

Scene 2.

ERIC sits reading *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe.*

ROSE enters in a fuss, holding a newspaper. As she does, ERIC adds a single rose to the bouquet.

1870.

ROSE

It's passed.

ERIC

Oh?

ROSE

It's all over the papers! Look, you see?

ROSE shoves the newspaper in his face. ERIC wafts it away.

ERIC

I needn't follow the paper.

ROSE

Lord knows how you manage, never knowing the goings on in the world.

ERIC

Hm?

ROSE

Whatever could you possibly be reading at a time like this?

ERIC

The haunted musings of a melancholic.

ROSE

As though you have anything to be melancholy about. I implore you, read for yourself.

ERIC

You implore me, do you?

ERIC concedes and takes the newspaper.

ERIC

So they've given negroes the vote.

Yes!

ERIC

And that concerns us because...

ROSE

Because if negroes have the vote, then surely, women will next.

ERIC

How charming.

ROSE

Charming. I tell you we've made major progress in American society, even the human race, and you say it's charming.

ERIC

By all means, love, celebrate if you want. It's wonderful news to those who need it most.

ROSE

But you have no need of the news.

ERIC

I need not follow the paper.

ERIC sets the paper on the table. ROSE gets out a wine bottle and a single glass.

ERIC

What have you there?

ROSE

A party of one.

ERIC

And I suppose I'm not invited?

ROSE

No. (beat) Stop looking at me.

ERIC

But you're so lovely to look at.

ROSE

Parties are for those in celebration, and as you have no need of the news, you have no purpose for frivolity.

ERIC

Wine need not warm me, I've my spitfire right here.

ROSE

You nary require much of anything, do you?

ERIC

Hm?

ROSE

No need of news, no need of wine, no need of anything.

ERIC

I fear you've confounded me.

ROSE

Ha!

ERIC

You're cruel to mock an addled man.

ROSE

How simple your life must be.

ERIC

My life is only so simple as you allow.

ROSE

Befitting a simpleton.

ERIC

Oh ho, very clever.

ROSE

I've not finished scolding you.

ERIC

Carry on, if you must.

ROSE

All you do is sit in your chair and read your books with not a care for the world around you! Never surprised, never frightened, never caught off guard, it's like being married to a statue.

ERIC

A statue in a garden of time.

ROSE

Keep your poetical sentiments to yourself.

ERIC

You adore my poetical sentiments.

ROSE

You sound more and more like those so-called romantics every day.

ERIC

One might say I've entered a state of evolution.

ROSE

Not with that Darwin again, Eric, the man was mad.

ERIC

I don't believe he's died just yet.

ROSE

A pity.

ERIC

So I'm capable of change! Change is hardly surprising, it happens all the time.

ERIC / ROSE

And yet it's always the same.

ROSE

You always say that.

ERIC

And you always remember.

ROSE

You never change.

ERIC

Not in the ways that matter.

ROSE

Not a single thing. You wear the same clothes, read the same books—

ERIC

I add a new one to the library every twenty years or so, to keep it fresh.

ROSE

You don't look a day over twenty-five.

ERIC

And so I do not.

ROSE

I'll be forty-five and everyone will mistake me for your mother.

ERIC

Oh, sweetheart.

ROSE

I cannot even begin to fathom how much older you are than me.

ERIC

Not much older. (Beat) Rose, darling, you're beautiful. You've always been beautiful to me.

ROSE

You have that far away look in your eyes you always have, your mind is elsewhere.

ERIC

Can I not compliment my wife?

ROSE

You're thinking about her, I can hear it in your voice as clear as church bells.

ERIC

Well, love, I must say the two of you are very alike.

ROSE

But not the same.

ERIC

You are the same in every way that matters.

ROSE

It's not fair.

ERIC

I wouldn't go so far as to cry unfairness. I get the pleasure of wooing you all over again. I never tire of that.

ROSE

But I don't remember.

