

THE LADIES OF THE SACRED SOUTH

FADE IN:

EXT. RAPIDAN RIVER. SOUTH BANK. DUSK. *THE PAST*.

A pastoral landscape of idle river, muddy banks, and tall still trees.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)

This is a story about the Past. Not the past of history books. Or of people's memories. Not the reconstructed, restored or romantic past. No! It is a story about the actual past.

A small contingent of Confederate CAVALRY patrolling the bank of the river. A light rain is falling. There is no particular urgency evident.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The funny thing about the actual past is that no one alive can ever know it. No one. Not ever. Except you.

It is very quiet and still.

The Patrol is led by CAPTAIN ROGER SWAIN.

ANGLE. ON CAPTAIN SWAIN.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.) (CONT'D)

This -- is Captain Roger Swain.

A young man whose face and posture show the scars and weariness of war. Not a handsome man, he sports a goatee and moustache.

The stillness is broken by a muffled thud in the distance.

ANGLE. ON THE PATROL.

A shell explodes in the air over the River. Captain Swain's horse rears up and the Captain is thrown into the River.

Flashes of flame leap from the dark woods on the opposite Bank. The Patrol has been ambushed.

The Captain, firing his pistol, rallies his Men, and after an intense but brief exchange of fire, it is still and silent again.

ANGLE. ON THE RIVER.

The smoke from the skirmish dissipates. There have been no casualties.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A SMALL SOUTHERN TOWN. DOWNTOWN. MORNING.

As the mist clears, we are looking down upon a brick Main Street with angled parking serving several Flea Markets and Antique Stores in the surviving older buildings.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)

Now, that is what is known as a "dissolve" because it takes us from the past to the present. Let's just call it "Today", and, I might add, a day on the cusp of spring.

ANGLE. ON A CAFE.

The busy "Boll Weevil Cafe" window displays the "Breakfast Special" as a "2 + 2 + 2".

Parked in front of the Cafe is a Pick-Up Truck.

ANGLE. ON THE TRUCK.

A QUARTET OF MEN stand around the opened hood. The engine turns over but doesn't start. Four big white coffee Mugs sit on top the cab. In the bed of the Truck are bags of fertilizer and a mud-splattered off-road vehicle.

EXT. DOWNTOWN. COURTHOUSE SQUARE. MORNING.

The Town Square, a block of ancient live oaks surrounding a Courthouse of red brick. Many benches supporting Old Geezers.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)

Legend has it that the town grew up around these gentlemen. And when the last one dies, so will the town.

EXT. JEFF DAVIS BLVD. MORNING.

An historic neighborhood lined with over-reaching live oaks.

EXT. ANOTHER RESIDENTIAL STREET. MORNING.

A neighborhood of old and shabby houses with the occasional modern ranch-style brick home.

Two such houses face each other.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)

Now, you gotta see this.

On the lawn of one of the houses a middle-aged BLACK MAN is painting his white Lawn Jockey black and in the other, a middle-aged WHITE MAN is painting his black Lawn Jockey white.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I believe this is what they call the
"new south".

EXT. HENRY CLAY STREET. SIDEWALK. MORNING

We see in CLOSE-UP two sets of feet treading the cracked and uneven sidewalk. The shoes are those of Old Ladies, one set advancing with the help of a metal-tipped cane.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)

Now, I don't want you to get the
idea that this story is about me.
Though I do have a part to play.
This is a story about the Past and
those who love it. It is about Five
Old Ladies.

The feet stop.

ANGLE. ON PERIWINKLE AND WYSTERIA.

The feet are those of ROSABELLE PERIWINKLE, tiny and frail yet vigorous and in her 80's, and OLIVIA WYSTERIA, somewhat younger and in lavender. Both Ladies carry casseroles.

They are contemplating a Redbud tree in the wild and overgrown yard of a decaying wood-frame house.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.) (CONT'D)

These are two of the Five Old ladies.
(MORE)

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Yes. Those are casseroles. And that means one of two things in the South: they're either on their way to a meeting or a funeral.

ROSABELLE PERIWINKLE
 Well! Palmer Motley's Redbud is blooming. Can spring be far behind?

After contemplating the tree they resume their walk.

OLIVIA WYSTERIA
 Miss Periwinkle, I have seen this tree blooming at Christmas. And there Palmer Motley would be, planting his precious *tomatoes*.

EXT. MOTLEY'S FRONT PORCH. MORNING.

