings and massacres.

LAWRENCE

We think they're biding their time, waiting for things to cool down then wham: The fucking Armageddon!

MENDEL

I can't believe they're gone. What about the house?

SAMARIA

They abandoned it, but left instructions in an envelope addressed to you. I hope you don't mind that we opened it. Here, read it yourself.

(SAMARIA hands a large envelope to MENDEL who opens it, retrieves a document which HE reads, then extracts a set of keys.)

MENDEL

They left the house to me...?

LAWRENCE

Surprise, surprise.

MENDEL

But why me?! I won't drive by never mind cross the threshold. What if the place is still contaminated?

ASTIN

The guys from the Health Department detected no toxins.

SAMARIA

I need to borrow the keys to get some books I left there. Will you come with me?

MENDEL

No thanks.

SAMARIA

Please?

MENDEL

Ha! I'll only come with an exorcist.

SAMARIA

All right, we'll find one.

MENDEL

I'm serious.

SAMARIA

So am I.

(THEY ALL leave the tavern.)

SCENE 10

(MENDEL turns to approach members of his Investment Club.)

MENDEL

Sam called every exorcist in the city -- all of whom were booked, batshit, or specializing in humans not houses, so we finally settled on Lithia who agreed to come again. Three days later, I flagged a cab, met Sam, and we entered the house, *my* house on Poe Street. She found her books, then the two of us sat primly in the parlor waiting for Lithia. After a few moments, Sam broke the silence and said...

MENDEL

...it's all yours now.

SAMARIA

It's all yours now.

MENDEL

Not for long. As soon as it's safe, I'll sell it. Who was here last?

SAMARIA

The inspectors I guess.

MENDEL

Notice how they left the lights on -- because it's creepy as ever.

SAMARIA

I feel fine. *(pause)* You're not really scared, are you?

MENDEL

No, just nervous, I didn't expect to see the place again.

SAMARIA

(pause) Did you miss me?

MENDEL

If you must know, losing you felt as brutal as a coronary infarction. It seems I possessed a tell tale heart, and though the thumpings are calmed, I'm still taking medications.

SAMARIA

I...I'm sorry.

MENDEL

I don't blame you or even the twins. In fact, you were right about me: I loved playing the market, playing roulette with my own and other people's money. I didn't give a damn that our economic system could be cruel and unjust. Anyway, I'm getting out, so I guess you did me a favor.

SAMARIA

You're really quitting your father's firm?

MENDEL

Yes, but I'm staying in real estate, acquiring dozens of vacant townhomes and warehouses in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, and Soho. They'll be converted to housing for the homeless paupers and poets of the city, people not unlike Poe and Virginia.

SAMARIA

(pause) After we broke up, I...I missed our weekends. I kept forgetting you weren't sleeping beside me, and I'd wake up, and when you weren't there, I felt such a sickly, hollow emptiness, I...I...

MENDEL

What are you saying...?

(The doorbell chimes.)

MENDEL

She's here.

(MENDEL opens the door to LITHIA.)

LITHIA

Hello, Mister Steingold, I hear you're the new owner.

MENDEL

Yes, but I can't in good conscience sell the place if it's haunted, so do whatever you can to assure us she's gone.

LITHIA

As I mentioned before, I don't make assurances.

MENDEL

How can I exorcise her?

LITHIA

With priests it's a tedious process, so it's best to let spirits leave on their own, but you can encourage them by burning herbs like white sage and fennel. You can also keep lights on, windows wide open, and get rid of any objects the spirits are drawn to -- like that harp.

MENDEL

Right, the harp has to go.

LITHIA

Now please, let's be quiet and I'll see if I sense a presence.

(Pause as LITHIA circles the parlor.)

LITHIA

She's not here, but I'll go through the rest of the house. I'll start with the rooms upstairs.

(LITHIA departs.)

SAMARIA

I have to confess something. *(pause, she sighs)* I love this house; it's a treasure, and if I were you, I'd keep it.

MENDEL

You can't be serious.

SAMARIA

But I am. Of course, you'd have to cover the red; paint the walls a buttery yellow or peachy cream and maybe the other rooms in shades of teal, but it's stunning really: the moldings, the high ceilings, the oak floors, and even its history -- all the people who lived here.

MENDEL

And died! And were haunted, poisoned and betrayed. Before I sell, I'm going to toss out every stick of furniture; the carpets, curtains, the lamps, linens, and every pot, pan, plate; all the crystal, glasses, knives, forks, spoons. I'm make sure every inch is scrubbed, scoured, and sterilized so there's nothing left of them -- not so much as a hair, a fingerprint, or a speck of their dust!

SAMARIA

I understand your feelings, but isn't it strange how even with their renovations, it's still a house that wants to be a home. Look how it's designed with space for living and dining rooms, a library, and extra bedrooms with baths for guests or children -- there's even a media room. And don't you love that patch in the back where you could plant those blue hydrangeas you like, and maybe some herbs and tomatoes. We could've been happy here.

MENDEL

"We" ...? I can't believe what I'm hearing. *(pause)* Are you all right?

SAMARIA

No, I haven't been right since you left. I've had time to regret everything I said, to realize what I'd lost. My rabbi says the two things that make grown ups happy are stimulating conversations and great sex, and we had that, didn't we? *(pause)* Fluorine said I was a fool to let you go.

MENDEL

Really?

SAMARIA

Even Argonne called you a prince among men.

MENDEL

Have you been drinking?

SAMARIA

No.

MENDEL

Then what's gotten into you?

SAMARIA

Nothing! It's just that after you were gone, and seeing you now, I...I realize how wonderful you really are, how we could've had a love that was more than love.

MENDEL

You're quoting Poe?

SAMARIA

All my days are trances
And all my nightly dreams
Are where thy grey eye glances
And where thy footstep gleams.

MENDEL

You're sure you're not... possessed?

SAMARIA

The only thing I'm possessed by is remorse, and maybe someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive me.

(LITHIA returns.)

LITHIA

The only presence I sense is a mouse in the attic. You should set some traps.

MENDEL

(handing her a check) Thanks.

LITHIA

Good night, and good luck selling the house.

(LITHIA departs.)

SAMARIA

Oh, Mendel, is it possible to start again? Don't answer yet! No, no, forget I said that! Forget everything! Let's just try not to...to be bitter.

MENDEL

Fine. (*glancing at his watch*) I should be going.

SAMARIA

Wait! Before we leave, I...I want to show you the room the twins made up for me -- for both of us really. There's a hand carved Louis the Fifteenth bed covered in a green satin quilt. Come upstairs, come on, follow me!

(SAMARIA leaves as MENDEL turns to end his speech to members of The Jupiter Investment Club.)

MENDEL

God help me, I followed; I even stayed the night, the next day, and bottom line: it's not the House of Usher anymore; it's the House of Steingold, already repainted, refurnished; the windows opened and the breeze scented with sage. Since we're all friends here, I should mention that Sam and I are together again, though I'm concerned about her insistence that we keep the harp. She's taking lessons and is already proficient -- too proficient, *much* too proficient, and when she plays, the house seems to quiver with life, and sometimes I think I see the walls bleeding blood, ha! Yes, I know, it's just your imagination, Mendel, from reading too much Poe: "from deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing." But I'm no longer fearing the house, so you're welcome to visit if you're passing by. (*pause, he sighs*) Well, that's it then; meeting's adjourned!

(As the lights dim to black a RAVEN caws.)

The End