

# The House on Poe Street

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Play by Fengar Gael  
Poems by Edgar Allan Poe  
Music composed by Sheilah Rae  
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*“I have no faith in human perfectibility. Man is now only more active,  
not more happy nor more wise than he was six thousand years ago.”*

*“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 28

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 polymathic prodigy, raised in London, age 23

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

LITHIA NICKELS, a Jamaican born middle-aged psychic medium

**TIME:**

The present and recent past

**PLACE:**

New York City: the meeting room of The Jupiter Investment Club, the parlor of a town house on Edgar Allan Poe Street, and a dark corner of William Wilson's Tavern.

**PROLOGUE**

(In an exclusive New York City clubroom, 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. You've requested an explanation for my resignation and you shall have it. For the new members who don't know me, I'm Mendel Steingold, who like most of you was twice blessed: first to be born a boy, and then to have affluent parents whose affection I repaid by graduating with a law degree and an avid interest in real estate. I wanted nothing more than to be admired for my wit, wisdom, and the good fortune to be happily married and among the one percent. In my world, it was perfectly fine for privileged men to earn four hundred times the wages of their employees, so you see, I didn't actively pursue an examined life or the ideals of freedom, justice, and the fair distribution of our planet's resources. No, instead I happily frittered away the years at my father's firm of Lanthan, Fermi, and Steingold -- until I 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 ARGONNE and FLUORINE SEABORG, two striking young women who speak with British accents 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

Crikey, 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

We assume it's her tribute to "The Masque of...

ARGONNE

...The Red Death."

FLUORINE

"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 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. 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 and poncey, 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 champagne in the fridge.

ARGONNE

I'll take a look!

(ARGONNE departs.)

FLUORINE

We should've come sooner. I feel wretched, though Mummy 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

Mummy said this was where Poe wrote "The Raven." (*pause, she sighs*) 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.

FLUORINE

Yes, 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 transsexuals. 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)* Here's to happy days on Poe Street!

FLUORINE

Cheers!

ARGONNE

Cheers!

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...well...

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

ARGONNE

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

FLUORINE

Double trouble! Then Mummy did the gender switcheroo, even though her colleagues called her procedures unethical -- the demise of humanity and all that eugenics rubbish.



ARGONNE

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

FLUORINE

Why not? He's *our* lawyer! And 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 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

Ducky! We've 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,..."

FLUORINE

"...And the fever called living  
Is conquered at last."

ARGONNE

"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 Mums 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 variants associated with gratitude and positive attitudes, but they're not reliable since they change with each person's circumstance.

FLUORINE

Mummy just wanted to make people kinder and more compassionate.

ARGONNE

Since it's obvious that pacifists and missionaries will never convert the gun-loving warmongers of the world, and since it's mostly men attacking men, Mummy thought less men equals less violence.

FLUORINE

Less rape, repression and regression.

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 cherished and respected.

ARGONNE

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

FLUORINE

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

MENDEL

You mean like chemical castration?

ARGONNE

Nothing so primitive.

MENDEL

So would a boy go to 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 misinformed journalists.

ARGONNE

But now that we're here in New York, we're resolved to be productive, to be useful and make a difference in this world.

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 Easington 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; on Fifth Avenue there's the Metropolitan Museum which rivals the Louvre; and there's the Frick, the Guggenheim; and in midtown there's the Museum of Modern Art and all the Broadway theatres.

FLUORINE

Oh, we love 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

How did you lovebirds meet?

MENDEL

Through mutual friends at Harvard, and it turned out both sets of parents belong to the New York Yacht Club.

FLUORINE

Oh, how ducky! So do you have any friends who might fancy 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

...as long as they're hot and hunky like you, Mendel.

MENDEL

Me, hot? Ha! Well, 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, 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 fetching?

ARGONNE

Fluorine! 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

Usually. I especially enjoy meeting clients and assessing their estates. Even as a boy, I was curious to see 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

Absolutely!

ARGONNE

Now please show us which papers to sign.

MENDEL

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

ARGONNE

Of course, then 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 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. Even that first day, the interior of the house struck me as vaguely oppressive, though "Mummy" had evicted the tenants and torn down their walls to recreate the single family dwelling it once was. In any case, despite my reservations, that following 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

Welcome.

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 it makes me feel warm.

MENDEL

You don't find it...unnerving?

SAMARIA

No.

LAWRENCE

It makes me thirsty.

MENDEL

For blood?

LAWRENCE

For wine!

FLUORINE

Brilliant! 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.

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 wealthy, stable countries can go astray. In other words, is there any real proof of moral progress in the world.

ASTIN

Oh, I can answer that: there isn't -- especially now.

SAMARIA

You're such a cynic, Astin.

ARGONNE

*(to Astin)* Are you studying history as well?

ASTIN

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

Yeah, 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 fighter planes, and your military spends more on weapons than the armies of the next seven nations combined.

MENDEL

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

ASTIN

You're kidding?

