

*Evermore*

by

Gary Wright

a play about

Love, Hate, and American Literature

# EVERMORE

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## CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

**Edgar Allan Poe (Eddy)** is in the last years of his life – his 30s. He has a brash confidence that his loved ones find endearing. His voice is somewhat “northernized” but still retains the lilt of his Southern origins. Fiercely intelligent, passionate, courtly, and deeply in love with his wife, Virginia.

**Virginia Clemm Poe (Sissy)** is a quick-witted and ebullient match for Eddy, and brings out the best in everyone around her. She plays piano and sings beautifully. If it is possible for one living human being to be “more alive” than another, Virginia is more alive than anyone we’ve ever met. She is every bit as devoted to Eddy as he is to her.

**Mrs. Mariah Clemm (Muddy)** is a widow in her 50s. She is Virginia’s mother. An aristocrat fallen on hard times, she is the only member of the Poe household with calluses on her hands – and she wouldn’t have it any other way. Hardworking and practicalminded, but fiercely loyal, she would not hesitate to give her life for Sissy and Eddy.

**Dr. Rufus Wilmot Griswold (Griz)** is a handsome, urbane, and very well-connected man in his 30s. He is a noted anthologist and editor, a man of some consequence in the publishing industry. He is chivalrous, literate, and well-spoken, the sort of guest who elevates the tone of any social gathering. His self-respect is his most prized possession. It is also his most fragile.

**Note:** The four actors listed above also play roles as needed in the interludes from Poe's stories and poems.

*TIME: October, 1849, and various moments in the preceding eight years.*

*PLACE: Various locales in New York and Philadelphia. Also, fictional settings for a few of Poe’s stories and poems.*

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*Evermore* premiered at the Foothill Theatre Company on September 27, 2007 in Nevada City, California. Carolyn Howarth, Artistic Director. The production was directed by Jon Tracy, Scenic Design by Melpomene Katakolos, Costume Design by Paulette Gilbert, and Lighting and Sound Design by Les Solomon. The production was Stage Managed by Matthew H. Compton \*. The opening night cast was as follows:

### CAST

Edgar Allan Poe - Eric Wheeler \*

Mariah Clemm - Leslie Ann Rivers \*

Rufus Wilmot Griswold - Ted Barton \*

Virginia Clemm Poe - Elena Wright

\* denotes member, Actors Equity Association

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## ACT ONE

*A thin beam of light finds the ghost of EDGAR ALLAN POE - not the gloomy Edward Gorey caricature we've come to expect, but a rather jaunty, cheerful spirit.*

**POE.** It was many and many a year ago  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee.  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love--

**MRS. CLEMM.** *(Off)* In here, sir.

**POE.** --And be loved by me. *(Poe's spirit fades from view, as-- MARIAH CLEMM enters, disheveled, on edge. Drowning in grief.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** You'll find most of it in here. *(DR. RUFUS GRISWOLD enters in her wake.)* That desk is where you'll want to work, I imagine. I'm chagrined you find the place in such a shambles, Mister Griswold, I've always--

**GRISWOLD.** Doctor Griswold.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Pardon me – Doctor Griswold. I have always kept a better house than this.

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, I seem to recall... you did. *(He crosses to the desk, taking the measure of the stacks of manuscripts and papers there. He sets a valise on the desk, opens it, and removes his gloves.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** *(Tidying halfheartedly)* I've been quite preoccupied, writing letters to Neilson and Rosalie, trying to sort one rumor from another--

**GRISWOLD.** Are these all of his manuscripts? I should have thought there would be more.

**MRS. CLEMM.** There are more.

**GRISWOLD.** Where?

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**MRS. CLEMM.** (*Gestures vaguely at the room*) They're here, mostly. There are more in some of the other rooms, I will go and cast about for--

**GRISWOLD.** Madam, I quite specifically requested that you assemble all of his papers and--

**MRS. CLEMM.** Yes sir, but--

**GRISWOLD.** I believe I was quite clear.

**MRS. CLEMM.** As I say, I have been posting letters to Baltimore and Richmond trying to learn what happened to Eddy, and no one seems to have the foggiest--

**GRISWOLD.** Someone has to find everything.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Is that not precisely what the estate is paying you to do?

**GRISWOLD.** Within reason, yes - but I am not at all comfortable rifling through your house looking for--

**MRS. CLEMM.** Oh, forgive my thoughtlessness – what could possibly matter more at this moment than your comfort? (*She angrily sweeps a mound of papers off the desk.*)

**GRISWOLD.** Madam!

**MRS. CLEMM.** Shall I edit the manuscripts as well, and carry them to the printer for you? (*Griswold collects the scattered papers without any help from her.*)

**GRISWOLD.** Mrs. Clemm, I fully appreciate that you are grieving, but honestly, I cannot be expected to--

**MRS. CLEMM.** I expect precious little, sir, believe me.

**GRISWOLD.** It was presumptuous and inappropriate to burden me with this in the first pl--

**MRS. CLEMM.** You didn't seem to think so at the time!

**GRISWOLD.** Times change! (*Softening*) I am well aware there are many who would consider it an honor, but frankly, for me, this is a most unwelcome imposition.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Certain to be his last.

**GRISWOLD.** I was— (*He coughs. Tries to speak, but coughs again. He cannot seem to stop...Mrs. Clemm unhurriedly pours a few dregs of water from a pitcher into a tumbler, and hands it to him. He drinks.*)

**GRISWOLD.** Thank you. (*Her lips tighten. He is not welcome.*) I was not his friend. Nor was he mine.

**MRS. CLEMM.** No. But here is money to be made.

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**GRISWOLD.** (*Stiffens*) If you think so little of me, I'll go. (*He closes his valise, collects hat, coat, gloves, walking stick, etc.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** No, stay. Please. It seems an ignoble concern under the circum-stances, but I've no other means of preventing myself from being turned out into the street.