Is it not enough to fall in love once?

ROSE

You fell in love with her and I— I will never be her. I hardly begin comprehending who she was.

ERIC

Rose, look at me. It's always been you.

ROSE

How can you say that?

ERIC

Because I remember. Even if you can't, I remember it all. And you, my dearest, you are always the same. Every lifetime, every body, every heartbeat may be a different pace, but you. You are more constant than the stars, for even they lose their light.

ROSE

And I suppose you've seen the stars fade.

ERIC

A few. It can be hard to tell when you've been under so many skies.

ROSE

What will happen, then, when I look like your mother, your grandmother, and you the same?

ERIC

I'll do as I've always done.

ROSE

What will happen if I die?

ERIC

You always die. A funny habit, that. I'll wait, darling. A good fifteen, twenty years I'll wait, and then we'll do it all over again.

ROSE

But I will be gone. It cannot be— it will never be us again, it will be you and a stranger.

ERIC

Not so.

ERIC / ROSE

Because I/you remember.

ERIC

Quick on the jump, you are.

ROSE

Your head must be stuffed with sawdust.

ERIC

You feel I'm not listening to you.

ROSE

You're not listening to me.

ERIC

You feel I'm keeping an air of distance.

ROSE

You are.

ERIC

You feel that I remind you of your father.

ROSE

Are you going to tell me now you've the power to read minds?

ERIC

We have had this exact conversation, what, nine times? Once every ninety to seventy years, we have this talk, and it always ends the same.

ROSE

You've never had it with me.

ERIC

I've only ever had it with you. And I never tire of it.

ROSE

Because I'm charming.

ERIC

Because you're more than just human, love. You are my Rose. My perfect summer flower. And while you wither come the fall, and the winter is cold without you, I always find you again. No matter how long it takes. And the summer is so beautiful.

ROSE

You're a cold man.

I know.

ROSE

I hate you.

ERIC

Never enough to leave. (Beat) You know as well as I do that there is no one on the face of this Earth that will ever know you so well, accept you so completely as I. No other with such long-suffering patience, such mild temperament in your rages. I needn't listen. I've heard it all before in a hundred different languages, in a hundred different lands. There is nothing you can do that will surprise me. And there is nothing you can do that will have me reject you.

ROSE

I could leave. We have no children. I could go today.

ERIC

And you would be back within the month.

ROSE

I would not.

ERIC

And the little affair you use to, how shall I say, recover from our relationship will leave you hollow and bare. And so you return, dismayed that I am, once again, right.

ROSE

I could leave another way.

ERIC

Ha!

ROSE

You haven't the foggiest idea what I'm capable of.

ERIC

You have only ever killed yourself once in all these thousand years. It is expressly unlikely you would do it again.

ROSE

If you find me every time, you must have to comb the world over to do so. It is impossible that I be born as the neighbor girl in Boston immemorial.

ERIC

You were suffering from an incurable disease of the bones that left you fainting with pain. Sometime in the thirteen hundreds, I would say. You committed suicide, arguing life itself was

torture no matter what relief I provided. (Beat) Is your life now, today, in the year of our Lord 1870, truly so painful that there are no comforts in the world? Nothing can sate you but the release of death, Rose, is that what you're saying?

Beat.

ROSE

...No.

ERIC

Good.

ERIC returns to his book.

ROSE

What was her name?

ERIC

Hm?

ROSE

Her name. The...version of me that, you know.

ERIC

Wilfred. You were the son of a wool merchant, very well to do. But hard to separate from your family, what with your ailments. Not marriageable for the times, thank the gods.

ROSE

Did you call him Rose, too?

ERIC

As a term of endearment from time to time, yes. It was *Marose* then, what with the popularity of noble French in those days. (Beat) It was a terrible thing you did, you know. You hurt me very deeply.

ROSE

My apologies.