LAWRENCE

Wow, 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 only fluent in French, German, Spanish, but can recall every conversation we've ever had -- verbatim.

ASTIN

I'm impressed.

LAWRENCE

Holy shit.

SAMARIA

*(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 the house into...

FLUORINE

...a museum!

ARGONNE

A museum!

FLUORINE

We'll give guided tours featuring all things Poe, complete with skulls and coffins.

SAMARIA

And a pit and pendulum...?

FLUORINE

Of course! And dioramas depicting scenes from his poems and stories.

ARGONNE

We might also hire actors to play characters such as Marie Roget and...

ARGONNE

...Annabelle Lee.

FLUORINE

Annabelle Lee.

SAMARIA

That's wonderful; I'll bring my students.

MENDEL

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

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 find he's morbid, rambling, and constantly referring to arcane obscurities I have to look up.

ARGONNE

He was paid by the word.

MENDEL

Ha!

ASTIN

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

ARGONNE

It won't be small if we purchase the houses on either side and break through the walls to recreate Prince Prospero's ballroom.

FLUORINE

And Tarr and Fether's asylum with dining for the deranged. Mendel will see if the owners are willing to sell.

MENDEL

Their names are public record, but some of these houses are owned by people who need them as investments. Of course, 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 it all?

FLUORINE

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

MENDEL

You mean the chemistry...?

ARGONNE

No! We're going to become oenophiles, connoisseurs of wine, so we'll be expanding Mummy's vineyard which she named Nevermore.

LAWRENCE

It certainly is delicious.

SAMARIA

And intoxicating. I'm already feeling its effect.

LAWRENCE

So am I.

ASTIN

Me too.

FLUORINE

The wines will 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 might 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 shop! We're also transposing Poe's poems to music which we'll perform in harmony for group tours. Would you like to hear "The Bells?"

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!  
All the heavens, seem to twinkle  
With a crystalline delight;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
To the tintinnabulation,  
The tintinnabulation,  
The tintinnabulation  
That so musically swells  
From the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells, bells, bells!*

(SAMARIA, LAWRENCE and ASTIN applaud.)

ASTIN  
That's great!

LAWRENCE  
You should make videos!

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.

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

FLUORINE  
Surely with your experience, you know that as houses age, they seem to grow hearts, minds and souls of their own. 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, Virigina Eliza Clemm!

SAMARIA  
(*to Lawrence and Astin*) She was Edgar's wife. (*to the twins*) 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 taps 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 houses the Poe's stayed in, *(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! 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.

FLUORINE  
When we follow the sounds, she comes down to this room and sits *(pointing)* right there, and I swear there's a slight indentation in the cushions.

ARGONNE  
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  
She's too fagged. She was fragile in life, so in death she can't summon the spiritual power to strum the strings from one dimension to another.

SAMARIA

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

ARGONNE

I'd say, what a pity you died of consumption, a disease we now call tuberculosis and can cure with antibiotics.

FLUORINE

I'd say, my dear Virginia, never think you lived in vain. Edgar adored you and your brief life inspired his immortal poems, and all the families who followed in your footsteps have taken care to preserve your precious harp.

MENDEL

How do you know it's her harp?

FLUORINE

We don't, but it's an antique dated 1836, so it might have 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 the last place he lived in the city. *(displaying his screen)* Look, here are the rooms.

ASTIN

God, they're small.

SAMARIA

How quaint and cozy.

LAWRENCE

*(reading his screen)* There's also a walking tour of other places the Poes lived 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

But this might be where Virginia spent her final hours.

LAWRENCE

*(reading his screen)* 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 delusional polygamous.

SAMARIA

Mendel!

ARGONNE

It’s called consanguinity, and it’s form of social control, of keeping wealth within families, while breeding offspring with low IQs and genetic mutations -- which explains why they’re susceptible to oppressive religions with archaic laws.

SAMARIA

But the Poes didn’t have children and some biographers claim they were more like brother and sister, so their marriage might not have been consummated.

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, read his manuscripts, but now all she does is leave her effluvia.

LAWRENCE

Her what...?

FLUORINE

It started last Wednesday when 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 lethal drops that dripped into Lady Rowena's goblet?

ARGONNE

Mendel's referring to Poe's tale of Ligeia, but this has a denser viscosity -- as if it came from lungs instead of veins.

FLUORINE

Like sputum laced with blood.

ARGONNE

It's disgusting.

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 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 your 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 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.

ARGONNE

Why? 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 everyone else.

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

Oh, 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 artists were valued as much as athletes, 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 her intended targets?

ASTIN

Right, they'd be in armies in jungles, bunkers or hiding out in cities.

SAMARIA

It could be given to women to use on men -- like mace.

ASTIN

Or mixed into a universal vaccine.

FLUORINE

Or virus! Then mosquitos could spread it.

MENDEL

But how would you know it's working?