**GRISWOLD.** I'm sure you'd manage.

**MRS. CLEMM.** No. Whatever money there is to be gleaned from all of this... paper... I need it. And I need help in the getting of it.

**GRISWOLD.** I do *not* need the money. I am only here because I gave my word, which I daresay meant a good-- (*He coughs. Gulps down the last of the water in his tumbler. She shows no sympathy.*) --Meant a good deal more to me than it ever did to Eddy.

**MRS. CLEMM.** If you say so, sir.

**GRISWOLD.** I do say so. (*Produces a piece of paper from the valise.*) This document will smooth the way, if you will affix your signature, just here.

**MRS. CLEMM.** What is it?

**GRISWOLD.** It grants me power of attorney to act on your behalf in negotiations with publishers, and the like.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Power of attorney?

**GRISWOLD.** Sign it or don't - makes no difference to me. I offer my help if you want it. If not, I'll be gone the sooner.

**MRS. CLEMM.** I'll just... look this over.

**GRISWOLD.** By all means. Take your time. (*He coughs - she pauses at the doorway.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** And I will fetch you some more water. (*Griswold glances sourly at the stacks of manuscripts.*)

**GRISWOLD.** Have you anything stronger? (*A small but genuine laugh from Mrs. Clemm.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** I believe I have. (*She exits.*)

**GRISWOLD.** (*Muttering, sotto*) Of course you have.

**POE.** (*Off*) Halloo? (*Transition, exit Griswold. Off*) Sissy? Muddy? (*Enter Poe and Griswold.*) Is anyone at home? Halloo? (*It is eight years earlier. The two men have just met, and are enjoying their new acquaintance. Poe is a few years older than Griswold, but has an energy which makes him seem a decade younger.*) My wife and mother-in-law appear to be at large in the city, Doctor. Loosed upon an unsuspecting populace. (*He sits at his desk, rummaging.*) It



would not be inappropriate to say a prayer for the people of Philadelphia.

**GRISWOLD.** *(Laughs amiably)* I like your house.

**POE.** The women keep it livable, thank goodness. Left to my own devices, I'm afraid I'd sink into abject squalor.

**GRISWOLD.** It seems altogether suited for a poet of genius. *(Smiles at Poe's cluttered desk)* Is this where you... do your work?

**POE.** *(Taps his temple)* This is where I do my work. *(Slaps the desktop)* This is where I write it down, usually. *(Proffers a sheet of paper)* Here, read this one. *(A pause while Griswold reads. Poe watches him, nervously.)* Can you make out my hieroglyphics?

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, I think so. *(More silence. Griswold reads, his face bland and inscrutable. Poe fidgets, awaiting judgment.)*

**POE.** How many will you include, from each poet?

**GRISWOLD.** I'm casting a wide net; we'll see what it yields. One or two from each, I should imagine.

**POE.** One or two...

**GRISWOLD.** If you just give me a few of your favorites; I can cull--

**POE.** I haven't any favorites. They are all like fevers, which have finally broken. *(Griswold laughs softly, and returns to reading, as-- The door opens, off, and feminine laughter wafts like a fresh breeze down the hallway.)*

**VIRGINIA.** *(Off)* Eddy, Eddy, Eddy, Eddy, Eddy! *(VIRGINIA POE bursts into the room and leaps into her husband's arms. She doesn't see Griswold.)* You'll never guess what I found at the stationer's - look! A new book of Thomas Moore sheet music, and it has your song in it! *(As she drags him to the piano, Poe tries to call attention to their guest.)*

**POE.** Sissy, I would--

**VIRGINIA.** Gloves. *(She pulls off both gloves with her teeth, and upturns her face to Poe, like a proud puppy. He dutifully takes the gloves from her mouth. Griswold hovers in the background, as the appropriate moment for introductions flits by.)*

**POE.** Darlin' I--

**VIRGINIA.** Ssshh! Make yourself useful - turn the page for me! *(As she plays the intro, Poe gestures for Griswold to come closer, but Griswold holds up a hand - he's fine where he is. He looks on, captivated, as Virginia sings to her husband.)* Come, rest in this bosom, my own stricken deer,  
Though the herd have fled from thee, thy home is still here;



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Here still is the smile that no cloud can o'ercast,  
And a heart and a hand all thine own to the last.  
Thou hast called me thy angel in moments of bliss,  
And thy Angel I'll be, through the horrors of this,  
Through the furnace, unshrinking, thy steps to pursue,  
And shield thee, and save thee – or perish there too! *(Poe places his hands on Virginia's shoulders and presses his face to the top of her head, breathing her in.)*

**POE.** Thank you. *(Virginia smiles contentedly, closes her eyes, her hands resting lightly on her husband's hands.)*

**GRISWOLD.** Is that the same Thomas Moore who-- *(Virginia screams and jumps; her head strikes Poe in the mouth. Poe cries out and lurches backward, as Virginia yelps in pain and hastily stands to see: Griswold - mortified.)*

**VIRGINIA.** *(Rubbing her head)* I'm sorry, I didn't realize we had company!

**GRISWOLD.** *(Overlapping)* I do apologize, I-- *(Mrs. Clemm comes running in.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** What on earth?

**POE.** Muddy, your child just assaulted me with a very hard, blunt instrument. Are you alright, my dear?

**VIRGINIA.** I don't think it's bleeding.

**GRISWOLD.** My deepest apologies, I--

**VIRGINIA.** Are you alright?

**POE.** Very well, I thank you, but you have a bump.

**VIRGINIA.** *(Slaps his arm)* Blunt instrument!

**POE.** I should have made introductions immediately, but I was caught up in the--

**VIRGINIA.** Sorry, for all the... *(She makes a comical gesture signifying chaos.)*

**GRISWOLD.** No, no, the fault is mine – I don't usually introduce myself to a lady by skulking in her parlor until she notices. *(Virginia laughs, which puts Griswold at ease.)* Doctor Rufus Wilmot Griswold, at your service.

