

Addicted to Praise

“Edgar Allan Poe is dead.”

I find the small obituary buried in the back of the post while I'm sitting at my small table, cluttered with half-read books and the remains of breakfast. My stomach flips as I read it and threatens to send the eggs back up my throat, and I take a deep breath, squeeze the corners of the table. The pine creaks beneath my fingers, but my effort doesn't work; I rush to the window and retch until it hurts my stomach.

I moan and spit the taste from my mouth. I try to get my breath, and I use water from the basin to splash my face. My eyes are wet, but I don't know whether from sickness or sadness.

Edgar was a small, slight man I never knew well enough to call a friend. I only met him twice, and the first time only for a few short moments during which his large brown eyes became larger at my mentioning my reputation for ratiocination.

He requested an interview.

I was, at first, reluctant, but he implored. He was working on a story of detection, he told me, and he would certainly benefit from the added advice and expertise of a sage such as myself. My wheedled ego appreciated the praise and agreed.

I was, back then, a young Parisian analyst who did not yet require a daily shave. I was in addition full of the hubris

of youth but did not yet have the reputation to support it, but I thought perhaps I could translate Poe's stories of analysis into quick respect and success.

I began to thrill at the idea. The American man of esteemed letters establishing the reputation of the French guru of clever cipher. Why, Baudelaire himself would translate the stories for consumption on the Continent, and very soon all the world would be familiar with those fantastic stories emblazoned with the passion of the man who had penned them. I would build my success on those stories without ever having solved a case on my own.

Back then, I had not yet done so. I had only studied the methods of deduction and detection and was eager to use them; I thought that, after they had read of my proposed application of rational techniques, local constabularies would turn to me to solve the cases they could not, the mysteries beyond the meager grasp of their collective intellects.

I became, instead, a laughing stock. A novice condescendingly dismissed by men who were older than me, of many far wiser than me. When I approached the local official forces to help them with their most recent cases, their detectives would point and laugh. "Oh, that's rich, Dupin, but when we suspect a monkey of the crime we'll come find you," or "But you do realize, Auggie, that the young lady's lost more'n a letter!"

And so it is that I subsist solely on my inheritance and continue to spend my time consuming these books about reason and deduction. The sum on which I live has in recent times dwindled from one appropriate for a dauphin to one more fitting a lord. Perhaps, even, a baron. I live in cluttered squalor in a section of Paris populated by whores and pickpockets, here in my small apartment filled with dusty books and skittering insects and my vices. It is not much of a life, perhaps, but it is the one I call my own.

My stomach clenches, and the convulsion is so great that, for a moment, I fear it is going to turn me inside-out, that I am about to loose an organ and all my remaining

humour. Icy sweat pops out on my brow and down my back, and my knees buckle. The wooden floor is cool against my suddenly fevered cheek, and the last thing I think of before I succumb to the black of midday night is Poe: his sad, imploring eyes; his downcast features and his sickly nature.

I feel him reaching out to me, but I cannot accept his grasp. Not yet. For now, the darkness.

I wake to cold darkness, Parisian October creeping through my small apartment and into the hollows of my bones, snake-slithery as quicksilver and arrows. My body quivers. The chill has seeped into my marrow, and I groan as I move my leaden joints. I crawl to the hearth and, with trembling fingers, light it. Orange-yellow light flickers out into my small sitting room, crammed with old books and second-hand furniture. I retrieve the post from the table before I settle into my creaking armchair to enjoy the slow warmth of the fire.

The obituary doesn't offer many details. He died the day before yesterday, it says, but the paper notes the piece was published in the issue of the New York Daily Tribune dated October 7th.

"The announcement will startle many," the text states, "But few will be grieved by it." It delves briefly into his character, his eloquent speech, the way he sometimes muttered to himself as if in prayer, before finally it closes with, "We have not learned the circumstances of his death. It was sudden, and from the fact that it occurred in Baltimore, it is presumed that he was on his way to New York," finishing with the line "After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

It is signed, simply, "Ludwig." The name means nothing to me. I wonder if it would mean anything to Poe.

