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Poe Theatre on the Air: The National Edgar Allan Poe Theatre podcasts

Abstract

This Practitioner's Perspective explores the podcast adaptations produced for the award-winning *Poe Theatre on the Air (PTA)* series, an output of the Baltimore-based National Edgar Allan Poe Theatre. Poe's oeuvre has always been recognised as offering a rich source for adaptation across media, not least audio. Exploring the legacy of Poe on radio and the potential of his Gothic texts for auditory horror, the article gives an account of the *PTA* professional project and includes the full script of *PTA's* 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (2009).

Contributor's details

Richard J. Hand is Professor of Media Practice and Head of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He has a particular interest in historical forms of popular culture, especially horror, and is the author of two books on horror radio drama; the co-author (with Michael Wilson) of four books on Grand-Guignol horror theatre; and the co-editor (with Jay McRoy) of two volumes on Gothic/horror cinema. He is the co-author, with Mary Traynor, of *The Radio Drama Handbook: Audio Drama in Context and Practice*. He is the founding co-editor of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, and his work spans adaptation, translation and interdisciplinarity in performance media using critical and practical research methodologies.

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Although we may typically consider the Gothic to be a form driven by the visual – fantastical or shocking spectacles that arrest the eye or feature totemic monstrosities – the auditory is equally important. Gothic literature abounds with the descriptions of the sonic just as music and sound become essential components of Gothic and horror screen media. After all, there is something inherently uncanny about the very nature of the auditory as a potent yet, strictly speaking, *intangible* form. As Isabella Van Elferen emphasizes: ‘Sound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and this is closely related to the ghostly’ (2012: 4). I would argue that this is one reason why the great ‘invisible’ media art form of audio drama has always drawn on, and evolved through, a close relationship with the genres of the thriller and horror. From its very beginnings, audio drama has exploited the state of utter darkness for a sustained and alarming purpose; it has presented the ineffable through inference and suggestion; and it has slid consummately between the interiority of the mind and exteriority of the material world.

To this end, that is why Gothic literature has provided such rich source material for audio adaptation. To give one significant example, Edgar Allan Poe’s oeuvre stands as a particularly fine demonstration of how integral the sonic can be for uncanny affect and meaning. Frequently in Poe, it is sound that fuels the climax of uncanny terror: the relentless beating of a dead man’s heart (‘The Tell-Tale Heart’); the eerie voice of a mesmerized corpse (‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’); the desperate noises of prematurely buried people and animals (‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, ‘The Black Cat’ and others). In fact, the

auditory is more profound than being moments in a narrative. Fred Botting locates the exceptional scale and significance of sound in Poe's narratives:

Like the uncanny more generally in Poe's fiction, sound plays out its disturbing effects in a fully – and fully (pre)Freudian – register: wishes, fears, memories, delusion or hallucinations realised; stories coming to life; life returning from or pre-recognising death. (2015: 76)

As Botting makes evident, Poe's use of sound goes beyond mere description or elementary effect and is genuinely profound in its psychological impact and (literal) resonance. Given the significance of sound in Poe it is no surprise he has been such a highly popular source for adaptation throughout the history of radio drama.

For critic and playwright Allen S. Weiss, Poe has an almost prophetic quality: 'Poe appears to offer something akin to a speculative philosophy of phonography and radiophony, well before their invention' (Weiss and Whitehead 2001: 92). The sound artist Gregory Whitehead concurs:

I have always thought of Poe as America's first radio artist, in theme, certainly, but also in style and in thought, the way so many narratives drop off into dark holes, and never really recover, or the characters who speak quite calmly and naturally and then the reader finds out they are posthumous, or the voices that drift in from other worlds, invisible and unnamed... (Weiss and Whitehead 2001: 92)

These are remarkable assertions given the fact that Poe died in 1840 and the radio was invented decades later, only becoming a viable, practical technology in the following century.

Putting it quite simply, Jim Harmon argues that although Poe would not have known it, when he wrote ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ he had produced ‘a beautiful radio script’ (1967: 75).

