

THE RAVING

by Ed Valentine

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THE RAVING

SETTING:

Edgar Allen Poe's lodging in New York, 1845. Cold December. Wind outside.

Long table. Two chairs. A bust of Athena.
Bright full moon in the sky (represented by a blue lightbulb.)
Perhaps a heavy purple curtain draped at back.

CHARACTERS:

POE:

The writer, beset by a hangover - and writer's block. His wife is sick upstairs.

THE GUEST (LATER: THE RAVEN)

Bedeviler, Prophet – and *Muse*.

Personified, at first, as a craggy man wrapped in a heavy overcoat.

A hat with a brim partly shadows his face.

THE RAVING

Scene: Wind. Ticking clock. At the table, two sitting: POE dead drunk, clutching an empty glass, his head down in a pile of books. THE GUEST sits, rubs his chin. Watches POE for a bit. Then the GUEST raps on the table.

GUEST

Poe.

(POE gives a snore. GUEST raps louder.)

POE.

(POE sits up, excited.)

POE

I've got it.

GUEST

Got what?

POE

An idea. No, THE idea.

GUEST

Congratulations.

POE

It'll solve all my problems, every one.

(Sets pen, paper, ink.)

GUEST

Every one?

POE

All in one stroke!

(Makes a stroke with the pen. Begins to scribble.)

GUEST

That's a lot of problems. The Cold. The Poverty. The Writer's Block.

POE

All over now!

(Still writing, reaches for a bottle.)

GUEST

Then there's the Drinking.

(POE takes his hand away from the bottle.)

POE

I don't drink. Only a little bit.

GUEST

True: you don't drink only a little bit! Please, don't let me stop you.

(POE pours, drinks. Writes.)

So: the Cold, the Poverty, the Writer's Block, the Drinking. And the Wife. How's your wife - your Lenore?

POE

Her name's Virginia.

GUEST

Not Lenore? My apologies, I thought it was 'Lenore.' How is she - is she better?

POE

Hold still - I'll check:

(Tiptoes over to "staircase." Listens, ostentatiously. GUEST makes the sound of the wife's breathing.)

Much better! The cough's quiet, the fever's gone. There's a cat on her chest!

GUEST

Ye gods! Why?

POE

Warmth.

GUEST

Oh. And the poor thing's been so sick. Not the cat, I mean: your childbride.

POE

Not a child.

GUEST (lasciviously:)

Not anymore.

POE (gets the joke, winks.)

Naughty.

GUEST

Now, that Barkeep at the Tell-Tale, Dooley: he thinks your wife is sick, still. And said so.

POE (takes up pen and paper again:)

Did he?

GUEST (“stage Irish” voice:)

Lads - that inkstained lump slumped over the bar? None other than the critic, Edgar Poe. I do impressions, I mimic. It passes the time. Now Poe’s a man of strictest habit: he writes daily, but he only drinks on days ending with the letter “Y”. And ain’t his wife sick, sure enough, ain’t the poor bird gravely ill, GRAVELy ill – if you catch my meaning...

POE

Not true, much better now, on the mend.

GUEST (as before:)

Gravely ill - but the Fancy Poet? He don’t even know it! Don’t realize at all. Why, all day long he drinks and scribbles, scribbles and drinks. Good-for-nothing! Devil take him!

POE

I shall never again set foot in that Pub.

GUEST

Yes you will. *Gravely ill, GRAVELy...* Are you listening, Poe?

(Beat.)

POE

Who are you, again?

GUEST

I’m your Guest, Poe.

POE

And how did you get in?

GUEST

You let me in.

POE

Perhaps, but I don’t know you.

GUEST

You know me. Many’s the time I’ve come rapping, rapping at your chamber door.

POE (scribbling, furiously)

Well, be that as it may, please leave now, I’m writing. The poem, the poem! It came in a dream. It came in a flash, whole, unbidden. The Muse was with me.

GUEST

The Muse was with you.

POE

Came to visit me in a dream! Gifted me with words. Now, shh! Don't disturb my flow.

GUEST

Well, I'll just sit here, then, I won't say a thing. Huh. Huh. I think one of my teeth is coming loose.

POE

I'm sorry to hear that. Shh, please.