I want his death to grieve me more than it does and so I feel guilty when it does not. I decide, then, that the single most effective recourse against the lack of grief and guilt and the inevitable is the recourse I usually seek. On a small table beside my chair, I keep a carafe from which I draw a glass of

chocolate-colored alcohol I raise to my lusting lips. Of all my vices the sweetest wine, oh, laudanum, how I sing the praise for which thou art so aptly named, how I chase thy delirious dragon through the maddening dreams of the poet who destroyed my character, how I cry out in the stillness of nights punctured by visions of disembodied but beating hearts, of thrashing ravens and dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

I drain the glass to the bone and pour myself another when suddenly I hear a tapping, as of someone tik-tik-takking against the window's wooden frame. I raise reluctant eyes to the glass, beyond which I can discern nothing around the flickering dancing light of flames within the hearth. Curious and not a little startled, I cross the room to release the shutter, allowing in a chilling, wicked gasp of wind that smells of crime and greed and whores.

Just that wind, but nothing more.

The city sighs as I turn away, retreat to my chair, carafe, and glass before I hear a great, dark flapping as of velvet violent-tearing that flips and screams about the room. So suddenly am I struck with terror that I drop my glass upon the floor, where it leaves a great, dark stain upon the threadbare rug. Hard, percussive air blasts my face from wings within the tiny space, until a great and stately raven lands upon the floor, lands and flaps and squawks and caws before it comes to rest upon my floor.

I seek my breath in shortened gasps breaths and stumble back in fear. Tongues of flames like votive candles dance within its liquid eyes, and it spreads its wings like parting night before, within its careful talon, it grasps the fallen glass. It ducks its head down to the rug as if to smell the stain, and then with a shot it lets fly the glass to shatter it within the hearth. Flames leap to lick the liquid sizzle and the room begins to fill with a scent like flowers for the dead, while the raven squaws and flaps and takes to perch upon the high back of my chair, where it sits to regard me from above.

Says the raven: "Nevermore."

It steels me with its oily eyes as I move to sit across from it, and the word may not be formed from lips and tongue but still I understand.

Hearing it speak cuts through the haze of my inebriation; I fight for a moment against sobriety, but it throbs in my head like waves.

I wonder if the raven is a familiar. Surely, it must be. Its appearance on the very day on which I've read Poe's obituary is too neat to be coincidence. I know that ravens have a reputation as representation for those beyond the veil, and I wonder if Poe is reaching out to me in the only way he can.

I find myself speaking to it. I cannot say why I do so in English, but perhaps it is because that is the language in which I spoke to Poe. "I do not care if you are. Your stories destroyed my reputation. And for what? Never a thanks, never a cent. The only thing you ever earned from them was a reputation as a drunkard and an opium addict."

Says the raven: "Nevermore."

"No, nevermore indeed! Nevermore at all. I can forget you," I say, and I feel anger coursing through me, but underneath it I feel sadness, which I know is the more true of the two emotions. "I can go on with my life, but what of that is there? What is there besides a broken-down flat and a failed consulting business and ---," I say, and my voice catches on me, but I force it on, "An addiction to praise?" Even in honesty I cannot accept it.

Says the raven: "Nevermore."

"Right. You said that. So what? Am I going to give it up because you say so? Will everything just get better?" I ask, and that's when I realize, fully, that I am speaking to a raven as if it will tell me what to do with my life, and I feel even more chagrin that part of me believes I might even get some sort of an answer.

The raven speaks again, and at first I hear the same word, again, but then I realize it said something else entirely.

I look at it. "What?"

It speaks again. Three careful syllables. As clearly enunciated as any syllables might be when coming out of a beak. “Ball.” “Tin.” “More.”

“Ball-tin-more?” I ask. “What does that me—,” and then I stop. Because I understand. “You think I should go.”

The raven is silent.

“To Baltimore. To America. I should go and investigate your death,” I say.

The raven, again, says nothing, but it doesn’t need to. Because by then I am looking around my own desperate surroundings and realizing there really is no reason for me not to go. Some small part of me wonders if, perhaps, I investigate Poe’s death and can discover the cause, I may rebuild my reputation.

