

POSSESSED BY THE PAST

by
RALEIGH MARCELL

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Raleigh Marcell
rmarcell@juno.com
8 Ketch Pl
Savannah, Georgia 31410

ACT 1

POSSESSED BY THE PAST

(Darkness.)

(Out of the Darkness the sound of music played on a piano. It is evocative "modern" music.)

(We are engulfed and surrounded by IMAGES accompanied by the strange, nearly melodic music. MUSIC CUE 1)

(Some of the IMAGES flash by in an instant, some linger, some move across our view and merge with others as though they are in a DREAM.)

(Portraits of ancestors in gilded frames. White gentlefolk, men and women. Children. Slaves. Slave cabins. Crumbling brick cabins. A black man's hands. A former slave woman gazes at us straight on, enigmatically.)

(Portions, magnified, of paintings suspiciously modern. Eyes. Photographs richly colored, of still life, fruits and beads and yellow squash. Lemons against pearls.)

(Brilliant eruptions of color in details from *Mardi Gras* floats. Devils with pitchforks.)

(Quiet black and white photographs from Paris in the 20's.)

(These Images appear and disappear, move, merge, bubble up, simmer, and re-appear as though being cooked in one massive DREAM-LIKE GUMBO.)

(The succession of images and the music fade, giving way to one central photograph: that of an OLDER MAN sitting in his parlor. He is dressed in a suit and tie and he gazes away from us at a dimly lit table upon which sits a decanter and glasses.)

(This Image, too, fades.)

(Darkness. Silence.)

VOICE

BUNK!! Clemmy!?

(A small area is lit dimly and we see a close approximation of the last Image. The man is WEEKS HALL. Weeks has suddenly roused himself from slumber. For a moment he does not know where or when he is.)

WEEKS

... Raymond---? Mose....

(He notices that the cigarette in his left hand has burned down nearly to the filter. He puts it in the standing ashtray. He tastes the inside of his mouth. It is not pleasant.)

(to himself)

I think that I am dead. Or dying. Not that there's much difference, you see.... CLEMMY!

(He pours a drink but there is only a drop remaining. He reaches around the back of the chair, producing a bottle. In the meantime an unseen "Clemmy" has arrived.)

Clemmy. I want you to do something for me. Go out into the far corner of the garden... Yes. The family cemetery. Go. And see if I'm there... Yes, I know I'm here. I want to know if I am buried there... And "if I is"? ... You can have the rest of the week off. Now go! And oh---! Clemmy....

(He squints in the direction of the audience.)

We seem to have guests. My best... decanter.

(Pleased with this, he lights up a cigarette.)

WEEKS (Continued)

My name is Weeks Hall. I am sixty-three years old, smoke one-hundred cigarettes a day, and have drunk myself into oblivion so frequently that the demons at the gate raise their glasses in tribute to me as I enter into those wondrous and rolling hills beyond....

I was born Halloween Night, Eighteen-hundred and Ninety-four. And since 1922 this house, and myself, have constituted the, local ruins....

My house is called "The Shadows". It was *built* by my great-grandfather and great-grandmother one-hundred and twenty-four years ago. They built it. But I have *created* it.

(Weeks gets up, going downstage with a little difficulty. He has phlebitis.)

Close your eyes.... Please.

(Everything goes dark.)

Now think of the south. And by "the south" I mean, The South. That's with capitals, if you please....

(Those who can resist peeking no longer begin to see, dimly, and in segments, outlines of trees in the foreground. Huge, dark trees, with limbs dipping to the ground, clusters of Spanish moss dripping from them.)

(The trees and the limbs cast shadows upon a sensed building. Glimpses of white at the first. Repetitious white fronting coral red brick walls.)

(The white resolves itself into eight huge white columns. The dusky coral-red brick wall broken with green-shuttered windows. The lower front gallery open to the yard and the upper gallery bounded by a simple white railing.)

(As Weeks steps back into context,
the massive photograph dissolves
into a more concrete representation
of the facade of The Shadows.)

WEEKS (Continued)

This is "The Shadows". And we are in the very center of the town of New Iberia, Louisiana.

(Weeks does not yet go "into" the house. He lights a cigarette.)