ARGONNE

Obviously, the most violent cases would no longer be compelled to rape, shoot, loot or pollute. They'd prefer light to darkness, creation to destruction, peace to conflicts and murders in wars.

MENDEL

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

FLUORINE

Oh, what does it matter? Mummy's formulas failed and she's gone, so 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

*(whispering)* Shush, Mendel, maybe they don't want to discuss this.

FLUORINE

Oh, we don't mind. *(to Astin and Lawrence)* There's an investigation at Mummy's clinic. It seems she changed the sex in utero without the parents' consent, so the clinic's being sued by pissed 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?

LAWRENCE

I don't have it.

SAMARIA

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 shooting or 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

Yes, 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!

LAWRENCE

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

MENDEL

Bloody Mary!

LAWRENCE

Catherine the Great, and let's not forget Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, and wasn't Hillary a hawk? 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. That's what they knew and they didn't have the insight or courage 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 nearly a thousand more words a day than men, and aren't all wars a failure of language?

LAWRENCE

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

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 questions. One blink for yes; 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

Will 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 honor you as well?

(The lights flicker once.)

FLUORINE

Ah!

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!

SAMARIA  
Oh, my god!

FLUORINE  
Oh, crikey!

ASTIN  
Jesus...

Shhhhh!

ARGONNE

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

FLUORINE  
That was marvelous, Virginia! Please play some more.

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

LAWRENCE  
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 put it past you to be playing parlor tricks. Soon you'll be installing fog machines and floating skeletons.

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

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

MENDEL  
Sorry. Look, there's plenty of restaurants around here -- is anyone hungry?

ASTIN  
Famished!

FLUORINE  
Yes, let's dine, then go dancing.

LAWRENCE

There's Club Hop Frog 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?

LAWRENCE

It sounds like a bird's flown in.

ARGONNE

*(to Fluorine)* Did you leave a window open?

FLUORINE

Oh, bugger all! I'll check!

LAWRENCE

Let me help!

*(FLUORINE and LAWRENCE depart, then FLUORINE shouts.)*

FLUORINE

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

*(Cawing sounds are heard as ARGONNE and ASTIN leave, and SAMARIA start to follow.)*

MENDEL

*(grasping Samantha's arm)* Pssst! Sam! Don't go!

SAMARIA

What...? Why not?!

MENDEL

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

SAMARIA

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

MENDEL

My 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

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

SAMARIA

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

*(Cawing is heard as SAMARIA 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 Astin, Lawrence, and Sam volunteered as a tour guides to the city's cultural treasures while 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.)

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, but the silly twit slipped it into her coat pocket, then flew to Jamaica. She forgot all about it till she wore the coat again and (*waving the letter*) here it is.

SAMARIA

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

(ARGONNE snatches the letter and hands it to SAMARIA.)

ARGONNE

We've memorized it but you can read along.

(SAMARIA stares at the page as the TWINS recite its contents.)

ARGONNE

"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.

FLUORINE

"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

“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.

ARGONNE

Then you read it.

SAMARIA

*(reading)* “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 who succeed in transforming this war ravaged planet...

SAMARA

...to one.

FLUORINE

...to one...

FLUORINE

“...of verdant glories for all!”

ARGONNE

“...of verdant glories for all.”

FLUORINE

“Sincerely, Your Mother, Beryl Seaborg.”

SAMARIA

*(pause, she sighs)* Well, she’s confirmed your feelings about the house being haunted, and 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! We’ve also been analyzing the slushy goo our ghost leaves in tea cups and porridge bowls.

ARGONNE

We’ve been storing it in metal containers, and 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 and is unrelated to any zoonotic virus or bacteria, and might even be an...

ARGONNE  
...unknown element.

FLUORINE  
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  
No, 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 leaps up, spewing forth his tea!)



MENDEL

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 dedicated to Edgar, we're calling ours the Virginia Clemm Poe Museum. We've decided to keep it small so we won't be needing the houses on either side. We've already commissioned Virginia's portrait and some of Poe's fictional women who we'll also represent with actors and effigies.

MENDEL

But why create a museum that features weaklings? Sorry, but Poe's women were passive victims who died young or were murdered or buried alive like Madeline in her blood stained gown.

ARGONNE

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

SAMARIA

Of course. I'll get her contact numbers from my friend, Ruth.

*(SAMARIA lifts her phone from her purse and starts texting.)*

MENDEL

So you're 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 eighty-three known occupants. The city's records show nine on site deaths including a minister, merchant, banker, sexton, and the remaining five 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 a 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. Want to hear it?

MENDEL

*(mumbling)* Not really...

SAMARIA

Oh, yes, please!

(FLUORINE and ARGONNE burst into song)

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,*

FLUORINE and ARGONNE (cont'd)

*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 his 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 rattraps to the outrageously opulent, but even with 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 if you want to do more you could join the Peace Corps and convince the tribes to stop fighting feuds that go back centuries. But I know you, Sam: you'll give up your Prada purses and Gucci shoes, but you're not going to leave your your family, your students, or me. Well, are you?