ERIC

I had expected at least another thirty years. I felt we had finally reached our true connection, that final cadence that comes with the actualization of a soulmate bond, and then... you were gone. Like a blink. Of all these lives... I waited a long time before seeking you out that next generation. It was nearly too late, nigh ten years before the end of your next natural life.

ROSE

Was it better? Even if it was only ten years?

ERIC

You were much older than forty-five. You often mistook me for your son, or your then late husband, but I hardly minded. I loved you all the same. You were my Rose, after all. And you always will be.

ROSE

Will I be a mother in this life?

ERIC

More than unlikely, it is very probably impossible, I'm afraid.

ROSE

Not once?

ERIC

Not once have we ever had a child. Not in this state, anyhow. When I was properly alive, yes. But that was a very long time ago.

ROSE

How long?

ERIC

Not too long, don't fret your pretty head about it. (Beat) It is an unlikely choice in today's world, but I would ask that you don't attempt anything drastic, on your own life or otherwise. For my sake.

ROSE

I won't.

Beat.

ERIC

This Poe fellow really is delightful. Bemoaning aside, his words capture what I cannot express myself. 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...

ROSE

...Than to love and be loved by me.

ERIC

And how true that is, no? Come, let us to the garden. (beat) Love?

ROSE

A walk would do me ill in this mood.

ERIC

We're in need of new flowers.

ERIC takes his period-appropriate hat and extends a hand to ROSE.

After some consideration, she takes it. ERIC snuffs the oil lamp. They exit.

Scene 3.

ERIC is sitting in his chair, book in hand. *The Beautiful and Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The painting on the wall is now a modernist. The hat on the hook is distinctly 20th century. 1950s.

Enter ROSE. The lamp turns on.

ERIC

How was it?

ROSE

Oh! Oh, you scared me silly, you awful man!

ERIC

You wait for me all day. What sort of fellow would I be if I couldn't do the same for my gal?

ROSE

That's thoughtful of you.

ERIC

Why, you'd have me just wither for want of love. No welcome kiss?

ROSE pecks him on the mouth as chastely as humanly possible.

ERIC

You're killing me, sweetheart.

ROSE

I'm in a bit of a tizzy. Too much brandy, I think.

ERIC

Sit with me awhile?

ROSE

You're probably hungry anyhow, waiting here all night when you should be, you know.

ERIC

I'll hunt later. There's plenty of cover in the early hours. Come, let me see you.

ROSE

...If you want.

ERIC

I do want.

ERIC initiates more physical affection. ROSE is stiff, allowing it but not participating.

ERIC

Did Bridge run long? (Beat) Bridge, with the neighborhood ladies.

ROSE

Yes, it was lovely. Sally won again. You know how she is, she always wins.

ERIC

A funny habit, that.

ROSE

I wouldn't mind if she weren't so smug about it.

ERIC

And how is Stewart?

ROSE

He's well.

ERIC

Is he, now?

ROSE

I presume. I haven't heard anything to the contrary.

ERIC watches her like a cat.

ROSE

I haven't heard anything to suggest he's worse off than last I saw him.

ERIC

Is that a new perfume you're wearing?

ROSE

No.

ERIC

It's not brandy.

ROSE

It's the, um. The one you got me at Christmas last year.

ERIC

The Chanel No. 5?

ROSE

Yes, that's it. A very classic scent, I like it.

ERIC

L'Air du Temps.

ROSE

What was that, darling?

ERIC

By Nina Ricci. I bought you L'Air du Temps at Christmas.

ROSE

That's right. I must be mistaken.

ERIC

You never so much as opened it.

ROSE

It was a very extravagant gift.

ERIC

An ornamental gift, yes, meant to be used.

ROSE

If you feel so strongly about it, I'm happy to use it more often.

ERIC

At all.

ROSE

Pardon?

ERIC

I'd be happy for you to use it at all.

Then we're in agreement! All is well now, is it not?

Beat.

ERIC

It is not.

ROSE

Hm?