My good friend, the writer Lyle Saxon - who is dead now but whom you will no doubt meet later - told me of a time that a voluble, amply-cushioned "suthern" lady concluded a tour of plantation homes of Louisiana and Mississippi. She remarked to him - and these are her words, "As far as the ante-bellum plantations that have made the most impression on me, there were two: Stanton Hall in Natchez and Weeks Hall in New Iberia. Stanton Hall for its bulk and Weeks Hall for sheer beauty.

Of course, she confused ME with MY HOUSE. I am a character, NOT a structure.

Both my mother and her sister were born in this room I am the last of the line For most of my adult life I have dedicated - some have said, *thrown away*, my life - striving to find some means of insuring that this place survives me, intact and preserved. I have failed utterly.

Some years ago I was offered thirty-five thousand dollars for this place. It was a fair offer and I needed every one of those dollars, you see, but there are people with a good deal of money who buy houses like this and embellish them - put them back to what they think was the time of GONE WITH THE WIND, you see, and most of them end up looking like the sets of GONE WITH THE WIND. And so when I die, rather than

(MORE)

WEEKS (Continued)

this place become a hamburger joint or a parking lot, or another bastardization of history I have stipulated in my will that it simply be... demolished.

("Clemmy" has returned and delivered his message.)

Clemmy informs me that I am... here. Which goes to prove that his fear of this arthritic, partially blind, crippled, and pathetically sober body is far greater than his desire for free time.

(He goes to a "window", lights a cigarette, and gazes out.)

Look at them! The tourists. They pour through here like ants. They overrun the place - it's like the plague. Viewing the house from a distance is not enough for them. They insist they have some sort of a right to go through this house. Sight-seers have pushed their way into this house, finding me, at various times, shaving - and in the tub! People have seen more of me than they have of Gypsy Rose Lee! ... And still they come ... Were I only younger ... The passage of time has the fortunate quality of enhancing the past. And Clemmy tells me that I am here.

(He crosses.)

(An Image of a painting of a Young Girl in a gilded round frame appears.)

This is my Mother, painted just after the "War for Suthern Independence".

(He moves.)

That dress remains in this house. I have it framed and under glass. It hangs in my bedchamber. Some years ago, after the accident, Mr. Clarence John Laughlin, a talented young man, photographed me standing before the framed dress....

(The Photograph appears.)

WEEKS (Continued)

He called his photograph, "Possessed by the Past". Well, how can one not be when surrounded by the objects and the people who *have been*. Including... *myself*.

(The light fades upon the living Weeks. The Image fades.)

(At the same time the outside of the House is lit. The exterior is also subjectively represented, though there is at least a portion of one of the white Columns and some waist high azalea bushes.)

(From behind these bushes pops up YOUNG WEEKS HALL, appearing as the Weeks in the photograph.)

(Young Weeks is in his early thirties. He wears dungarees [which we do not as yet see], is crew-cut, with a blue denim shirt and a white tie loosely-knotted. He wears light brown-framed glasses and is smoking a cigarette.)

(His sudden appearance has evidently surprised a pair of Tourists.)

YOUNG WEEKS HALL

The house? You want to go through the house, you say? ... Ladies, I... Whether you've traveled five miles or five-hundred miles has no bearing upon the matter.... Madam! ... Very well then -- Mose! Oh MOSE--! Please bring me my pants so I can come out from behind these azaleas!

(And before he can finish his sentence, the "Ladies" are evidently vacating the premises.)

Ladies---?

(Satisfied, he emerges from the azaleas, wearing pants, and holding a palette.)

These well-upholstered mid-western matrons can certainly cover ground when properly motivated.... You can come out, my dear.

(A YOUNG LADY, putting on a robe, emerges from the azaleas.)

YOUNG LADY

Why do you even allow them in the garden?

YOUNG WEEKS HALL

For the two-bits Mose collects from them at the gate. That was half a dollar there. If only they'd confine themselves to the garden!

(She gazes up at the House. Young Weeks studies her.)

YOUNG LADY

I can understand the attraction. This house is hypnotic.

YOUNG WEEKS HALL

You should have seen it when I first took possession, so to speak.

YOUNG LADY

Oh but I have, Mr. Hall. I was still in school. We'd walk along the bayou in back and sneak into the cabins...