SAMARIA

*(pause)* Probably not -- unless you come with me!

MENDEL

No thanks. 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 feel crushed watching the latest bloodbath, then two minutes later discuss the cost of condos in Cancun.

SAMARIA

We've had such privileged lives, we should be doing more -- caring 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

Well, I'd call it machocide, and why not? Nothing else is working! Why do we keep letting greedy demagogues turn civilized countries into 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 gods sake!

SAMARIA

They're not men; they're entitled oligarchs or suicidal assassins, silencing or slaughtering anybody who doesn't believe what they believe. The twins know compassion's not 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

Sorry, but you've changed; you're letting 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 emanate negative energy; they don't just stink of dust and decay; they're like...

SAMARIA

The House of Usher...?

MENDEL

Exactly! 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 rays reach the rooms and wash away the grief and gloom, but the twins' house is beyond gloom; it's...malevolent. In fact, every time I enter the premises, it's like there's less oxygen and I feel like poor old Fortunato suffocating in the catacombs. 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 trapped; 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

You're not being fair. Lawrence predicts that someday they'll have their own reality show.

MENDEL

Ha! Does he think they're prodigies just waiting to be discovered?

SAMARIA

Yes!

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 kisses Mendel's cheek and marches off.)

### **SCENE 5**

(MENDEL faces his club members as LAWRENCE and ASTIN appear on opposite sides 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's even learning Arabic.

MENDEL  
Is she 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 like hooking up with a hooker.

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

Well, she and her sister aren't exactly marriage material, are they? I mean, they may be crammed full of factoids, but there's a shallowness about them, and do you ever feel 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)* Yeah.

LAWRENCE

*(smiling)* Yeah,...

LAWRENCE

...I got a manicure.

ASTIN

...I'm craving chocolate.

LAWRENCE

I stopped watching football.

ASTIN

Notice how my *(squeaking)* voice is getting higher -- just kidding,...

ASTIN

...Mendel!

LAWRENCE

Mendel,...

(Now the THREE MEN are standing together.)



LAWRENCE

Jesus, get a grip, man! What's your problem?

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

Ha!

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

*(to Lawrence)* Have you read the one about the lawyer who sounds exactly like me?

LAWRENCE

No.

ASTIN

You should be flattered!

MENDEL

He's a pompous, overpaid thug with a club foot! *(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. 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 here on Earth or is there a final destination?

LAWRENCE

Buddhists claim they're all around us, waiting to be reborn under better circumstances. Even Pythagoras believed in the transmigration of souls.

MENDEL

So did Poe. One of his ghosts was a woman named Morella who possessed her own her daughter's body so she could torment her husband.

LAWRENCE

Cool, but 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

Well, are you going?

ASTIN

Yes.

LAWRENCE

Yes.

MENDEL

Then so am I!

**SCENE 6**

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

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, feelings of unease escalating to chills, goosebumps, palpitations -- all neurological manifestations of mystical perceptions.

FLUORINE

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

(The lights start to flicker.)

SAMARIA

Oh, god...

LAWRENCE

Whoa...

FLUORINE

Oh, crikey...

ARGONNE

Shhhush!

(THEY cease speaking as LITHIA circles the room.)

LITHIA

Ommmmmmmm, yes, there's definitely a presence here.

ARGONNE

A woman...?

LITHIA

Ommmmmmmm, I can't tell, but the spirit does not seem...benign.

FLUORINE

Are you sure?

ARGONNE

Shush, Fluorine, let her do her job!

LITHIA

Ommmmmmmm. *(pause)* She's shadowy, but closer, definitely a woman, and she's angry.

FLUORINE

Of course, she died young.

MENDEL

And married a pedophile.

LITHIA

Ommmmmmmm, ah, yes, I see her more clearly now. Her hair is dark and pinned in a bun.

FLUORINE

Is she slender with large brown eyes?

LITHIA

Yes, and she's pointing there.

ARGONNE

At the bookcase?

LITHIA

The wall next to it. Now she's pointing 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. (*leaping back*) Bloody hell!

ARGONNE

What...?!

LAWRENCE

Are you all right?

FLUORINE

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

SAMARIA

(*stepping back*) Oh, gross!

LAWRENCE

Shit...

MENDEL

Poe would be pleased; it's The Gold Bug!

(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!

ASTIN

Let me help.

(ASTIN and ARGONNE pry the floor board loose.)

ASTIN

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  
Absolutely.

(Pause as ARGONNE opens the box.)

ARGONNE

There are ten metacarpals and eight proximal phalanges from small human hands, probably a woman's hands, hands that might have played....

ARGONNE  
...the harp?

FLUORINE  
The harp!

SAMARIA  
The harp!

FLUORINE

How marvelous! We'll extract the DNA, then compare our analysis with Virginia's 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

What if the sexton who dug up her bones and reburied them in Baltimore was the same sexton who lived in this house? Perhaps he felt compelled to keep some mementoes.

