

POE

FADE IN:

INT. BACKSTAGE

A few PLAYERS have gathered in the wings for their entrance, watching the action from the candlelit dimness. They're dressed as royalty, in mourning weeds—CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, LAERTES, and two LORDS. ELIZA POE, small and dark, lies on a stretcher festooned with crepe, eyes closed, feigning Ophelia's death. Her burial gown is low-cut, her hair carefully fanned out about her face. She appears dead until little EDDIE, two, with a huge head, wanders up to her and begins tracing her features. Her eyes flick open like a doll's, but she doesn't move for fear of disturbing her coiffure.

ELIZA

Eddie dear, please. Go watch your father.

She takes his hand and kisses his palm, then closes her eyes again. Eddie watches her a minute, her stilled chest, her pale make-up, then burrows his way to the front of the other players.

Onstage, through a tangle of pulleys and patched drops, DAVID POE, as Hamlet, takes Yorick's skull from the FIRST CLOWN. He turns, pausing to

contemplate it, but his arm catches HORATIO, and he fumbles the skull, drops it, sending it spinning across the boards. The crowd JEERS. He picks it up unsteadily, and a thrown potato just misses him and thumps against a flat of the graveyard. He gives the crowd a fist. Eddie mimics him gleefully, as if it's a game.

GERTRUDE

Poe's at it again, devil take him.

CLAUDIUS

Eliza, you promised.

ELIZA

(still dead)

I promised he'd be fine on opening night, and he was. No one's paying to see him anyway.

CLAUDIUS

I wouldn't presume, if I were you.

She opens her eyes.

ELIZA

What would you have me do, Mr. Usher?

They match gazes; Claudius looks away.

LAERTES

We're on.

He picks up Eddie and moves him out of the way like a chair. The lords lift Eliza's bier. Eddie takes her hand.

ELIZA

Be good. Mama be right back.

He wants to go with her, but POLONIUS, still bloodstained, takes his other hand, and Eliza pulls hers away. The procession enters to TRUMPETS AND TIMBRELS, and Eddie wails. Polonius takes him on his lap and points.

POLONIUS

Watch.

Eddie does, as they lay Eliza in her grave.

Polonius pulls the cork from a pint of whiskey with his teeth and takes a swig.

Laertes jumps into the grave, followed by David Poe; they grapple, and the lords part them.

POLONIUS

(following along)

Dost thou come here to whine? To outface me with leaping in her grave? Be buried quick with her, and so will I: And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw millions of acres on us.

EDDIE

(parroting)

Min sacas.

POLONIUS

See, you're halfway there already.

He sets Eddie on his feet and stands to let David Poe exit, followed by Horatio. Polonius holds out the bottle and David Poe downs the rest. Eddie hangs onto his leg.

DAVID

Damn the bastards! What city is this?

POLONIUS

Boston.

DAVID

(shouting)

Brahmin bastards! Frogponders!

EDDIE

Fwaponda!

David picks him up and gives him a kiss.

DAVID

God love you, you know a good turn when
you see one—not like this rabble.

APPLAUSE, and everyone comes off, filing by David and Eddie. Claudius
and Gertrude give David a disgusted look, which he fields with a shrug.

Eliza comes last and grabs Eddie from him. She backs David into the wings
for some privacy. He's a good foot taller than her, and jowly from drink.

ELIZA

I liked the business with the skull. Is that
yours?

DAVID

Darling—

ELIZA

Why do you do this to me? Usher says this is
the last time.

DAVID

Do you believe him?

ELIZA

Do you believe me when I tell you this is the
last time?

DAVID

Eliza, I promise—

POLONIUS (O.S.)

Hamlet?

David pauses as if to apologize.

ELIZA

Just go. I want none of your promises.

DAVID

And me? Do you not want me either?

POLONIUS (O.S.)

Hamlet!

Neither speaks.

DAVID

Am I to assume we're at an end then?

ELIZA

Assume what you will.

DAVID

With you I assume nothing. I assume Eddie,
possibly Henry, but lady, I'm certain our
Rosalie is yours alone.

ELIZA

And I too.

He strikes her, and Eddie begins to wail. Eliza shields him from the blows.

DAVID

(drubbing her)

How's that, you little wanton! How's that?