The door opens. A figure stands behind the screen-door. It is PALMER MOTLEY, a wild-looking man in a ragged and dirty dark suit with a green vest whose brass buttons gleam.

He steps onto the porch. He is holding a flat of tomato plants. He whips out a gleaming trowel. A curious smile comes over his face.

ROSABELLE PERIWINKLE (O.S.)
 Palmer Motley has faith in that tree, Miss Wysteria, and when it correctly heralds Spring, he is rewarded with the first and most splendid tomatoes of the season.

Palmer Motley heads with determination down the street.

Immediately after, a tall, gangly youth of 12, PALMER MOTLEY, JR. appears from the darkness of the house, skateboard in hand. He surveys and dashes off.

EXT. ROBERT E. LEE LANE. MORNING.

We are now following PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA down Robert E. Lee Lane, an amalgam of concrete and asphalt, amply-ditched.

ANGLE. ON THE STREET.

A beat-up faded red pick-up truck approaches. Singing "The Sound of Music" in a falsetto is JACK, an ex-Californian actor in his 20's.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)
 You've probably been wondering,
 "Where's the body to go with this
 magnificent voice?" There I am!

JACK
 Top 'o the day to ya, Ladies!

He resumes his song.

ANGLE. ON PERIWINKLE AND WYSTERIA.

OLIVIA WYSTERIA
 Jack is in good voice this morning.

ANGLE. ON THE STREET.

We follow the progress of Jack's truck until it corners onto another street leaving us with a view of a baseball field.

EXT. BASEBALL FIELD. BACKSTOP. MORNING.

PALMER MOTLEY busily digs into the earth at the base of the chain-link Backstop. His intensity is such that this is not mere gardening: it is a Mission.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)
 Now if this was the Old Country Palmer
 Motley would be the Village Idiot.
 But, being from California, I fill
 that role.
 (unintentionally)
 And quite well, I might add... Palmer
 Motley is rumored to be in line of
 succession for the coveted
 southeastern corner bench in
 Courthouse Square.

EXT. MAGNOLIA WAY. MORNING.

PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA have paused at a peeling white picket fence through which huge azaleas have grown.

Periwinkle is drawn to a lone branch with blossoms.

ROSABELLE PERIWINKLE
I think this same branch bloomed
first last year.

Periwinkle removes a ribbon from her hat and ties it onto
the branch.

ROSABELLE PERIWINKLE (CONT'D)
Next year I will be certain of it.

As they step to the gate, PALMER MOTLEY, JR. clackety-clacks
by on his skateboard.

Periwinkle and Wysteria quickly step in and shut the Gate.

EXT. MAGNOLIA GROVE PLANTATION. FRONT YARD. MORNING.

It is as though PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA have stepped into a
different world. A different Time.

The azaleas close behind them. Lowering limbs of ancient
oaks are everywhere, jungle-like.

But through the limbs a House is glimpsed in tantalizing
flashes. Its white Columns most evident.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. WOODS. NIGHT. *THE PAST*.

ANGLE. ON A CAMPFIRE.

A smoldering fire struggles against the continuing rain.

ANGLE. CAMP.

The MEN of the Patrol eat, sleep, lounge about.

The CAPTAIN leans against a tree. He is smoking a pitiful
fragment of a cigar. He knocks off a section of ash.

ANGLE. ON THE CAPTAIN.

He removes a Locket from his coat. He opens the Locket.

ANGLE. INS.

Inside the Locket is a finely detailed Miniature of a beautiful YOUNG LADY.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MAGNOLIA GROVE. UPPER BEDCHAMBER. MORNING.

ANGLE. ON A PORTRAIT.

Of Hominy Ann Hampton wearing a Bridal Dress. She stands, holding magnolias, before grand white columns.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)

This is the lady in the locket.
Hominy Ann Hampton. Today. It's all
very confusing, you say? Patience.
Patience. Just remember in the South,
you see, the Past is always Present.

ANGLE. ON THE ROOM.

The Portrait hangs above a four-poster Bed in a small Bedchamber, permeated with an air of profound stillness and peace. Lying on the Bed is the Bridal Dress of the Portrait.

A simple Secretary, opened, with a handwritten letter and three-quarter burned candle. A Dresser.

The mantel Clock's pendulum is still. It is three o'clock.

ANGLE. THROUGH THE WINDOW.

Through wavy glass and a gauzy curtain, we see PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA walking down the gravel path toward the House.