In addition to numerous book readings, ‘golden age’ radio in the USA (1930–50s) often turned to Poe as a source for dramatization. In 1938, Boris Karloff performed ‘The Evil Eye’ (a version of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’) on the *Chase and Sanborn Hour*; in *The Mystery in the Air* (1947), Peter Lorre starred in adaptations of Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ and ‘The Black Cat’. In addition, Poe adaptations appeared on the horror radio shows of the period such as *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (1941–52), *The Weird Circle* (1943–45), *The Hall of Fantasy* (1952–53) and others. In the UK, the BBC’s landmark horror programme *Appointment with Fear* (1943–55) featured adaptations of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ and ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ in the 1940s.

The popularity of Poe for adaptation has continued unabated into our own time, with radio and podcast creatives frequently (re)discovering Poe’s consummate suitability as a source for uncanny and thrilling audio drama. There are countless examples, but Michelle Kay Hansen makes an interesting observation regarding *Doug Bradley’s Spinechillers* (2009–14), an audio series that features numerous Poe adaptations:

[It] effectively uses the audio format to bring Poe’s works to life for contemporary consumers of literature and popular culture. Furthermore, perhaps unknowingly, this anthology is a new step in the oral tradition of literature, which is at the heart of both storytelling and poetry. (2022: 217–18)

As Hansen observes, although audio technology has kept Poe’s work contemporary and accessible, it simultaneously affirms the fundamental traditions of oral storytelling at the heart of the Gothic narrative and its legacy.

In the last few years, a significant development in Poe and audio has occurred with the establishment of a Poe-focused cultural organization: The National Edgar Allan Poe Theatre (NEAPT). NEAPT is the first theatre in the world with a mission to adapt and stage the works of Poe onstage, on the air, and in the classroom. Established in 2019 by artistic director Alex Zavistovich, NEAPT is the successor to Molotov Theatre, an award-winning, Washington, DC-based company (also chaired by Zavistovich) that produced Grand Guignol-inspired horror stage shows from 2007 to 2017. When Molotov relocated to Baltimore, the theatre shifted its work to focus on the city's most celebrated literary figure, Edgar Allan Poe. The theatre sees its role in the city as producing adaptations of the author's work in a variety of formats in ways that embrace all of Baltimore's residents and visitors, providing educational opportunities related to Poe's works and historical context, including the crafts of theatre and the literary arts, as well as developing literacy. In addition to its civic and regional work, one format of global activity for NEAPT has been the audio drama series *Poe Theatre on the Air (PTA)*. Originally planned to be one component of the organization's provision, this work took on a particular importance during the COVID-19 pandemic as it offered a lifeline of creative activity at a time when stage, screen and other social interactive art and audience forms were prohibited.

Richard J. Hand was approached to be lead scriptwriter and artistic consultant on this series of National Public Radio broadcasts and, concurrently, audio podcasts accessible through NPR.org, Amazon Music, Audible, Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify and other platforms, including the NEAPT's own website (www.poetheatre.org/poe-theatre-on-the-air). Since its first production in 2019, *PTA* has won numerous awards including at the Hear Now Festival and the International Edgar Allan Poe Festival. In 2023, *PTA* was also acquired to be in the permanent special collections of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. And, most prestigiously, in October 2020, the Library of Congress in

Washington, DC, made a formal acquisition of the series for permanent archiving, considering ‘the podcast to be an important part of the cultural and historical record’ (Ashworth 2020).

In creating the *PTA* series, an overarching concept was needed beyond merely creating half-hour adaptations of Poe. To this end, we created a central location and narrative: Dr Mallard’s Lunatic Asylum. The listener is implicated as a visitor who arrives at the institution and is shown Mallard’s inmates – or, as he prefers to call them, his ‘children’ – as he extols his revolutionary ‘system’. Each episode presents a different one of Mallard’s patients as we enter the framed narrative that presents dramatized interpretations of a range of Poe’s stories from the most celebrated to the comparatively obscure. The framed narrative is a classic device in Gothic fiction but also an homage to classic horror radio, which often deployed a stable framing narrative – including narrators such as ‘Old Nancy the Salem Witch’ in *The Witch’s Tale* (1931–38) or ‘The Man in Black’ in the BBC’s *Appointment with Fear* (1943–55) – while each episode’s central story is self-contained and complete. Mallard and each of us, the listener/visitor, are offered a consistently framing narrative while we enter each cell to hear Poe’s idiosyncratic protagonists ‘tell their tale’.

