

## Past Torches

Clad completely in black, the Visitor walks with a determined cadence despite the low level of visibility at this hour of the night. He is frailer than I had imagined and requires the aide of a cane, which is silver-tipped, though it does not slow him down. His face is purposefully shrouded beneath the confines of a darkened fedora. I strain to get a better look at him and am surprised at the agility of such a hunched figure. A light level of mist plays at his footsteps, clinging to his heels as he navigates a quick path through the graveyard. He knows exactly where to go, and we know exactly where he is going.

I realize I have forgotten to breathe.

As noiselessly as possible, I draw in deliberate puffs of air and risk a glance at those surrounding me. All eyes are affixed upon this man, the Visitor, and the annual ritual we are eavesdropping upon from across the street. There is a heaviness spread unevenly throughout the chapel; I can feel it pressing us against the stained glass windows that currently serve as paned portals into the mystery man's movements. Occasional wisps of vapor ascend the hallowed corridors from the mouths of onlookers, revealing that it is caustically cold even within the comfort of the indoors.

I rejoin their collective gaze, returning my attention to the darkened figure just as he slows in unveiled reverence before the specific slab of concrete that is the purpose of his visitation. As the Visitor arrives at the tombstone, somebody huddled beside me mumbles excitedly—her meaning incoherent under iced breath—and I panic for a moment thinking that our already obstructed view will become fogged over in the exhilaration of this moment. The aged windows graciously withstand the power of our heightened condensation.

The man in black stands for some time before plucking a bottle from his long coat. I cannot see it clearly but know it is expensive French cognac. A deep swig tosses his head back enough to reveal that he is elderly, though I must squint to see this while the details of his face remain largely obscured.

After wiping his mouth, the Visitor drops to a knee and produces three roses colored of burgundy wine. They contrast so sharply with the dismal surroundings and lightly scattered blankets of snow that it looks to me like an old black and white movie that has been colorized in appeal to modern sensibilities; here, however, only the roses have been touched up for the scene. The Visitor places all three long-stemmed offerings at the foot of the grave, just as he has done nearly fifty other times in as many years. Standing over the marker in silent tribute, he scrapes still crystallizing frost from the headstone and reveals the name etched beneath.

*Edgar Allan Poe.*

The Visitor pauses, extends his bony arm, and lightly traces the infamous name. This is done with such tenderness that it affects me despite our considerable distance. Before I can react, he turns on his heels, forcing his cape to whip up a cloud of wintry fog that effectively obscures what I imagine as a rapid, graceful exit.

He is vanished.

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“It happened so fast, but I felt like everything was moving in slow motion . . .”

The voice belongs to my girlfriend, Alexia. We have been selected from a group of English majors at the University of Richmond to attend in silent non-participation from within the confines of the crowded church. While some hopeful spectators align the walls outside the grounds of the graveyard (the cemetery is officially closed at this hour), the caretaker allows select invitees to pile inside the holy edifice for an ample view of the grave and its mystifying yearly guest. As my professor, Dr. Blackstone, wrote a widely published work last year in defensive praise of Poe’s overriding talent—a reaction against recent academics who delight in asserting otherwise—he received a coveted invitation with space for ten of his brightest students as reward for his scholarship.

I am quite surprised to be selected among the privileged few. With a fledgling grade point average indicative of my aversion to math and science, I have only recently been removed from academic probation and cannot reasonably be considered a good student. Yet I was fortunate enough to find acceptance as an understudy into the competitive creative writing program, largely by way of Dr. Blackstone’s insistence. Alexia—who is an outstanding student—often advises that she, like our professor, perceives more in me by way of raw potential than I may ever allow myself to accept.

I realize her emerald eyes have been shooting at me through their pointed black-rimmed glasses (halfway obscured by playful tufts of scarlet and ginger hair) as they impatiently await a reaction. I do not know what to offer. My

experience feels so far removed from the others that no appropriate vocalization would carve common ground, encouraging the same looks of misunderstanding and confusion that have plagued my existence. I know this is unfair to Alexia, who has not once regarded me in such a manner, and yet the other students are choking me by way of proximity. I watch in silence as she begins to comprehend the impetus of my hesitation.

I am relieved when Dr. Blackstone approaches, expertly maneuvering his way through the dense crowd. He rubs his salt-and-pepper beard with a grin more appropriately belonging to a five-year-old on a playground and slaps me on the back, hard, once within arm's length of where Alexia and I have been standing.

"Well, Sean, what do you think of *that*?" and I am thrust back into discomfort.

I search my mind for the appropriate answers that would flow naturally from other students, all now chattering excitedly and replaying the experience as though it were a televised sporting event (there are, in fact, several reporters from local and national newspapers canvassing the room hungry for interviews). These fellow invitees have memorized countless facts, figures, and statistics of Poe and his writing; they can quote portions of his poetry, stories, and criticisms verbatim; they know about his rhyme, meter, and mechanics; they credit him with the creation of modern genres; and, they filter all of this through a long-limbed history of complex literary analysis.

I am not nearly as well versed. Yet, when I read Poe, I feel his words ricochet in my spine. I want to tell Dr. Blackstone that I felt a connection, that when the Visitor touched that name carved into stone, it struck electrical currents of understanding.

I want to say that I think the Visitor is a similar sort of creature.

"Awesome," is what I mutter. "It was just . . . really very awesome."

"Awesome, indeed," Dr. Blackstone confirms with his booming baritone. "*Awe* some, and *awe* inspiring." There is playfulness embedded in his deep-set eyes, now regarding Alexia in an exchange that has something to do with how they know I elected to stifle words, leaving them unsaid. Dr. Blackstone and Alexia often share such glances, and I find myself wondering what they talk about when I am not present.