**POE.** This is my wife, Virginia, and that lady there is Virginia's mother, Mrs. Mariah Clemm.

**MRS. CLEMM.** How do you do, sir?

**GRISWOLD.** Embarrassingly well, madam, I seem to be the only one to emerge unharmed from all this.

**POE.** Doctor Griswold is a very influential man, Muddy. He is assembling a

definitive collection of American verse, and it struck me that such a compendium might include one or two of my own poor efforts. (*Virginia pulls Griswold aside.*)

**VIRGINIA.** (*Stage whisper*) He's not trying to foist his poems on you?

**GRISWOLD** Well, yes, actually.

**VIRGINIA.** Have you read them?

**GRISWOLD.** Some of them. They're quite--

**VIRGINIA.** Dreadful, I know! You're not going to put them in, are you?

**GRISWOLD.** I think I might, actually.

**VIRGINIA.** But why? You seem a man of excellent judgment and taste.

**POE.** Hush, Sissy, now, Doctor Griswold will think you're serious.

**VIRGINIA.** Don't do it - American Literature will never recover.

**GRISWOLD.** (*Grinning at Poe*) I don't see any graceful way out of it, now - he knows where I live.

**VIRGINIA.** That is unfortunate - he's a master of pesteration. Once he discovered my address, all was lost - I finally had to marry him just to get some peace. (*Griswold laughs, utterly charmed by her. Poe gives them both a sour little smile.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** You should read him your poem about Sissy.

**VIRGINIA.** Oh yes--

**POE.** Or, we could just let sleeping dogs lie.

**VIRGINIA.** (*Bringing Griswold up to date*) Last night, I said there are certain types of feelings in life that cannot be expressed in words, and Eddy disagreed. In that tone he takes, when he's convinced he's dealing with an imbecile.

**POE.** I beg your pardon?

**MRS. CLEMM.** It's true, Eddy, you do take a certain tone.

**VIRGINIA.** Oh, he's insufferable. He informed me that my language skills are approximately those of a baboon.

**POE.** Sissy darlin' there's no need to inflict our petty squabbles upon the good doctor - and I believe I said orangutan.

**VIRGINIA.** He said: (*She imitates him*) Sissy darlin' you may lack the virtuosity to articulate your deepest feelings, but I myself am a fluent English speaker, and there is no sentiment so lofty that I, the great Edgar Poe, cannot capture it in verse.

**POE.** That is not, at all, what I said.

**MRS. CLEMM.** It sounds very like you.

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**POE.** Et tu, Muddy?

**VIRGINIA.** So... I invited him to write a poem, capturing perfectly, in all their depth and complexity, his feelings for me.

**POE.** But they're my feelings, darlin'. How can you possibly judge whether I've succeeded? (*Virginia affectionately straightens his lapels.*)

**VIRGINIA.** Oh, you won't.

**MRS. CLEMM.** He's been hard at it all day.

**VIRGINIA.** Yes, very diligent. And how are you progressing, my love?  
(*Pause...*)

**POE.** I confess, it has been a struggle.

**VIRGINIA.** I'm certain Doctor Griswold would like to hear what you have thus far, would you not, sir?

**GRISWOLD.** I would indeed.

**POE.** You don't want to hear that.

**GRISWOLD.** But I do.

**VIRGINIA.** Go on, read it.

**POE.** I cannot "read" it, I haven't yet committed it to paper.

**VIRGINIA.** A recital, then, from memory.

**POE.** It's a work in progress. There's no rhyme, and the meter is sloppy, and I haven't given it a title.

**GRISWOLD.** Excuses, excuses, my goodness. (*Griswold coughs. Virginia solicitously pats him on the back, which endears her to him all the more.*)

**VIRGINIA.** Just jump in, straightaway.

**POE.** Very well. (*Recites*) Not long ago, the writer of these lines  
In battle lock'd with an unbeliever,  
Maintained the power of--

**VIRGINIA.** Are you calling me an unbeliever?

**POE.** I am.

**VIRGINIA.** I won't stand for it. I demand you change it!

**POE.** As you wish. (*Revising on his feet*) Not long ago, the writer of these lines,  
In battle lock'd with a... termagant, Maintained th--

**VIRGINIA.** Termagant?

**POE.** It means, a shrill and overbearing female.

**VIRGINIA.** Yes, but who uses that word anymore?

**POE.** Certain, unfortunate poets use it, to describe their--

**VIRGINIA.** Surely not real poets? (*To Griswold*) Does Longfellow use that

word?

*(Poe gapes as if he has been stabbed through both lungs. Griswold guffaws - and coughs. Mrs. Clemm pours him a glass of water from a full pitcher.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Are you quite alright, sir?

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, thank you. *(Drinks gratefully)* This is a revelation - I'd no idea poetry was a blood sport.

**POE.** It is in this house. *(Revising again)*

Not long ago, the writer of these lines,  
In the... mad pride of... intellectuality,  
Maintained the power of words - denied that ever  
A thought arose within the human brain  
Beyond the utterance of the human tongue.  
And now, as if in mockery of that boast,  
My tongue is mute; my spells are broken.  
The pen falls powerless from my shivering hand.  
With thy name for my text, though bidden by thee,  
I cannot write - I cannot speak or think...

*(Pause)* That's as far as I've got.

**VIRGINIA.** You've finished. You cannot write, speak, or think - you've made my point better than I could. *(Poe stares blankly.)*

**POE.** What?

**VIRGINIA.** You heard me.

**POE.** Yes, but you're babbling incoherently - she did suffer a severe blow to the head. *(Rubs his chin)* Come lie down, darlin'. Muddy, be a dear and pour Sissy a glass of water, as well.