The structure of *PTA* also paid tribute to the ‘portmanteau’ horror movie. In films such as Ealing Studios’ *Dead of Night* (Albert Cavalcanti et al., 1945) or, even more aptly for *PTA*, Amicus Productions’ *Asylum* (Roy Ward Baker, 1972), a framing narrative features a series of short horror stories before culminating in a denouement of terror. Similarly, the first series of *PTA* reaches a cataclysmic finale in an adaptation of Poe’s ‘The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether’, the paradigm of the ‘lunatics have taken over the asylum’ narrative. This episode features the series’ various inmates released from their cells and the inevitable chaos that ensues. In the subsequent *PTA* series, a

different approach will be taken with serializations of Poe's longer fiction (including 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' and 'The Purloined Letter') that will pay homage to another great genre of radio adaptation: the classic serial.

As an appendix to this short article, we are delighted to have the opportunity to reproduce the script of the first episode of *PTA* in full: 'The Tell-Tale Heart'. This story – one of Poe's most celebrated – seemed the best choice to be *PTA*'s pilot episode. Following Jim Harmon's view that with this story Poe had written a 'beautiful radio script', we found a tale highly conducive to audio adaptation. It is a work of remarkable economy (being a little over two-thousand words) with a key feature of horror – the constant beating of the dead man's heart – that would offer a dramatic crescendo. The sound of the heartbeat that haunts the murderous protagonist (and no one else) can become a compelling experience when *the listener is able to hear it too*. Such moments succeed in implicating the audience in the dramatic uncanny to great effect. As much as 'The Tell-Tale Heart' gives the audio adaptor a great core narrative to work with, it also leaves ample opportunities for embellishment and interpretation. For example, we do not know the protagonist's age or gender. Locked in their testimony, in dramatization we can open this out and slide from exteriority to interiority. In the *PTA* adaptation, the protagonist is a woman who answers an advert to be a 'cleaner and companion' to the story's 'old man'. This allows a build-up in tension as the harmony of the initial arrangement becomes fraught and frayed as the protagonist's growing repulsion (emerging from what we might call obsessive compulsive disorder) culminates in homicide and incarceration.

If we listen to the 2019 recording of the play as produced by NEAPT, we can explore the practical interpretation of an audio script: the production does not follow the script line by line but rather makes its own artistic – and adaptive – decisions. After all, any script within the performance media is simply one stage in a journey of interpretation and adaptation. The

production establishes the world of Mallard's asylum through the sounds of locks, bolts and creaking cell doors. The sound effects and microphone treatment build a mood of darkness and potential claustrophobia as we are drawn into the institution. The mystery and gloom of the asylum is juxtaposed in a surprising, if not eerily illogical, way with the demeanor of the isolated inmate: a cheerful woman who speaks brightly of the 'spirit of springtime healthiness' but ominously cannot be permitted to meet any of Mallard's other 'guests'. This frames the main story as the Woman is invited to 'tell her tale'.

Throughout the recording, sound is used in a variety of ways – as well as the spoken voice, there are diegetic sounds and atmospheric effects and distortions. The music is principally sparing and subtle, effectively consolidating the mood of alienation. A central impetus in the first half of the central narrative is the use of the soundscape to develop the Woman's misophonia (a phobia of the sounds of eating and chewing, etc.) in order to make the listener begin to understand, then perhaps share, the same repulsion and neurosis. The production uses detailed layering: for example, the Old Man's breathing, snoring and gulping is augmented with ambient music and uncanny tones, all underpinning the mood and meaning of the Woman's monologic speech. The eerie, ambient music and sound effects work with the descriptive power of the spoken word while affording a voice actor the opportunity to use vocal sounds and utterance (rather than just articulate language). The script and subsequent recording aim to adapt and consolidate Poe's tale as an eerie and atmospheric listening experience with ironic humour, defamiliarization and psychological intensity.