SAMARIA

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

FLUORINE

Or featured as relics in our museum -- like the relics of saints in cathedrals!

ARGONNE

Or better yet, her genes extracted and replicated for transgender traits. After all, Poe claimed she possessed more innate goodness than anyone he knew. By all accounts she was lovely, gentle and wise, a gifted musician and gardener: the feminine ideal of her time.

LITHIA

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

(ARGONNE draws forth her phone and displays a picture.)

ARGONNE

Just to confirm: did she resemble this painting?

(Pause as LITHIA and the TWINS stare at the screen.)

ARGONNE

Her skin was the palest porcelain.

FLUORINE

Her cheeks flushed from fevers.

LITHIA

No, that's not her.

FLUORINE

What...?

ARGONNE

Are you certain?

(ARGONNE swipes her phone to display another picture.)

ARGONNE

Look, here's another picture.

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 the one.

FLUORINE

What if the two of them met? Can one ghost replace or consume another?

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

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

Only if she chooses to reappear.

ASTIN

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

LITHIA

No, but some spirits emanate bright auras, so I think they might be angels.

MENDEL

Or devils -- brewing weapons of mass castration!



SAMARIA

Mendel!

MENDEL

(*to Lithia*) Just don't forget the house on Poe Street;...

SAMARIA

Oh, shush!

MENDEL

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

FLUORINE

Oh, bollocks!

(Suddenly MENDEL begins trembling, his eyes bulging, his mouth agape as he staggers towards the harp.)

SAMARIA

Mendel, what's wrong?

ASTIN

What the hell..?

LAWRENCE

Oh, Jesus...

FLUORINE

Oh, crikey!

SAMARIA

Look at his eyes!

LITHIA

Move out of his way!

SAMARIA

Mendel...?

LAWRENCE

Holy shit...

LITHIA

Don't touch him!

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

SAMARIA

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

LAWRENCE

Christ man...

ASTIN

Lift his head.

FLUORINE

Oh, poor darling.

MENDEL

*(moaning)* Ohhhhhh...

LAWRENCE

*(to Astin)* Here, let's get him up.

FLUORINE

I'll fetch some water!

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

LITHIA

*(pause)* Can you speak?

MENDEL

*(whispering, nodding)* Yes.

ASTIN

What the hell happened?

MENDEL

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

LITHIA

Go on.

MENDEL

Like the blade of a knife was thrust through my back, and then I...I forget.

LITHIA

You don't remember playing the harp?

MENDEL

What...?! What the hell's going on?

SAMARIA

You played the harp!

LITHIA

Her spirit passed through you.

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 senses your hostility and she's proving her powers.

FLUORINE

Here, Mendel, drink some water.

MENDEL

No thanks. (*to Lithia*) Where is the witch? Is she here?!

LITHIA

Shhhhhh. (*pause, glancing around*) Ommmmmmmm. I'm afraid she's gone, and I think you've experienced what's known as a sensory meridian response, a spectral stimulation of your brain's left anterior insula, though it's usually not so traumatic.

MENDEL

My palms are sweaty, my heart's racing, and I swear something slid down my throat.

ARGONNE

Fear causes excess salivation.

FLUORINE

(*To Argonne*) Maybe he swallowed The Conquerer Worm.

MENDEL

Oh, shit...

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.  
La, la, la, la, la, la, la, and left a bloody wake!  
La, la, la, la, la, la, la, and left a bloody wake!*

MENDEL

How can you sing while I'm suffering!?

FLUORINE

We're trying to cheer you up!

FLUORINE and ARGONNE

*It writhes!- it writhes!- with mortal pangs!  
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 a tragic man  
And it's hero the Conqueror Worm!  
La, la, la, la, la, la, la, it's hero the Conqueror Worm!  
La, la, la, la, la, la, la, 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 she poisoned me!

(MENDEL dashes off as lights dim to black.)

### SCENE 7

(In the conference room where MENDEL continues his speech to the investment club.)

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, so I was forced to return to Poe Street where Sam was nestled in the arms of the demonic duo.

(MENDEL has entered the parlor where SAMARIA sits on the sofa, nestled between the TWINS. SHE leaps up!)

SAMARIA

Oh, sweetheart, are you all right?

FLUORINE

Mendel, darling, welcome back!

ARGONNE

So you weren't poisoned after all?

MENDEL

Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm fine, and 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 fetch some wine.

*(FLUORINE departs as SAMARIA tugs MENDEL's arm.)*

SAMARIA

Sit here, next to me. What did the doctor say? Did you explain...?

MENDEL

Oh, I explained all right. I told him all about this house, Mummy's ghost, *(to Argonne)* and your scheme to feminize the world.

ARGONNE

Did he respond?

MENDEL

He prescribed a sedative and recommended a trip to Bellevue.

ARGONNE

No offense, but that's prudent advice.

MENDEL

Offense taken!

SAMARIA

My advice is to stop reading Poe. *(to Argonne)* You should never have given him that book!