EXT. MAGNOLIA GROVE. FRONT GALLERY. STEPS. MORNING.

PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA have stopped at the foot of the steps to rest.

We notice, nearly obscured by vines, a sign: "Magnolia Grove Plantation. Operated by The Offspring of the Ladies of the Sacred South."

EXT. MAGNOLIA GROVE. FRONT YARD. MORNING.

A once grand house: six large white columns. A huge Lower Gallery, or porch, and an Upper Gallery.

Vines cover the sides of the house and are making headway up the outer columns.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)
Magnolia Grove Plantation has existed
for 83,220 days. This is the story
of one of those days. Today.

INT. MAGNOLIA GROVE. PARLOR. MORNING.

BUCK, a gentle black man of indeterminate age, is setting out a tea service and cakes, humming "Sweet Bye and Bye".

As is the case with every room in the House, the Parlor is crammed with generations worth of "stuff", from the sublime to the garish, the esoteric to the practical; yet all placed with the utmost skill and precision to appear as though it belonged nowhere else but where it is.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)
No one who's lived here has ever
thrown anything away. That's another
reason the Past is always Present in
the South: inadequate garbage
collection.

Above the Mantel is a Portrait of a Scowling Woman in black.

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Rachel Hampton. Mistress of Magnolia
Grove during the...
(clears throat)
War for Southern Independence. And
still keeping an eye on the help.

ANGLE. ON BUCK.

As he meticulously makes the final placement of the Tea Service. He hears the sound of Voices.

ANGLE. ON THE WINDOW.

Through which we see PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA on the Gallery.

ANGLE. ON THE ROOM.

As Buck sighs in expectation, trying unsuccessfully to avoid the glaring presence of the Scowling Woman.

INT. MAGNOLIA GROVE. ENTRANCE HALL. MORNING.

BUCK enters the generous Hall. The main Staircase dominates.

On the wall at the landing hangs a large and impressive Painting of a Bearded Man in a Confederate Officer's Uniform.

An upright Piano, with sheet music, against the wall.

A small desk with a 1940's-era Telephone and a stack of brochures.

Buck greets PERIWINKLE and WYSTERIA, opening the door for them. He takes their casseroles.

OLIVIA WYSTERIA
Oh, Buck, are we early?

BUCK
No ma'am.

EXT. MAGNOLIA GROVE. PARKING LOT. DAY

A huge maroon Continental screeches to a dusty stop. The door is thrown open and MRS. LAWRENCE WORTHINGTON BROWN III emerges.

She is in a state of excitement but pauses to take in the House and a deep breath.

MRS. BROWN III
This is the most important day in
the long history of Magnolia Grove!

Despite the gravity of this pronouncement and the majesty of the House, she is distracted by a stray cigarette butt on the ground.

EXT. MAIN STREET. BOLL WEEVIL CAFE. MORNING.

A car pulls up next to the pick-up Truck, its engine still being mulled over by the Men.

ANGLE. ON DRIVER'S-SIDE DOOR.

And we see that it is the property of the "Georgia Historical Society".

NARRATOR [JACK] (V.O.)
 Whoa! Did you see that? The "Georgia
 Historical Society". If this was a
 Western these guys would be wearin'
 black.

ANGLE. ON STREET/CAFE.

The car's passengers are HENRY BAXTER: a mid 40's, mid-level
 bureaucrat, nicely but informally dressed, and his protege,
 CAROLINE HUGHES, 20-ish, lovely but overweight, who has long
 ago come to terms with her bulk. She is dressed in black.
 He carries folders, she a notebook.

NARRATOR [JACK] (CONT'D)
 There's something about a big gal in
 black who thinks she's a 98 pound
 supermodel.

ANGLE. ON THE STREET.

A long and gleaming Bus, in gold and green, lumbers through
 town. Shimmering silver lettering proclaims it belongs to
 "El Dorado Tours".

ANGLE. ON BAXTER AND MISS HUGHES.

As they watch the progress of the Bus.

HENRY BAXTER
 When the azaleas bloom, can the
 tourists be far behind?

They go into the Cafe.

INT. BOLL WEEVIL CAFE. MORNING.

A WAITRESS is seating BAXTER and MISS HUGHES at a booth.

WAITRESS
 Coffee?

HENRY BAXTER
 Please.

MISS HUGHES
 I'll have tea.

Barely disguised disbelief and disapproval from the Waitress.

Miss Hughes finds a place in her notebook.