Some greater part of me, too, hopes. I am glad that latter emotion recognizes me, for I have changed so much since last I saw it.

Almost as soon as I have the thought, the raven takes to wing and goes.

It takes more than a week to gather my affairs and make my arrangements, but before two have passed, I and my bag are en route to America, to Baltimore, to Poe. During those almost two weeks, I drink laudanum only to prevent the intensity of withdrawal symptoms, only to keep my hands from shaking, only to remain sane.

Baltimore is a new, raw city, bricks as pink as fresh skin and cobblestones the deep grey of a winter storm. I nearly gag on the smell, some grotesque combination of roasted nuts, ground shells, and horse sweat and waste. The air is so sharp and cold breathing feels like getting soaked in the nose, and the men old enough to grow winter beards have, while the women’s faces are extra pink with rouge over windburn. I first secure a room for an extended stay, then visit the local constabulary.

“You’re here to investigate the death of Edgar Allan Poe,” the officer repeats. He is dressed in a dark grey wool

suit that barely retains his immense girth; his neck, when he talks, waddles around his shirt collar.

I nod. "Yes, sir. I was wondering if you might share with me---."

"And who'd you say you was again?"

I sigh. "My name is Auguste Dupin, sir, and—."

"Rightright, Dupin. And you're from..."

"France, sir. Paris."

"Right. You're far from 'ome, ain'tcha? 'Cross the ocean, inn't it?"

"Yessir. In Europe."

"Europe," he repeats, and in a voice the same tone as if I'd told him I'd come from Hades, or the Garden of Eden. "So what'd you come all this way for?"

"I told you, to investiga—."

"Right. The death. Poe. But why?"

"Well. Sir. I am an analyst—."

"Oh, you're a detective. I see. Why didn't you say that in the first place? Thought you could lend your expertise, eh?"

I hesitate. "Yes, I suppose—," I start to say, uncertainly, but the officer cuts me off.

"And what makes you think we need you here? We have the best detectives in the states working on my cases, and you show up with your fancy French analytics and think you can show my men up? Go home," he says, before he stomps off.

I am so taken aback I cannot at first move. I know, rationally, I should not be shocked; the reaction I just received is the reaction I should have expected. And what did I expect to achieve by coming, anyway? I swallow hard. I am a fool and an addict and here I am in America for the man who destroyed my reputation because some verbose bird made me believe it wasn't the foolhardy id—

"Excuse me." A voice behind me.

I turn to see a young man standing behind me. He has a thick crop of dark, wiry hair and trustworthy eyes that are a little too eager.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean— but I couldn’t help overhearing you and the chief— did you say you’re Dupin?”

I look at him.

“The Dupin? From the stories by Mister E. A. Poe?”

“Edgar based the character on me, yes.”

The man’s face bursts into a genuine smile. “Sir, it is pleasure of the most genuine degree to make your acquaintance. My name is Franklin Dixon. I have only recently enlisted in our city’s proud policing authority.”

I congratulate him. I try to find the heart to make it sincere but I do not think I manage it.

Dixon, then, does something that surprises me; he puts his hand in the crook of my arm and begins to lead me out of the station. “Let me escort you out.”

We get outside, into the bright Baltimore sun. Down the steps, turn and go several steps before Dixon steps me aside into the opening of an alleyway.

“I shouldn’t tell you even this much, but here are the facts in the case as we know them: Poe was found near Ryan’s Tavern on Third October by Joseph Walker, who contacted a man named Snodgrass. Snodgrass knew Poe, and took Poe to a physician named Moran at Washington College Hospital, where Poe died. We believe Poe’s ultimate destination was New York, but that he was mugged before he arrived; his mother-in-law indicated he had approximately five hundred dollars on him, but that money was not recovered,” Dixon says. Licks his lips as he looks around. “The case is still open.”

I try to absorb it all. Moran. Snodgrass. Walker, mugging. “Why do you tell me this?”

“I know you’re good.”

“What? How?”