MENDEL

Why? I'm beginning to appreciate his morbid humor. Where's your brother and Astin? *(to Argonne)* Have you slit their throats or stuffed them up the chimney?

SAMARIA

That's not funny, Mendel!

ARGONNE

Lawrence had to study, so they both left.

MENDEL

Smart move! This house is a danger zone, 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, and starting tomorrow we're repainting the rest of the rooms in reds -- from scarlet to deep crimson.

## SAMARIA

And I'm going to help! I'm also writing monologues for the actors based on Poe's poems. I was thinking of playing Helen.

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

## FLUORINE

What have I missed?

## ARGONNE

Mendel wants us to hire an exorcist.

## FLUORINE

God, no! We can't expel Mummy, especially now that we know she's the one who serenades us.

## MENDEL

So the harpy plays the harp at night?

## SAMARIA

Really, Mendel, 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 into thinking she was Virginia.

## FLUORINE

Oh, rubbish, we deceived ourselves, and you're wrong about Mummy.

## ARGONNE

Whenever she plucks the harp strings, it's so sweet and enchanting. After all, our atoms aren't just particles of matter but waves of energy rippling out in patterns of light. The vibrations of the harp strings affect those patterns, and when Mummy plays, they penetrate the outer shells of our spirits so they crack apart, making way to our deeper, denser, soulful selves.

MENDEL

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

FLUORINE

More soulful, which is why it's a pity that music isn't the means to Mummy's end.

ARGONNE

But harmonies can't be heard above gunfire which is why we need biological solutions, and if we ever create a feasible formula, we plan to spray it from planes flying over every war zone in every country wherever we find men with guns in their hands and hatred in their hearts. Of course we know you don't approve.

MENDEL

That's right. It's illegal, immoral and insane!

FLUORINE

What's with the attitude? 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

*(to Fluorine)* Mendel prefers a world where men are men and women are women which means a world where women are expected to do what men want.

FLUORINE

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

MENDEL

*(to Samaria)* Don't you love how they talk like I'm not here?

SAMARIA

They're just saying that you have every reason to like the world as it is.

MENDEL

So do you since you come from the same world!

SAMARIA

Yes, but the the twins and I want something better: a world without wars.



MENDEL

I'm afraid such a world is very unlikely.

ARGONNE

And unprofitable since I'm sure your investment club has shares in phallic weaponry such as guns, grenades,...

ARGONNE

...torpedoes.

FLUORINE

Torpedoes!

SAMARIA

That's not true, is it?

MENDEL

Well...

SAMARIA

You're kidding...?

FLUORINE

Oh, naughty boy!

MENDEL

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

ARGONNE

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

SAMARIA

Tanks...? You invest 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 houses instead? Or roads, bridges, storm barriers! How can you sleep owning stocks that depend on our being at war?

MENDEL

Because that's how we finance our 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, you can 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 a bloody, bullying bureaucracy of billionaires!

MENDEL

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

That's because I'm beginning to realize who you really are. You and your investment club are what's turned this country into a plutocracy of materialistic consumers!

MENDEL

If you're talking materialistic, then look in the mirror! You're the one wearing the Chanel jacket, the Cartier watch -- not to mention the Tiffany engagement ring!

SAMARIA

Here, take it back!

(SAMARIA yanks off her ring and tosses it to Mendel!)

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 Sapphists who seduced her!

SAMARIA

What?!

FLUORINE

Oh, crikey!

MENDEL

What's with all this hugging and hand holding? It's bad enough you're fucking our friends, but leave Sam alone! And just so you know: I'm going to do everything I can to sabotage your ludicrous museum and Frankenstein laboratory! Trust me, I'll find every legal or illegal means to keep your House of Horrors from ever opening its doors! (*grasping Sam's hand*) Now, come on, let's get the hell out of here!

SAMARIA

Don't touch me! We're through, Mendel! Now let go!

(MENDEL releases SAMARIA'S hand, and SHE starts to leave.)

MENDEL

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

(SAMARIA turns and approaches MENDEL.)

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?

FLUORINE

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

SAMARIA

Perfect! The perfect son, perfect lawyer, perfect lover. His looks, his charm -- even my parents approved. It's not his fault; he was programmed to be who he is: a privileged, predictable, supercilious snob!

MENDEL

Thanks.

SAMARIA

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

MENDEL

Look, I may not be the smartest, most informed 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 you having nothing to do with them, so let's not quit trying; let's keep talking.

SAMARIA

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

(SAMARIA marches off, leaving MENDEL with TWINS.)

MENDEL

Now look what you've done, you heartless hags!

FLUORINE

Oh, rubbish, we're not hags.

MENDEL

But you're heartless -- chips off the old block of ice! Tell me something, did it ever occur to you to resent "Mummy"? Why couldn't she accept you as the boys you were and men you could've become?

FLUORINE

We know she was well intentioned, and it's too late to be anything but our super selves.