**VIRGINIA.** *(Overlapping)* I am not babbling; I will not be silenced, unhand me, sir!

**POE.** Don't overexcite yourself, darlin' now, I'd hate to have to put you in the strait waistcoat again, in front of company. Water, please, Muddy, before she grows violent!

**VIRGINIA.** You simply cannot admit that you have been soundly beaten, by a girl.

**POE.** I'm sorry, darlin' - they sound like English words, but they just don't make any sense. *(As if speaking to an idiot)* Can - you - understand - me?

**VIRGINIA.** All too well, I'm afraid. *(Mrs. Clemm brings the glass of water.)*

**POE.** I fear this bump is growing larger, oppressing her poor brain, she's raving

like a maniac! Ah, thank you, Muddy! (*Virginia takes the glass of water, and sips from it.*)

**VIRGINIA.** Have you a handkerchief, Doctor Griswold?

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, of course.

**POE.** Well done, Doctor, humor the poor girl! (*Griswold proffers a white handkerchief.*)

**VIRGINIA.** Oh, it's not for me. Eddy won't admit it, but he desperately needs a white flag, to wave in surrender. (*General laughter*) And, of course, he'll need it to dry his face.

**POE.** I beg your pard—(*Virginia douses her husband with water, and runs out of the parlor, with Poe roaring in hot pursuit. You'll pay for that - and I haven't forgotten that Longfellow remark! We'll see who waves the white flag in this house! (Girlish shrieks and laughter from Virginia, off. Griswold laughs, charmed by their antics. His laugh turns into a slight cough. Transition. Griswold returns to his task, sorting manuscripts. Mrs. Clemm enters with a bottle and glasses in a box of stuff which includes more papers.)*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** Let me ask you - how would you use this power of attorney?

**GRISWOLD.** I don't know. Frankly, I haven't given it a moment's thought.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Think on it now, please. What would you do?

**GRISWOLD.** I suppose I should call on people I know in publishing houses of New York and Philadelphia. I might travel to Richmond and Baltimore as well. I've no contacts down there, but I imagine there would be some interest. Worth testing the waters, anyway.

**MRS. CLEMM.** And why would you go to such trouble? Surely not out of tender feelings for me? Or Eddy?

**GRISWOLD.** I would do it out of a sense of duty to... Literature. In any case, whatever differences I may have had with you or your late, lamented son-in-law... I always held your daughter in the very highest regard. Virginia had a lovely spirit. Truly... lovely.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Yes. Thank you. I do appreciate that. (*Shakes the liquor bottle*) Shall I pour?

**GRISWOLD.** Please. (*She pours a drink for each of them, immediately downs hers in one gulp, and pours herself a second, before Griswold even takes his first sip. She reaches into the box, produces a short manuscript.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** I found another one in here. "An Article on Autography" by Edgar A. Poe. Remember it? (*Griswold accepts the manuscript as if it were*



*covered in shit.)*

**GRISWOLD.** Oh yes. *(He daintily sips his liquor as he scans the article. Lights come up on a grinning Poe, lolling at his desk, composing it.)*

**POE.** Mister James Fenimore Cooper's signature is a rather pitiable specimen, unformed and halting, with a school-boyish air, reminiscent of certain laborious passages in *The Leatherstocking Tales*.

**MRS. CLEMM.** I quite liked that article, as I recall.

**GRISWOLD.** Did you?

**POE.** Mister Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's sins are chiefly those of affectation and imitation – an imitation that sometimes verges on outright theft. His autograph, like his verse, is much ado about very little.

**MRS. CLEMM.** I especially liked his send-up of Emerson.

**POE.** Mister Ralph Waldo Emerson's signature is sprawling and incomprehensible, and we have searched it for well over an hour now, with the aid of a taper, for any trace of clarity or sense, but - as in his essays - there's none to be found.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Very clever and entertaining.

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, in much the same way an ill-mannered dog is clever and entertaining.

**POE.** Doctor Rufus Wilmot Griswold has written much, but chiefly in the editorial way.

**GRISWOLD.** So long as it's lifting its leg on someone else.

**POE.** He is a gentleman of fine taste and sound judgment.

**MRS. CLEMM.** He paid you a number of compliments, as I recall.

**POE.** His knowledge of American Literature is unsurpassed.

**GRISWOLD.** Yes.

**POE.** He is a polished prose writer, and a poet of no ordinary power. His signature, however-- *(Griswold scowls.)* --appears unformed, and vacillates in a singular manner. Nothing of his character can be divined there from, except, perhaps, a certain... lack of purpose. *(Transition. Offices of Graham's Magazine. Poe is working, as... Griswold stalks up to Poe's desk and looms over him.)*

**GRISWOLD.** Eddy!

**POE.** Griz! Come to see Mister Graham again? *(Griswold waves the magazine at Poe.)*

**GRISWOLD.** You may not believe this, but I'd no better way to spend my morning than reading your "Article on Autography," over breakfast.

**POE.** What did you think of it?

**GRISWOLD.** It put me off my porridge.

**POE.** Our readers seem to be lapping it up with a spoon.

**GRISWOLD.** That's as may be, but mark me, sir, the people you have attacked in this--

**POE.** Attacked?

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, attacked! *(coughs)* Lack of purpose? How am I to take that?