Polonius flings aside a curtain and hauls David Poe off her, aided by
Claudius, who loses his crown in the tussle.

CLAUDIUS

Damn you, you're on.

Together, Claudius and Polonius drag him away, leaving Eliza to sob in the shadows. Her sobs turn to coughing, and she puts Eddie down to pluck a handkerchief from the bodice of her costume. Eddie's still crying.

Eliza hacks and hacks, finally bringing something up. The handkerchief comes away from her mouth bloody.

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

Eddie and his 5-year-old brother, HENRY, sit side-by-side on a crushed velvet loveseat, looking toward a closed door, from behind which comes a THUMP. The room is well-appointed, gaslit, with vases and red-flocked wallpaper, a single window giving on a snowy garden. A fire crackles. Above the mantel hangs a hunting scene. The boys are dressed in matching black suits, their hands folded in their laps. Except for the slight difference in size, they could be twins. Another THUMP.

The closed door opens, but the NURSE who comes out with a washbasin shuts it before the boys can see in. They watch her as she passes—craning to see what's in the basin—and exits through the door opposite. They resume watching the first door. A THUMP.

INT. SITTING ROOM - EVENING

The garden is dark, and Eddie's asleep, Henry cradling his head in his lap. The fire's been left untended, a bed of embers. The closed door opens, and a handsome woman with her hair pulled back in a bun peeks out—FRANCES ALLAN. She's the same size as Eliza Poe, her waist cinched in above full skirts. Her eyes are red, her face swollen from crying, but she's trying to cover that. Henry watches her as she kneels before them and wakes Eddie, smoothing his hair, caressing his cheek. He blinks blearily. She takes their hands and looks them both in the eye and smiles as if everything's going to be fine.

FRANCES ALLAN

(with a soft Southern accent)

Eddie. Henry. Your mother would like to see you.

When the boys don't respond, she takes their hands and rises, leads them toward the closed door.

Inside, Eliza Poe, pale as Ophelia, her cheeks rouged with TB, lies propped on her deathbed, attended by the nurse and another SOCIETY WOMAN, who dabs at Eliza's brow with a damp cloth. Abruptly, Eliza rears forward, coughing, and the nurse covers her mouth with a handkerchief. Eliza falls back, exhausted, and the headboard THUMPS the wall. The nurse wipes the blood from her lips.

Eddie and Henry stand at the foot of the bed, holding hands with Frances Allan. Before Eddie, on a low stand, sits the washbasin, full of bloody cloths soaking in water. When the nurse has Eliza settled, Frances leads the boys around to her side.

Eliza doesn't have the strength to take them to her breast. She reaches a feeble hand toward them. Henry takes it.

Eliza nods to Frances Allan, who opens the drawer of the night table and takes out two packets of letters tied with red ribbon, and two card-sized portraits. She hands one to each of the boys.

ELIZA

(in a ragged whisper)

To remember me.

She gestures for them to lean in so she can kiss them. Henry does, but before Eddie can, she seizes, jerks upright, choking.

Frances pulls Eddie away, and the nurse covers Eliza's mouth with a new handkerchief and helps her back down again. Eliza closes her eyes, then opens them again dreamily. She holds her hand out for Eddie, who takes it and leans in to kiss her. When he pulls back, one cheek retains the faint, bloody imprint of her lips.

For a moment, Frances Allan lets them stand there watching Eliza's eyes flicker open and closed; then she leads them around the bed again to the door. The boys look back. The society woman is dabbing at Eliza's forehead; the nurse is readying another stack of handkerchiefs.

Frances Allan herds them out and sits them on the loveseat again. She kneels and holds them both to her a moment, sniffing. The boys don't return her hug but clasp the letters and the miniature portraits in their laps, their eyes wide open.

Frances excuses herself and returns to the sickroom, closing the door behind her. Eddie looks down at the portrait—it's Eliza Poe as a young woman: doe-eyed, in a bonnet and fetching dress. Henry has a different one, and the two boys look at each other's. Henry notices the imprint on Eddie's cheek; he licks his fingers and rubs it off. They glance at the portraits again. They look to the door, then straight ahead. They sit there, waiting.

EXT. OPEN TRAP (MOVING) - DAY

A black COACHMAN in livery drives Frances Allan and Eddie through the busy streets of Richmond, flicking his whip. The sky is lead, and they're huddled under a comforter. Frances wears a black veil and has her arm around him, as if shielding him from the few stray snowflakes. Eddie peers out at the storefronts and steeples.