“I read the stories, Mr. Dupin,” he smiles, and he takes out a small notebook and a pencil, scribbles on a leaf of paper and tears it out, thrusts it into my hand. “Here. Get a carriage. Go to this address. Talk to Snodgrass. Maybe you’ll think of a question we didn’t. I must return. I

shouldn't even be talking to you," he tells me as he urges me forward, while he himself turns the other way. "Backway," he says as explanation, and then he disappears.

I leave the alley alone, and I hail the first carriage I can find, read off the address.

The carriage takes me to a gleaming white house with foliage-green shutters and a large, dark wooden sign on which "Dr. J. E. Snodgrass, est. 1840," is emblazoned in large white letters. Almost a decade, then. A small bell above the door tinkles as I walk in. The entire first floor, I realize, is the good doctor's office. I ask if I might speak to him, and the reception tells me to wait.

And so I do. There is a simple wooden bench, and I sit. And wait. And think. About Poe. So far, already, there are several possibilities; the first is a mugging, but I am unconvinced. Poe might not have had the strongest constitution, but I cannot believe a mugging would have killed him.

"Mr. Dupin."

I stand as a man I take to be Snodgrass enters, fills the room. Most of his grey hair is gone, and he wears a large, salt-and-pepper beard. "Right this way," he says, leading me through a door, down a hall and into an examining room. "What ails you?"

"Poe," I say.

He pauses, then: "I thought I recognized your name. You're the detective Edgar was always talking about."

I nod. "I suppose so."

He sighs. "I don't know much beyond what I already told the police."

"I would still like very much to hear it from you. Do you mind?"

He does not. He got a letter from a man named Walker, who had found Poe completely intoxicated just outside Ryan's Tavern. Walker sent for Snodgrass, who collected Poe and brought him to Washington College Hospital, where a

man named Moran treated Poe. Poe spent almost four days bedridden in fevered delirium. “He’d had some shock to the system, and he’d never been a strong man. He was unconscious most of the time, and what little time he spent awake, he was incoherent. At one point, he kept yelling for ‘Reynolds.’ I didn’t know what he was talking about. He barely made it to midnight of October 7th. Stopped breathing. Unconscious when it happened.”

“And this Walker?” I ask. I remember Dixon mentioned him, as well.

“Joe Walker. He was just leaving a pub when he saw Poe stumbling outside.”

“Did he leave an address by which to contact him?”

“I have it,” the doctor says. “Wait here.”

He disappears but returns a moment later with a scrap of paper on which Walker’s address is written in tight, spidery letters. I pocket it. My hand trembles as it does so.

“You know, there are things you can take.”

I look at the doctor. “Sorry?”

“Your addiction. You don’t look well. I can prescribe something to help. Laudanum, for instance.”

“Laudanum is what made me this way,” I tell him as I rise.

“You’re abstaining all together?”

“I am trying,” I tell him.

“I admire that. I’m a staunch supporter of the temperance movement. Tell me, how is your body handling it?”

I look at him. “Not very well. Please excuse me,” I say, and leave the office. I hail another carriage, a big, black, loud affair of horse hooves and wagon wheels, and tell the driver the address where I’m staying. On the way, I copy Walker’s address onto another sheet of paper. I have to pause several times, unable to control the pencil, and I tell myself it is the bump of stones under carriage wheels. I almost believe myself.

When we arrive, I give the driver the address, along with a large tip. "Go here. Please ask Mr. Walker to meet me this evening at seven at Ryan's Tavern."

The driver nods. I watch the carriage rumble away like a departing storm. In my chest, my heart trembles. It has been a long time since I have known this much activity in so short a time, and I feel it. My muscles and limbs feel loose and rubbery. I realize, too, that my breath is short, that I am nearly gasping to keep up with it.

I put my hand on my chest, feel my hummingbird pulse, and I turn. There is a railing on the stoop leading up to the building in which I have rented a room, and I lean against it, let my weight settle onto it because it feels like too much for me. My vision blurs, and just as it does, I see a dark shape light on the railing closer to the door, a foot above and in front of me.

It caws at me.

"I am here," I tell it. "I am here." I am surprised my voice is a whisper, for I did not mean for it to be.

It caws again, and then flaps off, a great, black blur as big as the world, and the percussive blast of its wings against my face is too much for me. I collapse, sideways, downward, into darkness.