Tonight I will not know, for the professor is announcing to his students that we will invoke an ancient tradition: going to a tavern and indulging in spirits.

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The bar is called *The Raven*, and this makes me groan. I am displeased with the conversation and the lighting, both of which are above me. The only time I enter the discourse is when it turns to a heated debate pitting Poe against his French counterpart, Guy de Maupassant. One particularly bold student

kickstarts the controversy by asserting that Maupassant is equally as brilliant as Poe, which naturally incites a mutiny against him. Many are surprised when—now one full hour into the fray and filled with reddened wine—I side with the asserter. When I am asked to provide empirical evidence in support of my justifications, all I can say is that I base my position on the strength of one story alone, which I read in junior high. It is called “Am I Insane?” and, as a lone work, I would pit it up against anything Edgar penned with flicks of his rotating wrist.

Challenges abound. A redheaded boy with acne matching the color of his hair accuses me of something short of a boldfaced lie. He boasts loudly that his major is focused on nineteenth century literature capped by a minor in French, thus he firmly believes he has read everything Maupassant has written. He has never heard of this story. I try to explain that I have been searching in vain for the evasive tale since that initial reading nearly a decade ago, but am met with an influx of inflammatory reactions exclaiming a *faux pas*. The consensus is that the story does not exist, that I must be mistaken. Dr. Blackstone also endorses this, having never heard of the tale himself.

I want to tell them that I can describe the story in perfection—not quote it, but retell it in immaculately shaped detail. Instead, I excuse myself and say I am going to the restroom, then immediately head for the exit.

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Outside the bar, the wind is far more biting than before. With head downcast, I am awash in solitary thought, wondering if Alexia and Dr. Blackstone will understand why I absconded from *The Raven* rather abruptly without explanation. As I ponder, my ungainly legs decide to explore the back alleys of this sister city.

Having been born and raised in Richmond, I am familiar with the longstanding rivalry with Baltimore in laying claim to Poe’s legacy. Thankfully, this has stayed friendly, though I must confess I favor Richmond in the contest. Living in the cobbled alleys and Victorian architecture of the historic Fan district, it has been many a night that I stumbled home from the bars breathing in Edgar’s residual ashes. With each clip-clapping step resounding off cobblestone, I have felt Poe’s ghost swoosh past in hurried stagers, rushing home in a similar state of drunkenness, exciting tales running through his head and begging themselves to be written by fountained pen. It is on nights such as these, I am certain, wherein he wrote his most macabre and fantastic of tales.

Although I would reject a full comparison to Richmond, I delight in the similarity of street names. While I live on Monument Avenue back home, I am walking on Monument Street here in Baltimore. Saint Mary turns into Madison Avenue and I find it interesting that Centre Lane retains its British spelling.

Richmond does not possess a Druid Street, though perhaps we should, and I ponder how appropriate the name is for a district accommodating the decayed corpse of the world's greatest slinger of horrifically imaginative prose. Without warning, my feet stop moving.

In all this random meandering, I have somehow returned to the cemetery. I immediately hop over the locked gates.

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I'm not sure how long I have been asleep, curled up against the historical tomb and relying on the affects of Edgar's errant soul to provide warmth through six feet of packed earth, but it must not have been too terribly long for the sun has not yet negotiated the obstacle of the horizon. It does not seem as though it will wait much longer to do so. Five inches from my cracked nose, slowly coming into focus, is a very nice leather shoe.

Looking up, I am startled to find that it belongs to the Visitor, who is peering down at me with a keen interest. I slowly prop myself up on my elbows.

"I slept here, too—the first time, before anybody knew of the tribute." His voice is the sound of two paper bags rubbing together. "Did you dream?"

"I did . . . must have seeped through the soil," I reply. I've somehow shed the insecurities plaguing me throughout the night and am possessed of warming confidence. Yet I am amazed at how instantly I feel comfortable speaking to a myth.

"You're a Richmonder, right?" he asks as wrinkles push his mouth into the shape of a grin. Then, by way of answer to a perplexed look I was unaware that I was wearing, the Visitor adds, "The accent, lad . . . The accent."

A long pause allows us to regard one another in silence.

"You're right about Maupassant, you know," his breath finally airs out like a sigh. "He's the only one who could've given Poe a run for his talent, far as I'm concerned. If I was French, suppose I'd be doing something akin to this for Guy in a graveyard in Paris. Course, I'm not. So I give him a taste of a tribute, mixed in with Edgar's . . ."

". . . the cognac," I deduce, and he is returning my perceptive understanding with another smile, wider this time. A chill of realization suddenly courses through me.

"Wait, how did you know . . .?"

"I've become quite talented at not being seen, young man. It takes work, but you'll learn how in time," and I am far from understanding the implications contained within this last statement when the Visitor takes me by the hand.

We disappear, together, into the swallowing blanket of night.

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On the ride home, as Alexia's head rests against my lap, I run the edge of my thumb along the tattered paper tucked inside my coat. It is a copy of Maupassant's "Am I Insane?"—a recent gift proving that I am not. As the bus bumps down the highway, I consider the need for a new selection of clothing, perhaps a costume of some kind. It is the last thought that enters my imagination before slipping into a brief, comforting sleep.

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*Factual Note: A mysterious visitor has frequented Poe's burial marker very late at night on the anniversary of his death since 1949, leaving a half-bottle of cognac with three red roses. His identity remains unknown and the event is shrouded in mystery. Recently, the visitor left a cryptic message behind declaring, "The torch will be passed."*