

The Tell-Tale Heart

By Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

TRUE! nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why WILL you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses, not destroyed, not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How then am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily, how calmly, I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture -- a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me my blood ran cold, and so by degrees, very gradually, I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded -- with what caution -- with what foresight, with what dissimulation, I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night about midnight I turned the latch of his door and opened it oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern all closed, closed so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly, very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this? And then when my head was well in the room I undid the lantern cautiously -- oh, so cautiously -- cautiously (for the hinges creaked), I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights, every night just at midnight, but I found the eye always closed, and so it was impossible to do the work, for it was not the old man who vexed me but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers, of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was opening the door little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea, and perhaps he heard me, for he moved on the bed suddenly as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back -- but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness (for the shutters were close fastened through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed, crying out, "Who's there?"

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed, listening; just as I have done night after night hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Presently, I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief -- oh, no! It was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself, "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney, it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or, "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions ; but he had found all in vain. ALL IN VAIN, because Death in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel, although he neither saw nor heard, to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time very patiently without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little - - a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it -- you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily -- until at length a single dim ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye.

It was open, wide, wide open, and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness -- all a dull blue with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones, but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person, for I had directed the ray as if by instinct precisely upon the damned spot.

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses? now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder, every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! -- do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me -- the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once -- once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But for many minutes the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence.

I took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly so cunningly, that no human eye -- not even his -- could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out -- no stain of any kind -- no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that.

When I had made an end of these labours, it was four o'clock -- still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, -- for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled, -- for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search -- search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My MANNER had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears; but still they sat, and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct : I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definitiveness -- until, at length, I found that the noise was NOT within my ears.

No doubt I now grew VERY pale; but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased -- and what could I do? It was A LOW, DULL, QUICK SOUND -- MUCH SUCH A SOUND AS A WATCH MAKES WHEN ENVELOPED IN COTTON. I gasped for breath, and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why WOULD they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men, but the noise steadily increased. O God! what COULD I do? I foamed -- I raved -- I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder -- louder -- louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly , and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! -- no, no? They heard! -- they suspected! -- they KNEW! -- they were making a mockery of my horror! -- this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! -- and now -- again -- hark! louder! louder! louder! LOUDER! --

"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! -- tear up the planks! -- here, here! -- it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Edward Albee

Born on March 12, 1928, in Washington, D.C., **Edward Albee** was adopted as an infant by Reed Albee, the son of Edward Franklin Albee, a powerful American Vaudeville producer. Brought up in an atmosphere of great affluence, he clashed early with the strong-minded Mrs. Albee who attempted to mold him into a respectable member of the Larchmont, New York social scene. But the young Albee refused to be bent to his mother's will, choosing instead to associate with artists and intellectuals whom she found, at the very least, objectionable.

At the age of twenty, Albee moved to New York's Greenwich Village where he held a variety of odd jobs including office boy, record salesman, and messenger for Western Union before finally hitting it big with his 1959 play, *The Zoo Story*, the story of a drifter who acts out his own murder with the unwitting aid of an upper-middle-class editor. Along with other early works such as *The Sandbox* (1959) and *The American Dream* (1960), *The Zoo Story* effectively gave birth to American absurdist drama. Albee was hailed as the leader of a new theatrical movement and labeled as the successor to Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill. He is, however, probably more closely related to the likes of such European playwrights as Beckett and Harold Pinter. Although they may seem at first glance to be realistic, the surreal nature of Albee's plays is never far from the surface. His best known play is *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

Albee describes his work as "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."

The Sandbox by Edward Albee

A Brief Play, in Memory of My Grandmother (1876-1959)

Players:

The Young Man, 25, a good-looking, well-built boy in a bathing suit

Mommy, 55, a well-dressed, imposing woman

Daddy, 60, a small man; gray, thin

Grandma, 86, a tiny, wizened woman with bright eyes

The Musician, no particular age, but young would be nice

Note. When, in the course of the play, Mommy and Daddy call each other by these names, there should be no suggestion of regionalism. These names are of empty affection and point up the pre-senility and vacuity of their characters.

Scene. A bare stage, with only the following: Near the footlights, far stage right, two simple chairs set side by side, facing the audience; near the footlights, far stage left, a chair facing stage right with a music stand before it; farther back, and stage center, slightly elevated and raked, a large child's sandbox with a toy pail and shovel; the background is the key, which alters from brightest day to deepest night.

At the beginning, it is brightest day; the Young Man is alone on stage to the rear of the sandbox, and to one side. He is doing calisthenics; he does calisthenics until quite at the very end of the play. These calisthenics, employing the arms only, should suggest the beating and fluttering of wings. The Young Man is, after all, the Angel of Death.

Mommy and Daddy enter from stage left, Mommy first.

Mommy Well, here we are; this is the beach.