As a whole, the *PTA* audio plays – and *Dr Mallard's Asylum* – do not pretend to offer a serious study of psychological disorders. They are unabashedly arch works of the popular Gothic. In homage to the great tradition of half-hour horror, adventure and suspense radio, the *PTA* audio plays are meant to be thrilling and chilling, evocative and compelling, diverting and mordantly amusing. We aim to take the audience into the heart of Poe's

imaginative world through scripts which are well-crafted and designed to use the media of contemporary audio to the upmost, not least in the diverse modes through which they have been consumed (as broadcasts, streams or podcasts). Nothing can place us as centrally immersed as audio drama, and nothing can make this more pleasurable uncanny than being at the dramatic heart of Edgar Allan Poe's vividly auditory imagination.

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POE THEATRE ON THE AIR:

'THE TELL-TALE HEART' (2019)

an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's tale by Richard J Hand

DR MALLARD

WOMAN

OLD MAN

POLICEMAN

SFX: FOOTSEPS ON GRAVEL

SFX: HEAVY DOOR KNOCKER

SFX: SLAT OPENS

MALLARD: Who is it? Ah! How very good to see you! Your visit has been most enthusiastically anticipated. At the agreed time too. I admire punctuality - it is a noble and morally clean quality.

SFX: HEAVY BOLTS AND CHAINS CLUNK AND SLIDE

SFX: DOOR CREAKS OPEN

MALLARD: Welcome to the asylum! Please - enter freely.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS ENTER BUILDING

SFX: THE DOOR SLAMS SHUT AND BOLTS ARE FASTENED

MALLARD: I am so glad you found us. The streets are dark on a winter's evening, even if it is the best time to visit us. Quiet. Tranquil. Few distractions on the way here. Come with me - down this corridor.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS IN CORRIDOR UNDER...

MALLARD: I must say I am delighted to have the opportunity to show you my system. My revolutionary system to change the way we treat - and most importantly CURE - the mentally crippled. For I believe in HOPE. There is no case beyond hope. No lunatic beyond cure. I have many inmates here - inmates abandoned by all other institutions. I have taken them in. I believe I can cure them, one and all. I can see you are perplexed? You want to know my secret? All in good time, but what I will reveal immediately is that I regard them all as my CHILDREN. They have lost their way - like little lost souls. But I am getting ahead of myself. I think it is best that you meet some of my... children. Here. Cell Number One. The patient is most polite. Quite enchanting. One of my favourite 'children'. I could spend hours in her company. In fact, I have done. She is blessed with the highest levels of sensitivity. For her own part, she regards it as a curse. A curse! A lady so attuned to her surroundings! Such potential. I am confident that my system will cure her - cleanse her. [LAUGHS] Haha... Excuse my laughter. You see, this patient is very clean and proper. But afflicted, diseased almost - with NERVES. And that is the impetus to her tragic tale. But you will find her most eloquent - I will let her tell you her tale herself, in her own delightful voice. Let us enter.

SFX: KEYS FUMBLE AND ENTER IRON LOCK WHICH TURNS OPEN

SFX: IRON DOOR CREAKS

MALLARD: Good evening, my dear!

WOMAN: Oh Doctor Mallard! I am quite unprepared! I have not had time to clean my room!

MALLARD: Please, do not worry yourself. If only some of the other guests were as sanitary as you, my dear. The other rooms could do with a clean-

WOMAN: Oh, I would be delighted to clean their rooms! I will find a spirit of springtime healthiness to infuse the

whole house! And I would so like to meet other people,
your other guests-

MALLARD: Ah. There's the rub-

WOMAN: Yes, I forgot. Forgive me. I am not to meet the other
guests.