EXT. ALLAN HOUSE - DAY

A picket fence surrounds the large plain saltbox with twelve-over-twelve windows and a fanlight above the front door. Smoke drifts from the two chimneys. In the yard stands a gnarled cherry tree, its limbs rimed with ice. The coachman helps Frances Allan down, then Eddie, and drives the trap around back. Frances opens the gate and leads Eddie up the brick walk.

FRANCES ALLAN

Remember, you're to call him Papa. Can you say Papa?

EDDIE

Papa.

She folds back her veil and fixes his collar and his hair, plucks at the mourning coat he's wearing, straightens the carnation in his buttonhole.

FRANCES ALLAN

Mr. Allan likes his young men presentable.

She stands and takes Eddie's hand but he balks, staring at the house uncertainly. She kneels and smooths his hair.

FRANCES ALLAN

(continuing)

I know it's frightening, darling, but this is your home now.

EDDIE

I want Henry.

FRANCES ALLAN

Henry's going to have a home of his own, and a brand new family, just like you. He's going to be very happy, and so will you, I promise. Come, your Papa's waiting.

She leads and he follows, but his expression is still unsure, lost.

INT. ALLAN HOUSE - DAY

A black VALET lets them in. The front hall has a high ceiling, a chandelier, mirrors and portraits along the walls. The valet takes Frances Allan's coat. When he comes for Eddie's, Eddie hides behind her.

FRANCES ALLAN

(to valet)

That's fine.

VALET

Yes'm.

FRANCES ALLAN

Is the master about?

VALET

He's in the counting-room, I expect.

FRANCES ALLAN

Thank you.

The valet leaves them, and Frances Allan leads Eddie towards the back of the house, passing silk couches and wingback chairs, crossing plush rugs. The dining room table shines; there's a hutch filled with delft, a sideboard with a gleaming silver service. Eddie swivels his head, amazed.

Frances Allan stops at a door and knocks softly.

JOHN ALLAN (O.S.)

(impatiently)

Yes?

FRANCES ALLAN

John, your son is here.

The bolt of the lock CLACKS back, and the door opens. JOHN ALLAN strides out—a broad-shouldered man in a tailored waistcoat, carrying a ledger and a quill. He kisses Frances on the cheek, then turns to Eddie formally, like a diplomat.

JOHN ALLAN

(with the same soft drawl as
his wife)

So this is the young man. A fine choice, I'd
say.

Eddie looks at him the way he did at the house.

FRANCES ALLAN

We've had a day, I'm afraid.

JOHN ALLAN

I'm sure of it. Well, Edgar.

(offering his hand)

It must be good to be home at last.

He retracts his hand, still smiling.

EDDIE

I want Henry.

FRANCES ALLAN

(to John)

I tried to explain it to him.

John Allan leans down and lays a hand on Eddie's shoulder.

JOHN ALLAN

Henry's a long way away. But you're right here,
and you're going to stay with us. Won't that be
lovely?

EDDIE

Papa.

JOHN ALLAN

Your papa is a long way away too, way across
the sea in a beautiful big castle with your
mother.

EDDIE

Papa.

JOHN ALLAN

No, my boy.

FRANCES ALLAN

John, he means you.

He looks to her as if to confirm it, and she nods. He pats Eddie's shoulder.

JOHN ALLAN

Yes, that's who I am, I suppose.

INT. EDDIE'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Eddie, now six, lies in bed while Frances Allan finishes reading him a story from the Brothers Grimm. Candlelight flickers on the walls. The room is strangely empty of toys, only a few lead soldiers skirmishing on a low commode, a spyglass on a windowsill. On the nightstand leans the miniature portrait of Eliza Poe.

FRANCES ALLAN

And they ate the peddler all up and used his bones to pick their teeth. Now to bed, I said.

She kisses his forehead, picks up the candle and starts to leave.

EDDIE

(now with the family drawl)

Ma.

FRANCES ALLAN

What is it, dear?

EDDIE

Where's England?

FRANCES ALLAN

Far across the sea. Tomorrow we're going to get on a big ship and go there, won't that be fun?

EDDIE

Was my mother from England?