Daddy (whining) I'm cold.

Mommy (dismissing him with a little laugh) Don't be silly; it's as warm as toast. Look at that nice young man over there: he doesn't think it's cold (waves to the Young Man) Hello.

Young Man (with an endearing smile) Hi!

Mommy (looking about) This will do perfectly...don't you think so, Daddy? There's sand there...and the water beyond. What do you think, Daddy?

Daddy (vaguely) Whatever you say, Mommy.

Mommy (with a little laugh) Well, of course...whatever I say, Then it's settled, is it?

Daddy (shrugs) She's *your* mother, not mine.

Mommy I know she's my mother. What do you take me for? (a pause) All right, now; let's get on with it. (She shouts into the wings, stage-left) You! Out there! You can come in now (The Musician enters, seats himself in the chair, stage-left, places music on the music stand, is ready to play. Mommy nods approvingly.) Very nice; very nice. Are you ready, Daddy? Let's go get Grandma.

Daddy Whatever you say, Mommy.

Mommy (leading the way out, stage-left) Of course, whatever I say. (To the Musician) You can begin now. (The Musician begins playing; Mommy and Daddy exit; the Musician, all the while playing, nods to the Young Man.)

Young Man (with the same endearing smile) Hi! (After a moment, Mommy and Daddy re-enter, carrying Grandma. She is borne in by their hands under her armpits; she is quite rigid; her legs are drawn up; her feet do not touch the ground; the expression on her ancient face is that of puzzlement and fear.)

Daddy Where do we put her?

Mommy (with a little laugh) Wherever I say, of course. Let me see...well...all right, over there...in the sandbox. (pause) Well, what are you waiting for, Daddy? ... The sandbox! (Together they carry Grandma over to the sandbox and more or less dump her in.)

Grandma (righting herself to a sitting position; her voice a cross between a baby's laugh and cry) Ahhhhhh! Graaaaa!

Daddy What do we do now?

Mommy (to the Musician) You can stop now. (the Musician stops.) (Back to Daddy) What do you mean, what do we do now? We go over there and sit down, of course. (to the Young Man) Hello there.

Young Man (smiling) Hi! (Mommy and Daddy move to the chairs, stage-right, and sit down)

Grandma (same as before) Ahhhhh! Ah-haaaaaaa! Graaaaaa!

Daddy Do you think...do you think she's...comfortable?

Mommy (impatiently) How would I know?

Daddy What do we do now?

Mommy We...wait. We...sit here...and we wait...that's what we do.

Daddy Shall we talk to each other?

Mommy Well, **you** can talk, if you want to...if you can think of anything to say...if you can think of anything new.

Daddy (thinks) No...I suppose not.

Mommy (with a triumphant laugh) Of course not!

Grandma (banging the toy shovel against the pail) Haaaaa! Ah-haaaaaa!

Mommy Be quiet, Grandma...just be quiet, and wait. (Grandma throws a shovelful of sand at Mommy.) She's throwing sand at me! You stop that, Grandma; you stop throwing sand at Mommy! (to Daddy) She's throwing sand at me. (Daddy looks around at Grandma, who screams at him.)

Grandma GRAAAAAA!

Mommy Don't look at her. Just ...sit here...be very still...and wait. (to the Musician) You...uh...you can go ahead and do whatever it is you do (The Musician plays. Mommy and Daddy are fixed, staring out beyond the audience. Grandma looks at them, looks at the Musician, looks at the sandbox, throws down the shovel.)

Grandma Ah-haaaaaa! Graaaaaaa! (Looks for reaction; gets none. Now...she speaks directly to the audience) Honestly! What a way to treat an old woman! Drag her out of the house...stick her in a car...bring her out here from the city...dump her in a pile of sand...and leave her here to set. I'm eighty-six years old! I was married when I was seventeen. To a farmer. He died when I was thirty. (To the Musician) Will you stop that, please? (The Musician stops playing). I'm a feeble old woman...how do you expect anybody to hear me over that peep! Peep! Peep! (to herself) There's no respect around here. (to the Young Man)There's no respect around here!

Young Man (smiles) Hi!

Grandma (continues to the audience) My husband died when I was thirty, and I had to raise that big cow over there (indicates mommy) all by my lonesome. You can imagine what **that** was like. Lordy! (to the Young Man) Where'd they get **you**?

Young Man Oh...I've been around for a while.

Grandma I'll bet you have! Heh, heh, heh. Will you look at you!

Young Man (flexing his muscles) Isn't that something?

Grandma Boy, oh boy; I'll say. Pretty good.

Young Man (sweetly) I'll say.

Grandma Where ya from?

Young Man Southern California.

Grandma Figgers; figgers. What's your name, honey?

Young Man I don't know...

Grandma (to the audience) Bright, too!

Young Man I mean...I mean, they haven't given me one yet...the studio...