MALLARD [SOTTO VOCE]: I'm afraid it would not be a good idea.

WOMAN: Doctor Mallard has made it clear that my sensitivity is
the root of my nervousness and my nervousness is the cause
of... Am I permitted to speak freely...?

MALLARD: Have no concern, my dear. You can trust our friend.
Tell your tale.

WOMAN: You must forgive me my nervousness. I assure you,
that's all that afflicts me: nerves. I promise you I am
not... I am not mad. [BEAT] You have no reason to think I am
mad. It's just a disease that has made me nervous. It has
heightened my senses. Above all, my sense of hearing is
most acute. [PAUSE] And yet you still look at me askance.
Wait until I tell you the whole story. I shall tell you
calmly - and healthily. You see, I loved the old man...

MUSIC FOR TRANSITION

SFX: FRONT DOOR OF HOUSE OPENS

OLD MAN [FEEBLE]: Hello...?

WOMAN: Good morning, sir. I have come about the vacant
situation.

OLD MAN: Ah! Perfect! Please - come in.

SFX: DOOR CLOSES

SFX: FEET ON CARPETED FLOOR

WOMAN [READING ALOUD FROM RUSTLED NEWSPAPER]: 'A cleaner and companion to a mature, distinguished gentleman...'

OLD MAN: I may have put modesty aside in my description. I am indeed mature and... I would like to consider myself... distinguished... I do hope you are not disappointed...

WOMAN: Not at all, sir. I couldn't be happier at the prospect!

OLD MAN: Very good! I am overjoyed! [BEAT] I see you stare at me...

WOMAN: No - let me apologise. Just my nervous disposition. I did not mean to...

OLD MAN: Is it my eye? I have no vision in one of my eyes... An accident long ago... A childhood misdemeanour... It is nothing... A little unsightly that is all... Unsightly! Hard to look THROUGH and to look AT! Hahaha!

WOMAN: Bless you, sir.

OLD MAN [PLAINTIVELY]: Do you wish to leave?

WOMAN: Not at all, sir!

OLD MAN: Very good! Welcome to my home. A modest place. A lonely place. And I struggle to tend to the household tasks.

WOMAN: You need not vex yourself anymore, sir! I will be a rock to you.

OLD MAN: And there are... dangers.

WOMAN: Dangers, sir?

OLD MAN [CONSPIRATORIALLY]: Robbers... My house may be humble, but I have certain possessions, mainly of sentimental value, that might nonetheless appeal to robbers. And... I fear violence. I am a man of gentle sentiment and the stories one hears of people accosted in their own homes, assaulted in their own beds, unable to defend themselves - it fills me with horror!

WOMAN: Then I shall protect you, sir.

OLD MAN: An angel! Descended from the heavens!

WOMAN: Oh sir, you shall make me blush!

OLD MAN: With you here, no one will harm me. And you'll live here and I will provide all you might need. And in return, you will help to keep me safe and the place in order... Fortunes be blessed!

SFX: CUPS AND PLATES BEING STACKED

OLD MAN: And you have started already! This will work out very well - for the both of us!

WOMAN: Indeed it will! Cleanliness is next to godliness...

MUSIC FOR TRANSITION

WOMAN: The place was filthy. Suitable only for farmyard swine. [CORRECTING HERSELF] No, no, don't get me wrong! I loved the old man! HE wasn't a pig! Just the place - a grimy, dirty mess. It took days to get the place spotless. But I did it. The house sparkled. But still... something bothered me... I am a lady of heightened sensitivity...

MUSIC FOR TRANSITION

WOMAN: Good evening, sir! Your dinner is served!

SFX: PLATES, CUTLERY AND GLASSES PUT ONTO TABLE

OLD MAN: This is extraordinary! You have cooked me a meal fit for a king and my home is so clean everything glistens and shines like treasure! I barely recognise it! I am fed and housed like a monarch! My humble home is transformed into a palace! All thanks to your incredible labours.