ERIC

All is not well, Rose. It has been rather unwell for quite some time, in fact, and I believe it is time for a reckoning of sorts.

ROSE

Oh, the drama!

ERIC

First, I'd like to address the lying. Very bold, ostentatious lies, I might add.

ROSE

I can't believe this.

ERIC

You're not a practiced liar! Your fibbing is hardly plausible, it's pathetic!

ROSE

Oh? Tell me of my pathetic lies, Eric, do tell. And don't say the perfume thing because that was an honest mistake and you know it.

ERIC

Well, first of all, Sally did not win Bridge tonight.

ROSE

She always wins, she— she cheats. Everyone knows it, it's just we all feel so bad for her and Stewart, we let her win, the poor thing.

ERIC

Sally is with her parents in Michigan.

ROSE

How did you—

ERIC

Your second lie tonight: Sally and Stewart had a falling out. Bridge was cancelled. You knew that, but you went anyway, to meet Stewart, a lie, because you are, fourth lie, having an affair. (Beat) You were going to come home tonight while I was out prowling and slip into bed like nothing happened, and I was going to let you do it.

Beat.

ROSE

What changed your mind?

ERIC

Rose, my love... I'm happy to indulge your little pretend games. They're exciting. Sneaking around, lying, having dirty secrets I don't know about, it makes you feel dangerous. Empowered. I like to see you up to mischief every now and again. It helps me know when to loosen the reins, let you breathe a little bit. But this is one step too far, even for you.

ROSE

What are you going to do?

ERIC

Really now, you think I'm going to hurt you?

ROSE

I don't know.

ERIC pursues her. ROSE backs into the chair and sits. ERIC stops.

ERIC

Well, now you're just hurting my feelings. (Beat) I can allow some misbehavior. Some deviancy, if you will. It keeps me young. What I cannot allow is rebellion.

ROSE

I wasn't aware I was under dominion.

ERIC

Am I not wronged? Am I not within my rights to— to question you right now?

ROSE

Not as an authority—

ERIC

How, then, shall I question you? "Pardon me, dear, would you mind it terribly if I asked about the randy bastard down the road? I saw the two of you in an intimate embrace and am feeling quite bedraggled," is that what you expect me to say?

ROSE

I expect you to be respectful, at least.

ERIC

Respectful! Is this behavior befitting respect? You don't even respect yourself, clearly, and you demand respect of me, why— You know what? Alright, I'll play your game. Let's be civil, then, is that what you want?

ROSE

It doesn't matter what I want—

ERIC

Rose, you are very close to making me angry, and you know how I hate to be angry. (Beat) I know everything there is to know, you may as well tell the truth.

ROSE

Ugh.

ERIC

Oh, you doubt me now? I know all about your secret rendezvous, your little box under the floorboards— It's in the den, full of momentos. You think I don't know the goings on in my own house?

ROSE

How dare you go through my secret things! You had no right—

ERIC

He's cheap, by the way. I would never dream of dressing you up so beneath your worth. Frankly, it's embarrassing, and I'm sorry to say I'm rather disappointed in your accepting such low-effort, disrespectful courting. Chanel No. 5, the man thinks no better of you than he does a pretty dog. And what a handsome pet you are!

ROSE

You can stop now, you've said enough.

ERIC

I don't believe I will. In fact, sweetheart, I have barely gotten started.

ROSE

I won't be spoken to this way.

ERIC

No? Shall I quote the good gentleman, Stewie, for you? "You'll really let me do anything, won't you?"

ROSE

Stop.

ERIC

“You’re just begging for it. Look at yourself, baby, you’re so—”

Please, I can’t bear it.

ERIC

You cannot debase yourself for a common brute and then reject me at home.

ROSE

I’m sorry.

ERIC

I will not accept coldness from you.

ROSE

I’m sorry.

ERIC

I have done nothing but please you, serve you, spoil you. Permitted your guilty pleasures when the life I provided became dull.