**POE.** Just as I expect Emerson will take it - with some sense of humor and proportion. Now, if you'll excuse me, sir, my deadline is looming. *(Poe resumes work, as Griswold coughs and fumes.)*

**GRISWOLD.** This is how I am dismissed? "My deadline is looming"! *(He coughs again, longer and harder.)*

**POE.** That cough sounds serious.

**GRISWOLD.** The cough is nothing - slight touch of consumption.

**POE.** Indeed? I was not aware there was any such thing as a slight touch of it.

Perhaps you should see a doctor about--

**GRISWOLD.** Perhaps you should mind your own health, Eddy. *(Coughs)* You cast no aspersions at Emerson's purpose.

**POE.** Well, the "purpose" of a transcendentalist is often invisible to the naked eye.

**GRISWOLD.** I daresay, sir, your own work seems to me to be rather "lacking in purpose".

**POE.** Oh?

**GRISWOLD.** Yes! That's right! Absolutely!

**POE.** Based on what observation of yours?

**GRISWOLD.** I don't believe you've ever written a tale with a moral!

**POE.** Haven't I?

**GRISWOLD.** None that I could see, even "with the aid of a taper".

**POE.** Well, what if I haven't? So what?

**GRISWOLD.** So what? Every fiction should have a moral! Else it serves no purpose whatever. It's merely... lies!

**POE.** Or entertainment.

**GRISWOLD.** Entertainment? Entertainment! Is that as high as you care to reach?

**POE.** *(A flash of anger)* Well, I doubt you could reach so high standing a-tiptoe! I did read your review of Barnaby Rudge last week, and I'll bet the Devil my



head it wouldn't entertain a--

**GRISWOLD.** I do wish you would not use that expression!

**POE.** Which? I'll bet the Devil my head? Why not? Are you that particular whom you gamble with? (*A prim, outraged gasp from Griswold.*)

**GRISWOLD.** I do not gamble! (*Pause. Poe laughs heartily, pats him on the shoulder, walks away with a corrected manuscript for the printer. Griswold stares after him, mystified: "What's so funny?" Transition. The ensemble strikes an opening tableau for the short story, "Never Bet The Devil Your Head." Against his will, Griswold plays a role.*)

**POE.** The critics have spoken.

**GRISWOLD.** (*Priggish*) Every fiction should have a moral.

**POE.** So they say. Luckily, the scholars have discovered that every fiction has! There is hidden meaning in everything from Homer to Hop o' My Thumb. There is no just ground, therefore, for the charge brought against me by certain ignoramuses – that I have never written a tale with a moral. In rebuttal, I offer this – a history about whose obvious moral there can be no doubt, since any man with one eye open may read it in the large capitals which form the title of the tale.

**ALL.** (*In unison*) "Never Bet The Devil Your Head"!

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** My friend Toby Dammit had an alarming propensity for cursing and swearing, and for backing his assertions by bets. However, Toby Dammit was much too poor to be a gambler, and thus he was never heard to say, "I'll bet you a dollar." No. It was usually:

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** I'll bet you what you please.

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Or...

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** I'll bet you what you dare.

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Or, most egregious of all...

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** I'll bet the Devil my head.

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** I do wish you would not use that expression, Dammit.

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** Why?

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Why? It is... immoral.

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** Ha! Does your mamma know you're away from home? Does she? I'll bet the Devil my head she does not! (*And so saying, he strikes the Narrator on the shoulder.*)

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** As a matter of fact, my mamma is very well

aware of my merely temporary absence from the domiciliary residence. *(And the Narrator strikes back. A rapid, childish flurry of escalating slapstick violence, which seems to peak with the Narrator pulling on Dammit's nose. But Dammit wins decisively, by blowing his nose into the Narrator's hand.)*

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** Ha ha! I'll bet the Devil my head you won't pull that again!

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** In that instant, I confess, I would gladly have championed the Arch-Enemy, and won for him Mister Dammit's empty little head. Our way home lay over the river, across a covered bridge. Once across, we would part company, never again to meet. Such was my firm resolution. *(They cross the covered bridge together.)*

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** Oh look, they've installed a fancy new turnstile!

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Fare you well, sir. I am going home. *(Narrating)* Thus I made my way quietly through the new turnstile, pushing it around as intended. But this turn would not serve the turn of Toby Dammit.

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** So that's how you get past a turnstile, is it?

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Here, alas, I missed a golden opportunity to ignore him. *(He turns.)* That is how any sensible person negotiates a turnstile. Pray tell me, Dammit, how do you do it?

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** I shall leap over it with astonishing ease. I shall soar like a meteor! Not only that, on the way over, I shall cut a very fancy pigeon-wing in mid-air! *(Demonstrates a jaunty, but ridiculous, dance step.)*

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** A pigeon-wing? *(Mimics Toby's dance step.)*

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** A pigeon wing! *(Demonstrates again.)*

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Impossible! Mere braggadocio – can't be done!

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** I'll bet the Devil my head I can do it! *(Narrator opens his mouth to protest, but is interrupted by the sudden appearance of none other than: THE DEVIL (represented by a sulphurous glow, and a voice-over). The Devil clears his throat.)*

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** Dammit...? *(Hastily explaining)* That must have sounded very much like an oath, sir, but I assure you nothing is further from my thoughts; I was simply calling out the name of this gentleman, Mister, euh, Toby Dammit. *(The Devil clears his throat)* Dammit, say something! Don't you hear? The gentleman says: *(And the Narrator clears his throat.)*

**TOBY DAMMIT/POE.** Uh... *(Dammit gulps.)*

**THE DEVIL (V.O.)** I am quite sure you will win it, Toby, but we are obliged to

have a trial, you know, for appearances' sake. (*Dammit gulps.*)

**NARRATOR/GRISWOLD.** And in truth, I never knew him to say another word, the rest of his life, than: (*Dammit gulps.*)

**THE DEVIL (V.O.)** My good fellow, I make it a point of conscience to allow you a few steps' run. Wait here, till I take my place over by the stile, that I may see whether you do, in fact, leap over it with astonishing ease, and soar like a meteor, and don't omit any flourishes of the very fancy pigeon-wing. Matter of form, you know. I will say "one, two, three, and away." Ready? (*Dammit nods, gulps.*) One... Two... Three... And... Away! (*Toby Dammit begins to run toward the turnstile, but before he gets there... Transition. Up on the study.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** I forget - how did that one end?