Grandma (giving him the once-over) You don't say...you don't say. Well...uh, I've got to talk some more...don't you go 'way.

Young Man Oh, no.

Grandma (turning her attention to the audience) Fine; fine. (then back once more to the Young Man)

You're...you're an actor, huh?

Young Man (beaming) Yes, I am.

Grandma (to audience again) I'm smart that way. Anyhow, I had to raise ... **that** over there all by my lonesome; and what's next to her there...that's what she married. Rich? I tell you...money, money, money. They took me off the farm...which was real decent of them...and they moved me into the big town house with **them**...fixed a nice place for me under the stove...gave me an army blanket...and my own dish...my very own dish! So, what have I got to complain about? Nothing, of course! I'm not complaining. (She looks up at the sky, shouts to someone off stage) Shouldn't it be getting dark now, dear? (the lights dim; night comes on. The musician begins to play; it becomes deepest night. There are spotlights on all the players, including the Young Man, who is, of course, continuing his calisthenics.)

Daddy. It's nighttime.

Mommy Shhhhhh. Be still...wait.

Daddy (whining) It's so hot.

Mommy Shhhhhhh. Be still....wait.

Grandma (to herself) That's better. Night. (to the musician) Honey, do you play all through this part? (the musician nods). Well, kept it nice and soft; that's a good boy. That's nice.

Daddy (starting) What was that?

Mommy (beginning to weep) It was nothing.

Daddy It was....it was...thunder...or a wave breaking...or something.

Mommy (whispering, through her tears) It was an off-stage rumble,...and you know what *that* means.

Daddy I forget...

Mommy (barely able to talk) It means the time has come for poor Grandma ... and I can't bear it!

Daddy I...I suppose you've got to be brave.

Grandma (mocking) That's right, kid; be brave. You'll bear up; you'll get over it. (offstage: another rumble...louder)

Mommy Ohhhhhhhhhhh...poor Grandma....poor Grandma...

Grandma (to mommy) I'm fine! I'm all right! It hasn't happened yet! (offstage: violent rumble; all lights go out, save the spot on the young Man; musician stops playing)

Mommy Ohhhhhhhhh. . . Ohhhhhhhhhhh..... (silence)

Grandma Don't put the lights up yet...I'm not ready; I'm not quite ready. (silence) All right, dear...I'm about done. (the lights come up again, to the brightest day; the musician begins to play.

Grandma is discovered, still in the sandbox, lying on her side, propped up on an elbow, half covered, busily shoveling sand over herself.)

Grandma (muttering) I don't know how I'm supposed to do anything with this god-damn toy shovel...

Daddy Mommy! It's daylight!

Mommy (brightly) It is! Well! Our long night is over. We must put away our tears, take off our mourning...and face the future. It's our duty.

Grandma (still shoveling; mimicking) ...take off our mourning...face the future....Lordy! (Mommy and Daddy rise, stretch. Mommy waves to the Young Man.)

Young Man (with a smile) Hi! (Grandma plays dead. Mommy and daddy go over to look at her; she is little more than half buried in the sand; the toy shovel is in her hands which are crossed on her breast.)

Mommy (before the sandbox; shaking her head) Lovely! It's....it's hard to be sad...she looks...so happy. (with pride and conviction) It pays to do things well. (to the Musician) All right, you can stop now, if you want to. I mean, stay around for a swim, or something; it's all right with us. (she sighs heavily) Well, Daddy...off we go.

Daddy Brave Mommy!

Mommy Brave Daddy! (they exit, stage-left)

Grandma It pays to do things well...Boy, oh boy! (she tries to sit up) ... well, kids...I...I can't get up. I... I can't move... (The Young Man stops his calisthenics, nods to the Musician, walks over to Grandma, kneels down by the sandbox.)

Grandma I....can't move....

Young Man Shhhh...be very still....

Grandma I... I can't move...

Young Man Uh...ma'am; I...I have a line here.

Grandma Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie; you go right ahead.

Young Man I am...uh...

Grandma Take your time, dear.

Young Man I am the Angel of Death. I am...uh...I am come for you.

Grandma What...wha (then, with resignation)...ohhhhh...ohhhhh, I see. (The Young Man bends over, kisses Grandma gently on the forehead.)

Grandma (her eyes closed, her hands folded on her breast again, the shovel between her hands, a sweet smile on her face) Well....that was very nice, dear...

Young Man (still kneeling) Shhhhh...be still....

Grandma What I meant was...you did that very well, dear...

Young Man (blushing) ...oh...

Grandma No; I mean it. You've got that....you've got a quality.

Young Man (with an endearing smile) Oh...thank you; thank you very much...ma'am.

Grandma (slowly; softly—as the Young Man puts his hands on top of Grandma's hands)

You're....you're welcome....dear.

The Musician continues to play as the curtain comes down.