WOMAN: It was a pleasure, sir. Besides, I had no choice. I am in your employ and... and... it has to be done. May I give you some wine, sir?

OLD MAN: Yes, please!

SFX: WINE POURED

SFX: GULPING DRINKS

OLD MAN: It is wonderful. Please, why don't you sit down with me. Share my repast - it looks delicious. Your labours are done. We can engage in conversation.

WOMAN: I would, but alas I feel my work is not yet done...

OLD MAN: Goodness! Your work must be complete... Please - sit down and we can eat together or at least have some wine-

WOMAN [SHARP]: There is an odour. A stench. A rank and rotten smell.

OLD MAN: Really? I cannot smell a thing... Just a sweet fragrance of cleanliness!

WOMAN: Not to my nose. [LIGHTLY] So I shall keep cleaning!

OLD MAN: And cleaning... and cleaning... and cleaning... An angel of the house!

WOMAN: Your dinner is getting cold!

SFX: CUTLERY SCRATCHING ON PLATE AND EATING CONTINUING UNDER

WOMAN: You might use the knife and fork correctly, more lightly upon the plate...

OLD MAN: I'm sorry?

WOMAN: Don't cut onto the plate so hard. [LAUGHS] You will scratch off the glaze! And they are such pretty plates...

OLD MAN: Yes, they are. They have been in my family for an age! My mother was so very fond of them...

WOMAN: Gently, gently does it.

OLD MAN: Mm, delicious!

SFX: SLURPING CHOPS, SATISFIED GRUNTING

OLD MAN: Exquisite food...! Mm, mm, mm...

WOMAN: You have a napkin.

OLD MAN: Hmm?

WOMAN: There is a napkin beside your plate.

OLD MAN: Yes...

WOMAN: Use it. [LIGHTER] It is there for you to wipe your mouth...!

OLD MAN: Very well... Is that better...?

WOMAN: Yes.

OLD MAN [EATING]: Hmm, delicious...

WOMAN: It might be best to close your mouth when you eat.

OLD MAN: Forgive me...

SFX: CHEWING FOOD UP CLOSE THEN MIXES WITH BREATHING AND LOOPS
AND DISTORTS INTO A LOOPING RHYTHM, LIKE A PULSE...

WOMAN: And I realised that the problem was not the house but the old man. I loved him. You must believe me when I say it. I did love the old man. But the stench that infused the house and could never be cleaned was... HIM. The food that slobbered down his chin in clumps, half-chewed and saliva-strewn... He couldn't imbibe without the drink trailing down his chin from the corner of his twisted mouth... And the noises he made... Breathing in hideous rattling loops, like the raking, raling breaths of a dying man... a dying man... a dying man... And then I realised that if the house was to be clean, properly clean, I would need to do something with the man... He was the contagion, the stench, the frightful mess... I looked at him and assessed his faults... The white hair, thin like wisps over his peeling scalp... The wrinkled, flaking skin... The bumps, pustules and moles... But I tell you truly - I LOVED the old man! All of his faults I could live with... But not the eye... the eye... the eye... the eye... [PAUSE] It was like the eye of a vulture. Dull blue with a hideous veil over it that disgusted me. It chilled the very marrow in my bones as it swivelled and seemed to watch me, although I knew it was useless - it could see nothing! When it looked at me, my blood ran cold. The evil eye! I can see it yet! [PAUSE] And so I set about my plan to clean the house once and for all - to make it truly pristine I would need to dispose of the old man. And you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded - with what caution - with what care I set about my work!

MUSIC UNDER

I was never kinder to the old man than when I had decided on my course of action. Although every screech of knife on plate, every smashing door, every creaking step the old man set my nerves on edge and... and made me want to sob my heart out... My nerves shuddered and shattered inside me. But I merely went about my tasks without a word. I cooked and cleaned and even wiped the old man's face with the neglected napkin myself. And I just smiled and smiled but bit my lip

until it bled. I could taste blood as I catered and cleaned for the old man. And every night - when I fancied him to be asleep - I would take a cleaver from the kitchen and I would creep up the staircase with a lantern to the closed door of his bedchamber. Pressing my ear to the door I could hear the ticking of a clock...