**GRISWOLD.** It's not particularly memorable. The idiot protagonist fails to clear the turnstile, and, in a freak accident, is decapitated by an unseen iron girder. The Devil absconds with Toby Dammit's head, leaving me to - or rather, leaving the Narrator - to ruminate boorishly upon the moral of the tale, and to pay for Toby Dammit's funeral by selling the headless remains to a manufacturer of dog food. (*Beat*) Not one of his best.

**MRS. CLEMM.** (*Amused*) But it does have a moral. (*Griswold shoots her a look. Mrs. Clemm places a document upon the desk in front of Griswold.*)

**GRISWOLD.** Oh. You signed. Very well - I shall begin to make inquiries tomorrow morning.

**MRS. CLEMM.** I do appreciate your help, sir. (*A kindly smile from Griswold.*)

**GRISWOLD.** I will secure the very best terms I can, madam. You have my word on it. (*Transition. Lights up on Poe, hard at work at the editor's desk at Graham's Magazine. Griswold happens by.*)

**POE.** Been to see Mister Graham again?

**GRISWOLD.** (*Holds up a book*) Writing another book review.

**POE.** Is that the new Hawthorne? (*Griswold nods.*) I'm glad to see you, I've been thinking about you lately.

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, I read "Never Bet The Dev--"

**POE.** I've been drawing up a last will and testament, Griz.

**GRISWOLD.** Suppose I'd best get round to that, myself.

**POE.** My lawyer suggested I appoint a special executor to compile and edit my work, in the event of my death.

**GRISWOLD.** You're not unwell, I hope?

**POE.** No, no, no. But I would like you to act as my literary executor, if you're

willing.

**GRISWOLD.** Me? What makes you think you'll die before I do? (*Poe waves the question away.*)

**POE.** Point is, there's no man I would trust more with the job.

**GRISWOLD.** (*Surprised, and touched*) Really?

**POE.** You are the best editor I know, Griz. I think you may be the best in America today. There's some money in it for you, but not until after... Anyway, I would be honored if--

**GRISWOLD.** No, I'm honored, Eddy. The honor is mine, entirely.

**POE.** You'll do it? (*Griswold nods*) Excellent! That's a - that's a burden lifted. I'll speak to my lawyer tomorrow.

**GRISWOLD.** Thank you.

**POE.** No, thank you. (*Griswold turns to go. Stops.*)

**GRISWOLD.** Might I ask a favor of you? In return?

**POE.** Of course. (*Griswold has difficulty finding the words...*) What is it, man?

**GRISWOLD.** I, euh... I have no desire to supply you with fodder for these entertainments of yours.

**POE.** Oh.

**GRISWOLD.** I am nothing like your characters.

**POE.** I wouldn't presume to say you are, Griz. On the other hand, if I could make my characters a little more like you, I would consider that a triumph of--

**GRISWOLD.** Please don't. (*Poe laughs.*) I'm quite serious, Eddy. Stop referring to me in your--

**POE.** I have never once mentioned you by name.

**GRISWOLD.** Regardless, I know when you mention me. And you know I know.

**POE.** That's just between us.

**GRISWOLD.** Even so.

**POE.** I never meant any offense.

**GRISWOLD.** I know.

**POE.** I thought you might enjoy the--

**GRISWOLD.** I don't. I'm asking you as a friend.

**POE.** (*Saddened*) Very well, if you feel that strongly about it.

**GRISWOLD.** I do. (*Pause*) I'm sorry, I--

**POE.** No, no - it's a fair request. My work will be the poorer for it, but no word or deed of yours will ever again appear in any tale of mine. You have my word

on it.

*(Transition. Griswold returns to Poe's study, October, 1849. Mrs. Clemm enters, with another crate full of papers.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Do you want everything? *(Quizzical look from Griswold)* There's more here than tales and poems – we have letters, essays, criticism, notes, drawings, legal documents...

**GRISWOLD.** Drawings? *(She hands him some; he looks them over.)* Not bad. I used to draw a bit, myself, in school. This is you, to the life. *(He holds up one, comparing it to Mrs. Clemm.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Yes, I know. I have aged.

**GRISWOLD.** I was thinking that you look much happier, here.

**MRS. CLEMM.** He drew that before Virginia became ill.

**GRISWOLD.** Did he ever draw her?

**MRS. CLEMM.** Virginia? He tried a few times, but he said there was some uncanny mischief in that girl that he just could not capture on paper. *(They share a smile.)* I know he did manage one fairly satisfactory likeness - I've seen it - but I don't know what ever became of-- Oh my, look what's in here. *(From the bottom of the crate, she pulls a jester's cap, with tinkling bells. Griswold recoils.)*

**GRISWOLD.** You still have it? *(He coughs.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Do you want it back?

**GRISWOLD.** No, for God's sake, no! Put that thing away! *(Still coughing, he grabs his hat and coat and heads for the door, but cannot exit because: Virginia enters, oblivious to Griswold (because she's entering 7 years ago), and sits at the piano. She finds the page she wants in the Thomas Moore songbook, and begins to play, as... Griswold again attempts to exit, but cannot, because... Poe enters (also 7 years ago), and moves to the piano, where he listens to Virginia playing. Griswold again moves to exit...)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Where are you going?

**GRISWOLD.** Out for a walk, to clear my lungs. *(Coughs)* The air in this room is... oppressive. *(At last, Griswold successfully exits, as the flashback begins.)*

**VIRGINIA.** *(Sings)* Tis the last rose of summer

Left blooming alone;

All her lovely companions

Are faded and gone:

No flower of her kindred,



No rose-bud is nigh,  
To reflect back her blushes,  
Or give sigh for sigh.  
So soon may I follow,  
When friendships decay,  
And from Love's shining circle  
The gems drop away.