ROSE

I’m sorry—

ERIC

Do not overestimate my forgiveness for human weakness! Rose, I swear— Your mortal charms I do so adore, but you will not spit in the face of my love of you, and by the gods, Rose, I demand you raise your standards for your disgusting human playthings, and next time, pick someone who treats you better than a discount whore!

ROSE

So you’re not upset because of the affair.

ERIC

Do refrain from making me repeat myself, I beg of you.

ROSE

You’re upset because it’s Stewart.

ERIC

I’m upset because I thought you knew better than this. I thought you had principles, I thought you had expectations! The man is a bonafide ape!

ROSE

He's not the most...upright person.

ERIC

You can say that again.

ROSE

But he cares about me. He likes to hear my ideas, and he... He'll take me on walks in the gardens and parks, and—

ERIC

Oh, he walks you? With a little leash and all, does he?

ROSE

You don't know what it's like! You don't know what it's like being a— a creature of the daylight, Eric, a body that craves the sun. Everything is different in the day, you can't possibly understand.

ERIC

And occupying your nights with another man's bed illuminates your days...how?

ROSE

I'm tired.

ERIC

That's well-established, what with you awake all hours, it seems.

ROSE

I'm tired of the same neighborly conversations day after day, go to the department store, tend the rose garden, bake pies and cakes and cookies for whatever bakesale or birthday or holiday party. I'm tired of Bridge. I hate Bridge.

ERIC

You always lose.

ROSE

She cheats! I swear, the woman cheats, and it's all so mundane and boring and I'm so... He saw me. Stewart saw me, and he wanted me, and I've never felt that before.

ERIC

I don't make you feel wanted?

ROSE

It's different.

ERIC

I don't "see" you?

ROSE

No, you don't.

ERIC

(laughing) What a silly girl you are.

ROSE

I'm not silly.

ERIC

I don't see you? Darling, I see everything— I can see in the dark!

ROSE

Why do I even bother?

ERIC

Bother with what? Getting yourself into trouble? Contradict my every bid for guidance?

ROSE

It was foolish of me, thinking I could make you understand.

ERIC

Of course I understand, darling. You long for the companionship of your own kind. It's all very animal; you're a social creature.

ROSE

Then why? Why keep me this way if you understand?

ERIC

I spare you from hunger, from thirst, from poverty. I spare you from violence. I ensure you have never a need for fear or doubt. And I do so because you are my soul's one and truest love. All you need do is ask, and I'll move the mountains in your name.

ROSE

I like the mountains right where they are.

ERIC

But I suppose that was too convenient for you, hm? Wanted to be used and mistreated instead. Defiled, even. If my struggle to empathize with such twisted desires makes me inhuman, well, sue me.

ROSE

I wanted to feel real.

ERIC

And how was reality for you? (Beat) I told you this would happen. You wouldn't remember, but a lifetime ago, I told you outright, any dalliance you entertained would leave you empty, and here we are. Again. The worst part of all this is that you won't learn. You'll live out our life and then you'll die and it'll be like it never happened. You can't imagine the levels of patience I've cultivated, learning to tolerate this behavior over and over. And I can't even be angry with you.

ROSE

Maybe I want you to be angry.

ERIC

And why in the world would you want that?

ROSE

You're supposed to be angry. You're supposed to be shouting and— and throwing things, you should be so disgusted by me you walk out and never see me again.

ERIC

That can't possibly be your aim, come now.

ROSE

What if I do? What if that's why I did all of this, because I knew you would follow me, I knew you would watch and feel something, anything for me that's individual? Anything that would set me apart from her, anything that would make me, *me* the special one you never forgot? What then?

ERIC

Rose, look at me. It's always been you.

ROSE

How can you say that?

ERIC smiles.

ERIC

You asked me earlier what I was going to do.

ROSE

I did.

ERIC

I do have to do something, what with all the variables at play now.

ROSE

Variables?