

NOTES

In an excerpt from Dawson Nichols' play, *I Might Be Edgar Allan Poe*, we meet Joseph Walker, a patient currently residing at the Oakbrook Mental Health Facility. Joseph's life bears a striking resemblance to that of Edgar Allan Poe, the Master of Horror. In fact, his familiarity with Poe's work leads him to believe that he might actually *be* Edgar Allan Poe. This selection should be performed by a male and be entered in Dramatic Interpretation. This is a powerful one-man show, and it is always difficult to portray a character teetering on the edge; however, when portraying varying levels of insanity, it is important for the performer to avoid stereotypes. Play the moments and keep Joseph's character honest; after all, if life is comprised of defining moments, couldn't an unforeseen tragedy be the catalyst that pushes someone over the edge?

The doctors don't want me to read any more Edgar Allan Poe. They say it isn't healthy for me. I told them that I liked Edgar Allan Poe. I told them that...I might *be* Edgar Allan Poe. I mean, I know I'm *not* Edgar Allan Poe. He's dead. I know that. But I figure if anyone was going to come back from the dead, it would be him. And I *feel* like Edgar Allan Poe. I mean, I *think* like Edgar Allan Poe. I've had his thoughts.

The doctors said that that was an indication that I had a problem—a manifestation of my illness.

The funny thing is I never really thought much about Edgar Allan Poe until I got here. Oakbrook. They might as well call it deciduous aquatic tranquility, that's what it is. Oakbrook. It's nice though, and I guess I like it here well enough. They make this place as nice as they can—beautiful grounds—gardens and lawns, excellent food, everything taken care of for us—and then they tell us we're not normal if we decide that we'd like to stay.

A few weeks ago I started sneaking into the library here and reading this book they have by Edgar Allan Poe. One new story every night. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Black Cat*, *The Premature Burial*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*. I was so familiar with each story. It was like reading my own diary. And I became more and more convinced that I was myself, in some way, Edgar Allan Poe.

The doctors said it wasn't healthy for me to read Edgar Allan Poe. I asked them why they had it in the library then. They removed it.

They like to be in charge. And there are some things they want us to think about and other things they don't. Like the fire. The doctors think that if I tell them about the fire, I'll have some sort of breakthrough. But that's not true. I could talk about it. I just don't want to. I mean, why should I? People don't like to dwell on painful things, and that's—people don't dwell. You live your life; you move on. Why isn't that normal? I don't want to talk about the fire with them. They'll want to examine it. Dissect it. Make it devoid of meaning.

I was living in an apartment building. One night there was a fire. There was a loud explosion and then there was a fire alarm and we all went outside and stood on a strip of grass across the street. It was actually quite pretty, the orange and yellow flames licking up the outside of the building. And you couldn't see the smoke very well because it was night; but if you looked at the stars you could see that there was something moving underneath them, blotting them out.

And then a woman came running out of the building. She was only wearing a brassiere and her naked white body was smeared with soot. She was screaming that her child was in the fire and wouldn't somebody help her. One woman did try to wrap a blanket around her, but she jerked away and tried to run back into the fire. A man got in her way though, so she ran back across the street to where we were all standing and watching and she started screaming at us. And then she ran up to me. I don't know why she chose me, but she ran up to me and started to pound on my chest, screaming that a real man would go in there and try to save her child. I looked at her and she started to hit me in the face. A couple of men pulled her off of me, but my lips were already bleeding and I was wondering what she meant by that. And why had she chosen me? And there was something in the look in her eyes... that I thought I recognized.

I couldn't see anything at first. It was just boiling smoke everywhere, and my eyes were stinging. I went up to the second floor and I started shouting and running from door to door to see if anyone was there. As I got toward the other end of the building one of the doors was open and there was a lot of smoke in there, but I thought I heard something, so I got down onto my hands and knees and crawled in. It's a very odd perspective - something like a cat or dog sees, I suspect. Only, the tops of the tables and chairs and even the sofa were lost in the smoke. I crawled through what I think was the living room and then onto a tiled floor, and when I came to a larger, porcelain bowl I knew I was in the bathroom. And then I