I wake in a bed. My head throbs. The room is dark except for a flickering candle. I detect movement to my side but do not move myself. My tongue is sour and swollen, and I want to ask for water, but it comes out a groan. I feel pathetic.

"You're awake?" the voice comes from off to the side, and I recognize it as belonging to the woman who is renting me the room in her house.

I know enough not to nod, and speaking didn't work either. I raise a leaden hand, fiddle my fingers.

She puts a glass of water to my lips. I drink.

"Found you at the bottom of the steps. Pale as a ghost," she says, as if she is familiar with them. She presses a cool

compress to my head. "One of the other tenants helped me get you up here."

"Thank you," I say. My voice is still weak. I realize, then, what the darkness means. "What time is it?"

"Half till seven."

I groan. I have to meet Walker. I started to get up, and pain like a giant, flapping bird screams through my brain, but I manage it, anyway.

"Where you think you're going?" she asks.

"I have to meet someone."

"Now? You'll find your death."

"I have to meet someone."

Ryan's Tavern is an Irish place with a brick exterior and windows that barely let any light through. Smells like old Scotch and bangers and mash, like someone's cooking cabbage and corned beef somewhere. Air as thick and substantial as soup.

I sit at the bar. It's a big, beautiful, gleaming hunk of wood.

Walker is a young man with dark hair and a bushy mustache. He is reticent until I tell him who I am, after which he opens up. "Yeah, I seen 'im. Bad shape. Drunk. And not just drunk like he drunk one too many. Like he'd been drinking for three days. The stench was coming off him in waves. Clothes all rumpy. But I know the Doc, and when Poe mentioned him, I figgered the Doc could help. That's when I sent for 'im."

"Just here for a drink after work?" I ask him.

"No sir. I was votin'. Election day. Fact, I thought Poe was votin', too, just got one too many free drinks out of it."

I take this information in. Something about it is not right. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Joe smiles. "I wondered when you'd ask."

I call the tender over. He's a large man with reddish hair and freckles, and I ask him for two lagers, which he draws and slides across the bar to us.

“Slainte,” Joe says.

I clink his glass. It is only when I take a drink I realize I’ve not eaten much yet. I decide to go slow, if I even finish.

A memory comes, then, of drinking with Poe. Or, rather, of not drinking; of meeting him and drinking a lot, myself, but that he drank water most of the time we talked. And that he became intoxicated from a single drink.

“You said he was drunk,” I tell Joe.

Joe’s pulling another long draw from his glass. He drinks in great gulps. He nods. “He was in a bad way, yeah.”

I wonder if the tender would remember serving Poe. I call him over again. Briefly describe Poe.

The tender shakes his head. “Sorry, sir. If it’s when you say it was, a lot of people came and went that day. We had a poll here for the election. Free drinks for casting a ballot.”

Would Poe have voted? He wasn’t a resident of Baltimore.

“New bar,” Joe says to the tender. “Wasn’t here for the election.”

“Oh, aye,” the tender says. “Just put it in.”

“Local guy?” Joe asks. “I need some work done on my house.”

Tender nods. “Namea Reynolds. I’ve got his address.”

I nearly choke on my drink. I cough and splutter, wash it down with another gulp, then get out: “You said Reynolds?”

“I did.”

It cannot be a coincidence. “Is he a regular here?”

“He was the judge for the election. Never seen him before that night.”

I need to speak to Reynolds. “I would like that address, myself.”

“Sure,” the tender says, retreats away.

Joe is looking at me. “You need work done?”

I shake my head. “But I think I need to speak to him, anyway.”

Joe nods, perhaps knows not to press the matter further. The tender returns with two pieces of paper and pushes them across the bar to us. Joe picks one up, drains his beer, stands, excuses himself for home. I shake his hand and thank him for meeting me, and he thanks me for the beer before he's out the door and gone.

I only barely pay attention. Everything feels distant, now. I have only consumed half the beer, but I feel it sludging up my joints, my thoughts. I feel as if I should know by now what occurred, as if I have all the facts in the case, but they seem not to fit together. Cobwebs in my hazy brain muck up my thoughts.