FRANCES ALLAN

We're all from England, dear. Now go to sleep. We have to be at the docks early.

EDDIE

Will I see her there?

FRANCES ALLAN

No, my love. Your dear mother's in heaven.

EDDIE

Is England like heaven?

FRANCES ALLAN

(with a laugh)

No, dear. It rains all the time, and all they eat is potatoes. You'll find out soon enough. Now go to sleep.

She leaves, and the room goes black.

EXT. CLIPPER SHIP LOTHAIR (ASAIL) - DAWN

The James, the water calm, a few oystermen tonging the shallows. The ship slides by Old Point Comfort and Fortress Monroe, its battlements jutting out into the lapping water. A lone guard stands atop the ramparts. Eddie waves, and the soldier hails him back.

EXT. CLIPPER SHIP LOTHAIR (ASAIL) (FOG) - DAY

Far asea. The hull tears a white line in the dark water. Eddie peers over the rail, mesmerized.

SAILOR (O.S.)

Ho! To starboard!

Eddie looks up, searching the fog. Not forty yards off the bow lies a frigate, awash, broken amidships. Its sails are rags; from the mainmast hangs a tattered Union Jack.

Eddie pulls out his spyglass, and the sailor joins him at the rail as the wreck passes. He's tan and missing an earlobe.

EDDIE

I don't see anyone.

SAILOR

She's a ghoster, all right. You see them from the war all over these parts. You'll find a man alive once in a while, been out there for years, just him and his mates.

EDDIE

What would he eat?

SAILOR

What wouldn't he—that's the question.

He leers at Eddie and we see he's missing teeth.

Eddie balances his elbows on the rail and peers through the spyglass. John Allan joins them in a topcoat. The sailor tips his head in deference.

JOHN ALLAN

What's all this then?

SAILOR

Just filling in the young master's education, sire.

Through the spyglass, fuzzily, we see a figure on the other ship. It slowly comes into focus: a man frantically waving his arms over his head—no, a

boy—in fact, Eddie, his clothes shredded. The ship passes back into the fog, and then is WIPED away as John Allan takes the spyglass from Eddie.

JOHN ALLAN

Come down to your Ma. She needs your company.

Eddie looks out into the fog as if to savor it a last minute.

JOHN ALLAN

(continuing;
taking him by the arm)

Come, there's plenty of that where we're going.

EXT. LONDON STREET - DAY

Edgar, now a skinny ten, leans out the window of a coach, holding Frances Allan's hands in his. A HACK is hefting Edgar's bags onto a rack behind the driver's perch.

FRANCES ALLAN

Don't fret so, darling. We'll visit, or I will if your father can't get away from the shop.

EDGAR

Why can't I just stay here?

FRANCES ALLAN

You can't stay at home forever. You have to make your way in the world. You know what your father says.

EDGAR

(reciting)

The world is a workplace.

FRANCES ALLAN

Your father's right. It wouldn't hurt you to take a lesson from him.

The hack climbs on and takes the reins; he looks to Frances Allan.

FRANCES ALLAN

(continuing)

I promise you'll like it there.

EDGAR

And if I don't, may I come home then?

FRANCES ALLAN

But you will. Here, give us a kiss.

He leans out the window and kisses her cheek. She takes her hands back and motions the hack to go on.

She takes out a handkerchief to wave goodbye. As the coach pulls away, Edgar leans out to see her but doesn't wave back. Frances Allan stands there until the coach turns a corner, then tucks the handkerchief back into her skirt and heads inside.

EXT. GATES OF THE MANOR HOUSE SCHOOL - DAY

The coach turns through the stone gates. Ahead, topping a long slope of lawn, stands a cathedral-like gothic hall, complete with archways, lancet windows, a spired bell tower. The stone seems to weep soot. Edgar leans out to take it all in, atonished, his face frozen in awe.

INT. DINING HALL - EVENING

Mullioned windows, crests, a great stone fireplace. Edgar sits between two other BOYS in the blue school tunic, a steaming piece of fatty mutton on his plate. The other two boys are digging in. Edgar looks down the table.

EDGAR

(in his Southern accent)

Would you be so kind as to pass the gravy?

BOY

(mimicking him)

Why, it would be an honor, suh.