GUEST

Maybe all of my teeth are coming loose. They'll come dropping out one by one, like icicles off the eaves, they'll fall like pebbles off the roof, plink plank plunk. Then I'll be all gums. All gums, you hear? Disaster.

(POE mumbles lines to himself, writes:)

Say. Say, if all your wife's teeth fell out, what would you do?

POE

I'd chew her food for her.

GUEST

Really?

POE

Really. Even that I'd do.

GUEST

Devotion.

POE

Above all things, my work and my wife.

GUEST

Your wife Lenore.

POE

Virginia.

GUEST

You're certain?

POE

I remember the name of my wife.

GUEST

She's very memorable, she wears a cat on her chest. *Prr. Rroaw.*

POE

SHH!

(POE back to scribbling. The GUEST peers over, tries to see what POE is writing.
POE moves the paper away.)

GUEST

So. So, tell me what you're writing.

POE

I never talk about my work...

GUEST

Oh, give a little hint, come on.

POE

I don't think so.

RAVEN

I'm a fan. I'd love to hear it.

(POE writes, mumbles.)

Come on, just tell me this much: is it a good idea?

POE

Yes! It *is* a good idea - I'm more than a little pleased with myself, I confess, more than a little pleased. I bet I could write it in one night - in one burst - even though it's long...

GUEST

How long?

POE

Huge! Volumes. It's most romantic, European, they'll love it on the continent! It will be - my masterpiece.

GUEST

Masterpiece! Congratulations.

POE

Thank you, as I say, 'more than a little pleased!' But don't ask me what it's about, no, don't ask me, I see it in your eyes, you're getting ready to do just that, but I won't tell you, I won't say a word, you can't force me. Even if I wanted to tell you. Which I do - badly. But don't even ask, you couldn't drag it from me.

(Beat.)

It's about a woman.

GUEST

Good, more.

A woman riding on the back of -
POE

Go on.
GUEST

Of A Unicorn.
POE

A Unicorn?
GUEST

In a garden. With flowers!
POE

A Unicorn!
GUEST

Yes, in broad daylight! It's pastoral.
POE

That doesn't sound like your usual -
GUEST

POE (digging for clippings of reviews:)
Yes yes yes yes yes, and that's exactly it! I'm tired of it, you see, no more the gloom and the night and the fog and the lightning. I've tried selling that - no one's buying. You should see my reviews.

GUEST (
I know, I've seen them!
(Recites, using bust of Pallas as the reviewer. "Lady Bracknell" voice:)
Mr. Poe is too fond of the wild – the unnatural and the horrible! Why will he not permit his fine genius – fine genius, hear? – to soar into purer, brighter, and happier regions?

POE
Why, oh why will he not disenthral himself from the spells of supernatural imagery?

GUEST
Why will he not exercise the art of poesy towards the betterment of man

POE
without declining -

GUEST
Declining - descending, into the dark -

POE

mysterious -

BOTH

And unutterable creations of licentious fancy?

POE

By God, from here on, I'll write what'll earn me money! I'll write in the sunlight, I'll give them what they want - dappled fields, flowers, kittens – yes, even unicorns. Romance! It's the new Poe!

GUEST

How unexpected! Back to the poem: where is this garden?

POE

I don't know. England, maybe.

GUEST

And the lady, what's she doing?

POE

She's on the back of the unicorn.

GUEST

Right, but –

POE

She's riding it.

GUEST

Naked?

POE

Nearly. Covered by a gauzy shift.

GUEST

Gossamer, good good, go –

POE

And the unicorn is white, and the lady is lovely and she's - she's riding! Prancing through the peonies, cantering through the chrysanthemums, trotting, trotting, across the field of flowers.

GUEST

Ah - but why?

POE
Why? Well, she's – she's galloping...

GUEST
Right, why?

POE
She's merry.

GUEST
But why?

POE
I don't know.

GUEST
You must.

POE
I tell you, I don't know, stop hounding me.

GUEST
Why's she galloping? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

POE
I DON'T KNOW, SHE'S GOING NOWHERE!
(Pause.)

GUEST (very dry:)
Well, this poem'll be a corker! I look forward to reading it.

POE
It was marvelous in my dream.
(Sinks despairingly into his papers.)

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