I look around the bar and realize being here is going to do me no more good, so I settle for the drinks and rise. I leave half a beer behind, but I'm having trouble walking, anyway. The door is heavier than I remember, and then I'm outside in the cold, Baltimore evening.

The wind braces me immediately. November air stings tears into my eyes, and my breath plumes in front of me. Oil lamps flicker orange in the darkness, but mostly it's just black. Cobblestones glisten treacherously beneath my feet, and I walk on careful legs, but still I can't help stumbling occasionally. If anyone saw me, they would believe me drunk.

I wonder if it was this cold when Poe was here. I wonder if he had the same problem, and I wonder why he was drunk. If in fact, he was. But surely he must have been. Walker didn't seem educated, but I believe Snodgrass would have realized if those slurring movements had been the result of weakness more than alcohol. I wonder why Poe wanted Reynolds, and if it had something to do with the election.

I sigh like steam.

Dixon mentioned money and the new magazine, but none was found on Poe's body. I wonder if it was stolen, and why Poe was here to begin with. Why was he inside that tavern if he did not even drink.

I imagine Poe walking the street just as I am now. I imagine his rubbery knees, his weak-lightning heart. I imagine his gait was similar to mine, that it might have been accurate to call him inebriated but that there was more to it, that the cold Baltimore air was stealing his breath away and he was fighting to get it back, and I realize, then, that I am, too. My breath won't come; I am hyperventilating but still it eludes me.

A cry, piercing the darkness. I wonder at first if it is my own until I hear it again. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle, and another, shorter, softer sound follows the first, drips like ice down my back.

I look up. The gassy streetlights seem to be bleeding orange into the evening, and I know there cannot be as many as I'm seeing, because I know that what I see above me cannot be true; there, on the ledge, looking down at me, are ravens. A great, seething mass of ravens that merge and blur and caw together. As if they were waiting to confirm they had my attention they take to wing at once, flap into the night, which wavers with their motion. I see nothing but inky eyes and oily feathers, and I hear nothing but the screaming, screaming, screaming like Hades in flight.

I gasp. Again. I cannot breathe. The darkness is too much, and that's when brightness explodes like sunlight through my head. My knees will not hold straight, and the sidewalk is cold and hard.

A voice in the darkness. "If you know what's good for you, froggy, you'll quit pokin' your nose where it ain't wanted." It is like sandpaper through my skull.

I groan.

He boots me hard in the gut, and I cry out, and then the world goes so bright it crosses over again into darkness, and the last thing I hear is the raven's caw. As if beckoning. And I follow. Into the darkness. Beyond.

I am on a cliff. It is dark, but lit lonely silver-grey by a full moon. Waves crash angrily against the rocks far below, and white foam shivers wet thunder into the air.

The poet is here. He has lost some hair but grown a small moustache since I last saw him, but his eyes are dark as they ever were. "I'd hoped you'd come," he says.

"I had no choice in the matter," I tell him. My voice surprises me. It is confident, and strong. Unburdened. Comfortable.

"I'm still grateful. Especially after what happened. You deserved better."

I nod. "So did you."

He says nothing. The waves crash against the rock.

"You going to tell me what happened?"

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I don't quite know myself. It's so blurry. One minute I was in Philadelphia, and then I find myself here." He shrugs.

"Where is here?" I ask.

He shrugs again, then nods to the side. I look that way and see a cave. "In her sepulcher there by the sea," he says. "In her tomb by the side of the sea."

The air is pungent with dashed salt. I wonder if dreams smell.

He looks back at me. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I hadn't meant—"

"I know," I tell him.

"Good," he says. "Then we can rest. We can be free."

"We can," I agree, and the poet turns back to her tomb while I turn to face the precipice, the freedom beyond it, and with strong, sure lungs I take a giant gulp of air kissed with ocean spray and I run and I leap, and I fall, at first, but then I leave behind my body, trade in reason and logic for the freedom of flight and dreams, and I flap the giant wings I find in place of arms and soar toward the moon, toward the stars, into the darkness as black as night.

-Will Entrekin