SFX: TICKING CLOCK [SOMEWHAT LIKE THE PULSE OF A HEART] MERGES IN WITH SNORING

And the nauseating, rhythmic rattle of his snoring and I would grasp the handle and open the door slowly... slowly... slowly... And I would lean my head into the room and open the lantern so it cast a beam upon his face. And I did this ritual every night until-

OLD MAN [TERRIFIED]: Who's there!?! Who is it!?! What do you want!?! Please! PLEASE!

WOMAN [EERIE WHISPER]: The beam of lantern light like a thin thread of spider web...

OLD MAN: Who's there! Help!

WOMAN [EERIE WHISPER]: Falls upon the evil eye...

OLD MAN: Who is it?! Help! Help!

WOMAN [EERIE WHISPER]: The vulture eye is awake... It sees me...

OLD MAN: Please! I implore you!

WOMAN [EERIE WHISPER]: It is now the time to act...

SFX: FOOSTEPS ON FLOORBOARDS

OLD MAN [STILL IN TERROR]: It's you! It's YOU! But WHY, in heaven's-

SFX: HACKING MURDER: TERRIFIED SCREAMS FROM THE OLD MAN AND TRIUMPHANT SCREAMS FROM THE WOMAN.

SFX: BLOOD SWILLS, GORE SPLATS, THE CLEAVER FALLS NOISILY ON THE FLOOR.

WOMAN: Oh, the noise...! [PAUSE] Peace at last. It is over.

SFX: FAINT HEARTBEAT PULSATES A FEW TIMES

WOMAN: What is that sound...? [SILENCE] Nothing... Nothing... I am a lady of great sensitivity, that's all... But a lady's work is never done. Time to dispose of this blight upon the house. [PAUSE] I placed the corpse into a metal tub.

SFX: SOMETHING OF BULK MANOEUVRED INTO METAL BATHTUB

SFX: GATHERS UP CLEAVER, CLUNKS ON SIDE OF TUB

WOMAN: First of all the head.

SFX: CHOPPING SOUND AND SQUISHY FLESH IN TUB

WOMAN: Then the limbs...

SFX: MORE CLEAVING

SFX: HEAVY, PULSATING BREATH OF WOMAN

WOMAN: Beneath the floorboards you shall go...

SFX: LOUD ECHING CREAK OF FLOORBOARDS BEING RAISED AND ALMOST SPLITTING

SFX: CHUNKS OF FLESH ARE DROPPED INTO FLOOR

SFX: FLOORBOARDS REPLACED

WOMAN: Ha! Ha! I cannot believe my eyes! There is nothing to wash out - no stain of any kind - no blood whatever. I have been too wary for that. The tub had caught all - every drop of him! Ha! Ha! And that can be disposed of down the drain...

SFX: TUB DRAGGED ALONG FLOOR AND ON FLAGSTONES OUTSIDE

SFX: LIQUID POURED DOWN A DRAIN

MUSIC FOR TRANSITION

WOMAN: And I enjoyed my tranquillity. I am a lady of heightened sensitivity so you can imagine how I appreciated no mess, no noise... No mess, no noise. Immaculate floors and furniture. Doors closing quietly. Silent eating off of unscratched plates. I imagined that the house itself took me to its bosom and said THANK YOU...! But this only lasted a few hours when-

SFX: KNOCK AT DOOR, RHYTHMIC LIKE A PULSE

SFX: DOOR OPENS

WOMAN: Hello...?

POLICEMAN: Good afternoon, madam.

WOMAN: A policeman!? Whatever has happened!?

POLICEMAN: Nothing to worry about, madam. Are you proprietor of this house?

WOMAN: Yes. No. The owner is abroad. He will return presently, although I am not sure when. A long vacation-

POLICEMAN: May I come in?

WOMAN: Of course. Please, wipe your feet. And again.

SFX: DOOR CLOSES

POLICEMAN: Has there been any disturbance, madam?