When true hearts lie wither'd,  
And fond ones are flown,

Oh! who would inhabit

This bleak world alone? (*Mrs. Clemm applauds with genteel, but genuine appreciation.*)

**MRS. CLEMM.** Lovely, Sissy. (*Poe, less impressed, rewards her with but a single, perfunctory clap.*)

**POE.** Yes, of course it's lovely, but darlin' what has the last rose of summer to do with my birthday? I would much prefer to hear "Come Rest In This Bosom," if you--

**VIRGINIA.** Again?

**MRS. CLEMM.** (*Almost simultaneously*) Again?

**VIRGINIA.** How many times must we--

**POE.** Well, is it my birthday, or is it not?

**VIRGINIA.** (*Suddenly amnesiac*) Is it?

**MRS. CLEMM.** I'm afraid it is.

**POE.** You know full well it is, and I believe that entitles me to hear my favorite song just about as often as I please. (*Virginia slumps in mock despair.*)

Especially as I have yet to receive a single birthday gift from any of my so-called loved ones.

**VIRGINIA.** We were awaiting the appropriate time to shower you with gifts.

**POE.** The moment I emerge from slumber and lift my head from the pillow is the appropriate time. (*Poe drags his unwilling wife to the piano.*)

**VIRGINIA.** Look, my fingers are worn down to nubs with playing that infernal song! (*She displays her hands, the fingers worn down to nubs (bent at the first knuckle).*) I can't reach an octave anymore, why, I'm not sure I can play at all!

(*To prove it, she pounds on the keyboard, making a dreadful jangling racket.*)

That chord doesn't sound quite right, does it? (*Mrs. Clemm is amused; Poe affects an injured look.*) Is this better? (*She clubs the keyboard some more – the*

*din is horrible. Virginia sings off-key.)* Come rest in this bosom, my own stricken deer;

Though the herd--

**POE.** Alright, alright, stop it, please, for the love of God! You win!

**VIRGINIA.** *(To her mother)* I always win. *(Mrs. Clemm moves toward the exit, laughing.)*

**POE.** This is the worst birthday ever! Where are you going? Muddy? Worst birthday any poet ever had!

**VIRGINIA.** I seem to recall William Shakespeare died on his birthday. *(Poe thinks about that, but is unwilling to concede the point.)*

**POE.** He's well out of it. The rest of us are left behind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous matrimony. *(Virginia laughs. The laugh turns into a light cough, as Mrs. Clemm re-enters, bearing a gift.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Happy birthday, Eddy.

**POE.** *(Lecturing Virginia)* Mark you now, this is how a birthday ought to be. People bringing you things, and doing everything in their power to please you.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Well, I hope you like it. *(Poe unwraps the gift – a music box. He*

*flips open the lid, and music plays.)*

**POE.** A music box!

**MRS. CLEMM.** Listen! Listen... *(They do... Virginia gasps in recognition, and coughs. Mrs. Clemm absently pats her on the back.)*

**VIRGINIA.** It's--

**MRS. CLEMM.** Sssshh! Let him guess. *(They listen...)*

**POE.** This is: "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms."

**MRS. CLEMM.** It plays three different Thomas Moore songs. One of them is "Come Rest In This Bosom." *(Poe's hand goes to his heart.)*

**POE.** Oh my goodness... I had no idea such a thing existed.

**MRS. CLEMM.** It didn't exist. I had it made, down in Richmond.

**POE.** You had this made? For me, special? Oh, Muddy, it's beautiful. *(Poe embraces his mother-in-law and kisses her on the cheek.)*

**VIRGINIA.** Yes, perhaps now I can avoid singing myself hoarse every nineteenth day of January. *(She play-coughs, but it turns into a real cough.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Sissy?

**VIRGINIA.** *(Unconcerned)* I'm fine - I'll get myself some water. *(Virginia exits as Poe and Mrs. Clemm embrace.)*



**POE.** Thank you, Muddy. This is... No one has ever given me such a thing. It is... simply... *(A knock at the front door, off.)*

**VIRGINIA.** I'll answer! *(Mrs. Clemm touches Poe's face, fondly.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Still the worst birthday ever? *(The front door opens, off, and we hear Virginia laugh.)*

**POE.** I'll let you know. The pendulum does appear to be swinging the other way.

**MRS. CLEMM.** Oh, thank goodness. *(Virginia peers through the doorway, still laughing, and coughing a little.)*

**VIRGINIA.** Eddy? Did you give Doctor Griswold the impression this would be a costume party?

**POE.** *(A little too innocently)* I don't recollect. Did I? *(Griswold enters, dressed in full medieval jester regalia, holding a thick manuscript in one hand, a bottle of wine in the other. He grimly notes the ordinary, everyday attire of everyone else in the room.)*

**GRISWOLD.** Yes. You did. *(He removes the tinkling hat. Virginia takes the hat from him, and, in solidarity, fits it to her own head.)*

**POE.** I'm so sorry.

**GRISWOLD.** *(Recovering bravely)* Your contrition is palpable. For penance, you may proofread your poems in this galley of "Poets and Poetry of America." We go to press next week!

**VIRGINIA.** Oh, congratulations!

**GRISWOLD.** Thank you.

**POE.** *(Almost simultaneously)* Thank you.

**GRISWOLD.** Yes, it's been quite an ordeal, bringing it this far, but well worth it, I think, well worth it.

**POE.** Good Lord, look at this thing, Muddy, it would stun an ox!

**GRISWOLD.** I've included three of yours, beginning page three hundred twenty-nine.

**VIRGINIA.** Which ones?

**GRISWOLD.** If you would just check them for any mistakes, I would be most grateful... *(To Virginia)* "The Sleeper," "The Coliseum," and "The Haunted Palace."

**POE.** Three hundred twenty-nine? *(Disgruntled, he opens the book. Looks at the page number.)* One hundred eighty-seven. *(He makes a show of turning the many,*

*many, many pages before his poems.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** What's in the bottle?