ARGONNE

Of course we often wonder if Mummy's genes are expressing themselves in the cold, rock-hard side of our natures, the fact that nobody seems to fancy us beyond the initial sexual attraction -- not the boys and girls of our youth, not Lawrence or Astin or you, Mendel. No one's really loved us much except for Sam, and that's a warm, welcoming, sisterly bond.

MENDEL

Is that all it is?

FLUORINE

Afraid so, ducks. We were hoping for more, mind you, but Sam was devoted to you.

MENDEL

The operative word is “was.” *(he sighs)* I finally found 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? It’s a start.

FLUORINE

Go on, Mendel, find her!

*(MENDEL takes a deep breath, then dashes off, leaving the TWINS enveloped in darkness.)*

### SCENE 8

*(MENDEL steps forward to address his club members.)*

MENDEL

Sam refused to see me. She stopped taking calls or responding to texts, and I became so depressed, Astin suggested a retreat to a Himalayan monastery where electronic gadgets were forbidden and the library was blissfully free of Poe’s Tales of the Grotesque.

*(As MENDEL continues, HE seats himself at the tavern across from SAMARIA.)*

MENDEL

A few days 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?

SAMARIA

Teaching mostly, and you?

MENDEL

Not great. I'm afraid I've reached a point where all my clients and their properties are starting to look alike, which is why I'm thinking of leaving the firm to try something else -- not sure what or where, but I'm quitting all my clubs, liquidating my assets. You'll be glad to hear I sold my defense stocks.

SAMARIA

You're quitting your investment club...?

MENDEL

I sent a formal letter of resignation, but the members requested a meeting, though how can I tell them there's no lucid explanation, no safe place to hide? *(pause, he sighs)* So has the museum opened?

SAMARIA

No, and it never will.

MENDEL

Really? What happened? *(pause)* Have you and the twins had a falling out?

SAMARIA

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

MENDEL

Sorry, 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'd furnished a secret clinic where they were testing the Virginium.

MENDEL

So they found volunteers?

SAMARIA

Not exactly. 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 some of the feminine clichés: Larry's started quilting 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. Whatever they were cooking, released a colorless gas that filled the house. None of us knew its effects until we started manifesting symptoms.

ASTIN

It's illegal because what infected us has a hormonal gene drive that can propagate traits through generations, but we're being treated by the best endocrinologists in the city.

MENDEL

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

ASTIN

Hell, yes, but by the time they sent investigators, the twins had taken off.

MENDEL

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

ASTIN

While you were in the Himalayas without your phone.

LAWRENCE

You missed all the fun, Mendel.

MENDEL

Well, where are they? Where did they go?

ASTIN

They've been tracked as far Mexico City. They shipped the Virginium there, collected it, then left without a trace. We're waiting for proof that they've actually sprayed the stuff, but so far there's none.

LAWRENCE

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

MENDEL

I...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 an envelope to MENDEL who opens it, retrieves a document and takes a moment to read it.)

MENDEL

They left the house to me...?!

SAMARIA

Surprise, surprise.

MENDEL

They should've left it to you!

SAMARIA

They thought I'd go with them, but I...I couldn't.

MENDEL

Why me?! I can't even drive by much less cross the threshold, and what if it's still contaminated?

LAWRENCE

A team 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

I'd only come with an exorcist.

SAMARIA

All right, we'll find one.

MENDEL

I'm serious!

SAMARIA

So am I.

(SAMARIA, LAWRENCE and ASTIN leave the tavern.)

### SCENE 9

(MENDEL turns to approaches the members of his club, then enters the parlor.)

MENDEL

Sam called every exorcist in the city -- all of whom were booked or batshit, so we settled on Lithia Nickels who agreed to come again. Three days later, Sam and I 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. Who was here last?

SAMARIA

The inspectors I guess.

MENDEL

I notice they left the lights on -- because it's creepy as ever.

SAMARIA

I feel fine. *(pause)* Did you miss me?

MENDEL

If you must know, losing you was brutal. It seems I possess a tell tale heart, and I'm still on medications.

SAMARIA

I...I'm sorry.

MENDEL

I don't blame you or even the twins. In fact, you were right about me: I was obsessed with money, with playing roulette with my own and other people's. I didn't give a damn that our economic system could be cruel and unjust, so I guess the monks had their effect on me.

SAMARIA

I heard you've quit your father's firm.

MENDEL

Yes, but I'm staying in real estate, using my assets to acquire vacant warehouses in the Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Soho. They'll be converted to housing for homeless poets and paupers -- people not unlike Poe and Virginia.

SAMARIA

That's wonderful, Mendel. *(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 cold, hollow emptiness...

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 what you can to assure us she's gone.

LITHIA

I told you I don't make assurances or perform exorcisms. It's best to let spirits leave on their own, but you can encourage them by burning white sage and fennel. You can also keep lights on, windows 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, glancing about)*  
Ommmmmmmm. *(pause)* She's not here, but I'll go through the rest of the house.