YOUNG WEEKS HALL

---they were slave cabins.

(he stops dead, then, as though to someone not there)
I tore them down immediately.

YOUNG LADY

(subjectively)
How it must have felt to know that this was...yours.

YOUNG WEEKS HALL

(objectively)
I walked through the broken gate thinking here's a place to fix up and live in -- a beautiful old house to capture in oils or pastels or watercolor... and then----

YOUNG LADY

And then----?

(Several images of nude paintings materialize as Young Weeks speaks.)

YOUNG WEEKS HALL

And then...I have a painting to finish... A portrait of that beautiful and functional machine for living that is your body. Imagine a machine whose function in part it was to drip a fluid from two bags of equal size which must be

(MORE)

YOUNG WEEKS HALL (Continued)
 instantly available and yet not interfere with a thousand
 other functions just as necessary. Nature has solved it and
 made the beauty of the breasts as necessary as their function.

(Young Weeks and Fanny exit as the
 Present Weeks is dimly lit in his
 chair. The nudes slowly recede.)

WEEKS

(showing his braced arm)
 I used to paint, you see...and teach. And my advice to young
 artists seeking commissions and cheques, from, say, high
 church Episcopalians, was that in order to get the work you
 had to paint their own idea of God. Which was anyone over
 thirty-five, with an untrimmed beard, in a dressing gown
 three sizes too large.

(Appearing off to one side is INEZ
 HEBERT, a prim woman, but not too
 prim. She has a stenographer's
 pad. A pencil is stuck in her hair.
 As she speaks, Weeks lights and
 smokes a cigarette.)

INEZ

You know, the first time that Weeks Hall ever saw me, and
 this is the gospel truth, I was about - I must have been 18
 or 19 years old. And I was in the Shadows garden. Enjoying
 the camellias and the fountain and pool and all - and I didn't
 know anything about it until after this happened but E.J.
 Carstens was up in the house with Weeks and they were looking
 down out of the window into the garden and Weeks says to
 E.J., he says, "E.J. Who's that down in the garden? She has
 the most magnificent back of her head. I would love to paint
 it." When E.J. told me what Weeks had said, all I could do
 was shake my head. Everyone in town was right. He's nuts....
 That was years ago. Who would have thought that I'd end up
 working for him. After the accident, that is.

WEEKS

INEZ! INEZ---!

(She opens her stenopad and extracts the pencil.)

INEZ

He still hasn't painted the "magnificent back of my head".

(She deliberately turns so that the audience can glimpse the back of her head as she goes to Weeks.)

WEEKS

I saw a photograph of my aunt today, don't write this down, and it set off a train of thoughts which would be perfect for my cookbook - if I can ever get the damn thing written but it keeps becoming something else -- write this down...

(Inez pulls up a chair and sits to take the dictation.)

My aunt collected receipts. Recipes. Her search for them was unending and frustrating because, you see, cooks have no professional ethics except that of secrecy. Once she achieved a rare double victory when she got from different branches of one family a receipt which neither would give to the other! It was a great sport and she gloried in it. Stop writing now.

(Inez, who has frequently consulted her watch, anxious to leave, rises.)

No-no. Sit down, Inez.

INEZ

Oh, Mr. Weeks, it's getting late and... Dino's waiting for me.

WEEKS

It's not yet dark. Would you like a drink?

INEZ

No. Thanks.

WEEKS

You couldn't stay just a bit?

INEZ

----Sure.

(She sits and Weeks, who has risen when she rose, also sits.)

WEEKS

So --- what do you think?

INEZ

Think?

WEEKS

Think. About it. About... things.

INEZ

I'm just a little country Cajun, Mr. Weeks. Oh, I got it all down. You know I can take it all down good. But it don't usually mean a thing to me. I'm sorry.

WEEKS

That's quite all right....

(Now feeling that she's done more harm than good with her comments, she settles in.)

INEZ

I'll have that drink.

(Weeks pours her a glass of wine.)

And you---?

WEEKS

I never drink alone --- with a lady.

INEZ

Thank you....

(Pause)

WEEKS

"...doesn't usually mean a thing---" to you?

(Inez downs the remainder of her wine as fortification.)

INEZ

Well, like this, Mr. Weeks...

(Finding a place in her pad and reading:)