**GRISWOLD.** Oh, nothing – a mere token I happened to have in the cellar, I thought you might... *(Poe's aggressive page-turning derails his train of thought.)*

It's a bottle of sherry.

**VIRGINIA.** *(Reeading the label)* Amontillado.

**GRISWOLD.** *(Correcting her pronunciation)* Amontillado.

**POE.** Two forty-four...

**VIRGINIA.** Shall we have a toast?

**MRS. CLEMM.** Yes! *(Mrs. Clemm produces three cordial glasses, while Griswold opens the bottle.)*

**POE.** *(Savoring the word)* Amontillado. Italian?

**GRISWOLD.** Spanish.

**POE.** Three-ought-one...

**GRISWOLD.** It's a sherry fino, actually, fortified with grape spirits, usually richer and darker than--

**VIRGINIA.** *(Glancing over Poe's shoulder)* Ooh, look at all the poems by Mister Longfellow. He must be very, very good. *(Poe glares at her - she blinks back at him, innocent eyes wide.)*

**GRISWOLD.** Anyway. Wonderful stuff, amontillado.

**POE.** No, this is wonderful stuff, Griz, this big fat Longfellow section - a sovereign cure for insomnia. Imagine it, you're up late, tossing and turning, unable to sleep, and then you open "Poets and Poetry of America" and turn to the Longfellow pages. *(Reads)*

I shot an arrow into the air,

It fell to earth, I know not-- *(His head slumps forward, and he begins to snore.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Eddy...

**POE.** *(Wakes up, refreshed)* Good morning, Muddy! *(Resumes turning pages)* Three twenty-six... Three twenty-seven... three twentyeight... *(Pause)* Oh. Oh dear.

*(Frowns)* Griz, 'memories' is meant to be capitalized, here. Same for 'echoes' down here. And I don't believe 'plinth' is spelled with a 'y' is it?

**GRISWOLD.** I'm sure I've seen it spelled with a 'y' somewhere.

**POE.** Not in any poem of mine.

**GRISWOLD.** Well... I will make sure it's correct before we go to print. Is that all?

**POE.** No. (*Turns the page*) I don't know who numbered these stanzas with Roman numerals, but it wasn't me. This phrase is meant to be contained within paren-theses, like so, and this here should be a separate line, altogether. (*Pause*) That's all.

**GRISWOLD.** Very good, sir. I will see to it, thank you. (*Preparing to pour*) We are one glass short, I believe.

**POE.** I don't drink spirits.

**GRISWOLD.** No?

**POE.** I haven't the constitution for it – makes me ill.

**GRISWOLD.** Oh. I'm terribly sorry, man, I was not...

**POE.** Perfectly alright, Griz, you didn't know. It's the thought that counts. You were at least good enough to bring a gift, unlike some people I could name.

**VIRGINIA.** Eddy, propose a toast.

**POE.** To: "Poets and Poetry of America." I wish you all success.

**GRISWOLD.** And I, you.

**ALL.** (*Overlapping, not in unison*) "Poets and Poetry of America."

**MRS. CLEMM.** And the poor ox who gets stunned with the damned thing!

**POE.** And now, a song, in honor of our guest – a song of steadfast, enduring friendship – Sissy, give us that splendid Thomas Moore tune – "Come Rest In This--"

**VIRGINIA.** Eddy, I've played it--

**POE.** Not for Doctor Griswold – not today. Now, he was good enough to give me a chance to edit my poems – and a good thing, too, because they were riddled with errors.

**GRISWOLD.** Hardly "riddled."

**POE.** He brought us this fine amontillado, and he even managed to make a fool of himself for my birthday... (*Pushing Virginia onto the piano stool.*) So I think the very least we can do in return is to give him this song.

**VIRGINIA.** (*To Griswold*) He's using us both for his own nefarious purposes.

**GRISWOLD.** We must watch for an opportunity to escape. (*Once again, Poe drags her to the piano.*)

**VIRGINIA.** Don't you dare leave without me!

**GRISWOLD.** (*Melodramatically*) Never! (*Mrs. Clemm laughs at their playacting.*)

## EVERMORE

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**VIRGINIA.** *(Plays, and sings)* Come, rest in this bosom, my own stricken deer,  
Though the herd have fled from thee, thy home is still here; Here still is the  
smile that no cloud can o'ercast—*(She coughs.)*

**POE.** Are you alright?

**VIRGINIA.** I'm fine, excuse me. *(Sings)*

And a heart and a hand all thine own to the last.

Thou hast called me thy angel in moments of bliss,

And thy Angel I'll be, through the—*(She coughs again, a longer spell. The  
jester hat falls from her head.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** I'll get water. *(Virginia is racked again – a violent spasm of  
coughing.)*

**VIRGINIA.** I'm so sorry, I... *(Still coughing, she stands up, knocking the piano  
stool over, and sags against the piano, bent over double.)*

**POE.** Sissy? Come lie down, darlin' and let us make a fuss over y-- *(She turns  
around; an alarming quantity of arterial blood has gushed from her mouth,  
down over her chin and throat and the front of her dress.)*

**GRISWOLD.** Dear God... Dear God... *(Virginia stares, frightened and  
bewildered, at the blood on her hands.)*

**VIRGINIA.** Eddy? *(She coughs again, staggers and falls. Poe rushes to her.  
Griswold hovers uselessly. Mrs. Clemm returns with a glass of water, but stops  
in her tracks when she sees the blood.)*

**MRS. CLEMM.** Oh, Jesus. Sissy... *(She runs to her child, cradles her. Poe  
looks from Griswold to his fallen wife, seemingly confused by the blood on his  
shaking hands. He stares down at Virginia, his mouth working but... Speechless.  
Fade to black.)*

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