WOMAN: No. [PAUSE] Why do you say that?

POLICEMAN: You neighbours have reported hearing screams last night.

WOMAN: Screams? Why would they say such a thing?

POLICEMAN: Repeated screams - both male and female - after midnight. They feared it was a robbery.

WOMAN: A robbery!? Such nonsense. Please, come and inspect for yourself. See every room!

POLICEMAN: Thank you, madam.

SFX AND MUSIC UNDER

WOMAN: And I showed him every room. Everything clean and proper. The bedchambers beamed with sunlight and were fragrant with fresh air. No mud on the staircase or clumps of dust in the corner of the room. You could inspect beneath the rugs and find no filth. I showed him everything in the kitchen too: I ensured he looked at his reflection in the knives, spoons and the cleaver. He admired the unscratched surface of the old man's precious plates. I was proud of my work.

POLICEMAN [AT A DISTANCE]: Well, evidently everything is in perfect order...

WOMAN: The initial suspicions I detected in the policeman had, by now, evaporated. I enjoyed my role. I was playing to the balcony! I was so confident, I made him sit in a chair above the body of the old man...

POLICEMAN: Are you sure the gentleman who owns the house did not say when he would return?

WOMAN: No, a long vacation. A long, much deserved vacation.

SFX: HEARTBEAT STARTS

POLICEMAN: And you really have no idea where he went?

WOMAN [STILTED]: Oh, ah, no... Places, places...

POLICEMAN: To see family?

WOMAN [ANXIOUS]: No, no, family. Alone in the world.

POLICEMAN: Friends and old acquaintances?

WOMAN [STACCATO]: Maybe. Friends. Places new.

POLICEMAN: Did he pack many belongings...?

WOMAN: No... no...

POLICEMAN: Are you alright, madam?

WOMAN [INCREASINGLY MANIC]: Yes... I love the old man... I miss him... never a kinder word from him... the way he liked his dinner... cutting upon the plate... full of smiles... despite the eye... not his fault, a childhood injury... And he is OLD... but... but... the vulture eye must have been blind but it seemed to stare so... stare at me and... and... stalk me around the room... and I do hope he is enjoying his much deserved and welcome vacation... Old friends and places new. I will embrace him and kiss him when he returns as I miss him so - did I not tell you that I loved the old man? But why do you stare upon me so? Why do you smile? I know you can hear it! I know you can hear it! Hear 'what', you say? I am no fool! Do not humour me... do not pretend! I am a better thespian than you... dear policeman! I know you can hear it! You villain! Very well! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! Here... here! It is the beating of the old man's hideous heart!!

[SILENCE]

MALLARD: And there we have the dear lady's tale. Very sad, very tragic. But not beyond hope. My system will cure her. And she will return to sharing company, such is my confidence. Imagine her, this sensitive lady - a veritable angel of the house!

WOMAN: I am no fool! I hear it still! I am a lady of sensitivity! But I know you hear it too! Do not humour me... do not pretend! I know you can hear the beating of the old man's heart!

MALLARD: Hmm, yes, I think that is our cue to depart. Early days in her cure.

WOMAN [FURIOUS]: And next time WIPE your BOOTS BEFORE you come in here!

SFX: RAPIDLY, DOOR OPENED AND SLAMMED THEN LOCKED

MALLARD: If only we can transfer her sensitivity and cleanliness to her moral compass. Lots of cleaning and proper conduct - but seeing less FAULTS in others. And no murder, obviously. We cannot risk her meeting the other residents. It would be pandemonium. She sees the shortcomings in others when she should find the GOODNESS IN ALL THINGS. We shall find a moral tolerance in her by keeping her alone in darkness and silence. And she must realise there is no heartbeat. I mean, there isn't, is there? You didn't hear a heartbeat did you...? Of course you didn't! Did you? No, no, I merely jest. That would be deranged. And then you should be in here alongside her! [BEAT] Good idea. Let's move on. You want to meet another of my 'children'? It's only a few steps to my next challenging case...

THE END