The whole table laughs, and a PROCTOR—dressed in a powdered wig and black gown—comes over and surveys them disapprovingly, stands there keeping the peace, arms folded, a pointer in one hand like a sword.

Edgar accepts the gravy and ladles some on his meat, then returns the boat to the center of the table.

The boy to his left sneaks his hand down to Edgar's ribs and pinches him viciously, holding it as the two match eyes—Edgar's pleading, the boy's superior.

Edgar lets out a CRY.

PROCTOR

You sir, Mr. Poe, come with me.

The table laughs as Edgar gets up.

The proctor slaps the pointer down across the table.

PROCTOR

You will be silent!

(turning to Edgar)

Mr. Poe.

Edgar hauls down his pants and stands bent over in his drawers.

PROCTOR

What is your crime?

EDGAR

I am guilty of unruliness, sir.

More titters at his accent.

PROCTOR

Do you desire punishment?

EDGAR

I desire punishment.

The boys with their backs to the scene turn their heads to see.

PROCTOR

Eyes front! You're to be eating!

The proctor holds the pointer even with Edgar's behind and slowly brings it back. He sends it whipping forward—it makes a WHOOSH through the air and Edgar flinches—but stops just short of hitting him.

He does this again. Edgar's face is red from bending over; one eye twitches.

Finally the proctor hits him with it. Edgar grunts once, and waits for more.

The proctor feigns hitting him again, and Edgar whimpers.

PROCTOR

Button up.

As Edgar does, we see a single tear on one cheek, which he secretly rubs away.

He sits down again, and the boy to his left stifles a laugh. The gravy has congealed. Edgar picks up his knife and fork and eats.

INT. EDGAR'S DORMITORY ROOM - NIGHT

A tiny gable room, the ceiling slanted over the bed on one side, the desk on the other. Eliza's portrait leans beside an inkwell. By candlelight, Edgar opens

a small volume. He pulls back a tipped-in sheet of onionskin to reveal an engraving of Lord Byron declaiming to the forest as he wanders.

Edgar moves the taper closer and turns the page. In the dark room, he leans over the words like a miser counting his hoard.

EXT. FOREST (MIST) - MORNING

Two BOYS creep hunched along a path, stopping at a split-rail fence. One of the boys parts the high grass.

The fence surrounds a cemetery. Inside, Edgar sits on the steps of a marble vault, writing. He dabs his quill to his tongue and then his inkwell, looks heavenward for inspiration.

The boys let the grass close and smirk at each other.

INT. HEADMASTER'S CHAMBERS - AFTERNOON

The portly REVEREND BRANSBY stands at a window, looking down at Edgar walking an elm-lined path, his book held out like Byron's.

REV. BRANSBY

It's a shame. We very much enjoyed having him. Loves his Latin. A real facility.

He turns from the window to face John and Frances Allan, sitting across from his desk.

FRANCES ALLAN

If we weren't going back, we'd certainly keep him here.

REV. BRANSBY

And if I may be so bold, why are you leaving?

JOHN ALLAN

Business matters.

REV. BRANSBY

I won't ask for good or ill.

JOHN ALLAN

Then you, sir, are a gentleman as well as a scholar.

He rises to shake the reverend's hand, as does Frances Allan. The reverend ushers them out and returns to the window.

Below, Edgar is waving one arm, declaiming to the elms.

REV. BRANSBY

A curious boy.

EXT. CLIPPER SHIP MARTHA (ASAIL) - DAY

Edgar stands at the rail with his spyglass, scanning the mists. He lowers it, seemingly disappointed, then raises it again, and there, through the glass, sails a ship manned by the pale dead. Edgar turns as if to watch it glide by. There's nothing there, yet he follows it, one eye squinted shut.

INT. STANARD HOUSE - DAY

The Stanard's drawing room, much like the Allan's—a silk sofa, wingback chairs, plush rug. Edgar, now a slim, pretty fifteen, and ROBERT STANARD, a boy his age, are sitting with Robert's mother, JANE STANARD. She's a tiny brunette—again, like Eliza—with a long scar on her throat and delicate arms. Both she and Robert are leaning forward while Edgar gestures as if watching something huge move in the distance.

EDGAR

And just then it slid by our starboard side, and from the deck rose a gasp shared by all on deck. At the wheel, his wrists lashed to the belaying pins with rusted chain, stood no more than a pile of bones in the regalia of the