*(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

Of course, you'd want to repaint the walls a buttery yellow or shades of teal, but it's stunning really: the oak floors, the high ceilings, and then there's the history of all the people who lived here.

MENDEL

And died! And were haunted, poisoned and betrayed!

SAMARIA

*(pause, she sighs)* I can't help it, I miss the twins, and isn't it strange how despite all their plans, this is still a house that wants to be a home.

MENDEL

Really...?

SAMARIA

I mean they kept the living and dining rooms, and there's a library, and extra bedrooms with baths for guests or children.

MENDEL

Children..?

SAMARIA

And don't you love that patch in the back where you could plant those blue hydrangeas you like. *(she sighs)* We could've been happy here.

MENDEL

"We"...? I can't believe what I'm hearing. 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. Rabbi Meitner says the two things that make couples 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; even Argonne called you a prince among men, and seeing you now, I...I realize 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 sick?

SAMARIA

Yes, I'm sick with remorse, and I hope 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 along with two young women who are very much alive.

*(ARGONNE and FLUORINE enter laughing.)*

FLUORINE

Hello, darlings!

SAMARIA

Oh, my god!

MENDEL

*(leaping up)* What the hell?!

(The TWINS embrace SAMARIA as LITHIA'S phone pings and she glance sat the text.)

SAMARIA

You're supposed to be in Mexico; everyone's looking for you!

MENDEL

I'm calling the police!

ARGONNE

Oh, please.

FLUORINE

Sorry to intrude, ducks; we'd hoped to escape without being seen.

ARGONNE

Bad timing on our part; we only came back for...

ARGONNE

...the oblong box.

FLUORINE

The oblong box!

FLUORINE

We forgot Virginia's bones! Argonne thought I'd packed the box.

ARGONNE

And I thought Fluorine had.

LITHIA

I'm afraid I have to leave...

MENDEL

But Mummy's spook is gone -- poof! -- banished, right?

LITHIA

Right. There's just you, Mister Steingold, and your lady friends.

ARGONNE

Do you suppose our ghosts will miss this old house?

LITHIA

It has it's charms, miss, but I couldn't say.

FLUORINE

Maybe they're just asleep.  
*(singing) The ladies sleep, oh may they sleep...*

ARGONNE and FLUORINE

*Which is enduring so be deep  
 We pray to god that each may lie  
 Forever with unopened eye,  
 While pale sheeted ghosts go by.*

*My loves they sleep, oh may they sleep,  
 As it is lasting, so be deep.  
 Thrilling to think poor child of sin  
 It was the dead, it was the dead,  
 It was the dead who groaned within.*

LITHIA

That's lovely, ladies, a dirge for the dead will be much appreciated. Now I'm due at the Morgan Library where the spirits keep shuffling the manuscripts, ha, ha!

FLUORINE

What fun! Cheerio!

SAMARIA

Good night.

ARGONNE

Au revoir!

*(LITHIA departs.)*

FLUORINE

Now we must dash, Mendel, darling, but do take care of these hallowed halls.

MENDEL

Sorry, but unless you want your house back, it's going on the market next week.

FLUORINE

No!

ARGONNE

No!

MENDEL

Take whatever you want! Otherwise I'm going to toss every stick of furniture; the carpets, curtains, lamps, linens -- every pot, pan, and plate! I'll make sure every inch is scrubbed and scoured so there's nothing left -- not so much as a single strand of hair or speck of dust!

ARGONNE

Bitterness doesn't become you, Mendel. All we want is to wish you both happiness.

MENDEL

And emasculate the human race!

ARGONNE

Well, that too.

FLUORINE

While you were gone, Argonne and I tidied up a room just for the two of you, your own little love nest featuring a hand carved Louis the fifteenth bed with a satin coverlet. (*she sighs*) We'll miss you, darlings; you really must kiss and make up.

MENDEL

Please go!

SAMARIA

Take care of your selves.

FLUORINE

Good luck, ducks.

ARGONNE

(*to Samaria*) Farewell, my dears.

(FLUORINE and ARGONNE embrace SAM and depart.)

SAMARIA

Oh, Mendel, do you think...? Is it possible to start again -- don't answer! No, no, forget I said that! Forget everything! Let's just try not to be bitter.

MENDEL

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

SAMARIA

Wait! Before we leave, I...I'd like to see the room the twins made for us. I'll only be a minute.

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

## MENDEL

God help me, I followed, and now 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. I guess I should mention that Sam and I are engaged 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. Sometimes when she plays, the house seems to quiver with life, and I think I see the walls bleeding blood, ha! Yes, I know, it's just your imagination, Mendel, from reading too much Poe, but I'm no longer oppressed by the house. In fact, if you're passing by, you're welcome to visit. (*pause, he sighs*) Sorry if I've been too personal, too self indulgent, but now you know why I've resigned. Well, that's it then; meeting's adjourned!

(The lights dim to black as a RAVEN caws.)

*The End*