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Powerhouse

By Eudora Welty

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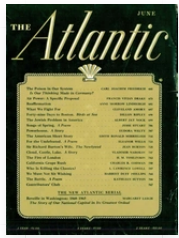
POWERHOUSE is playing! He's here on tour, from the city — Powerhouse and His Keyboard — Powerhouse and His Tasmanians — all the things he calls himself! There's no one in the world like him. You can't tell what he is. He looks Asiatic, monkey, Babylonian, Peruvian, fanatic, devil. He has pale gray eyes, heavy lids, maybe horny like a lizard's, but big glowing eyes when they're open. He has feet size twelve, stomping both together on either side of the pedals. He's not coal black - beverage-colored; looks like a preacher when his mouth is shut, but then it opens — vast and obscene. And his mouth is going every minute, like a monkey's when it looks for fleas. Improvising, coming upon a very light and childish melody, *smooch* — ho loves it with his mouth. Is it possible that he could be this! When you have him there performing for you, that's what you feel. You know people on a stage — and people of a darker race — so likely to be marvelous, frightening.

This is a white dance. Powerhouse is not a show-off like the Harlem boys — not drunk, not crazy, I think. He's in a trance; he's a person of joy, a fanatic. He listens as much as he performs — a look of hideous, powerful rapture on his face. Big arched eyebrows that never stop traveling. When he plays, he beats down piano and seat and wears them away. He is in motion every moment — what could be more obscene? There he is with his great head, big fat stomach, little round piston legs, and long yellowsectioned strong fingers, at rest about the size of bananas. Of course you know how he sounds — you've heard him on records; but still you need to see him. He's going all the time, like skating around the skating rink or rowing a boat. It makes

everybody crowd around, here in this shadowless steel-trussed hall with the rose-like posters of Nelson Eddy and the testimonial for the mind-reading horse in handwriting magnified five hundred times.

Powerhouse is so monstrous he sends everybody into oblivion. When any group, any performers, come to town, don't people always come out and hover near, leaning inward about them, to learn what it is? What is it? Listen. Remember how it was with the acrobats. Watch them carefully; hear the least word, especially what they say to one another, in another language; don't let them escape you — it's the only time for hallucination, the last time. They can't stay. They'll be somewhere else this time tomorrow.

Powerhouse has as much as possible done by signals. Everybody, laughing as if to hide a weakness, will sooner or later hand him up a written request. Powerhouse reads each one, studying with a secret face: that is the face which looks like a mask, anybody's; there is a moment when he makes a decision. Then a light slides under his eyelids and he says, 'Ninety-two!' or some combination of figures — never a name. Before a number the band is all frantic, misbehaving, pushing, like children in a schoolroom, and he is the teacher getting silence. His hands over the keys, he says sternly, 'You-all ready? You-all ready to do some serious walking?' — waits — then, STAMP. Quiet. STAMP, for the second time. This is absolute. Then a set of rhythmic kicks against the floor to communicate the tempo. Then, 'Oh Lord,' say the distended eyes from beyond the boundary of the trumpets; 'Hello and good-bye ' — and they are all down the first note like a waterfall.



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This note marks the end of any known discipline. Powerhouse seems to abandon them all; he himself seems lost — down in the song — yelling up like somebody in a whirlpool — not guiding them, hailing them only. But he knows, really. He cries out, but he must know exactly. ‘Mercy! . . . What I say! . . . Yeah!’ and then drifting, listening, — ‘Where that skin-beater?’ (wanting drums), — and starting up and pouring it out in the greatest delight and brutality. On the sweet pieces, such a leer for everybody! He looks down so benevolently upon all the faces and whispers the lyrics, and if you could hear him at this moment on ‘Marie, the Dawn Is Breaking’! He’s going up the keyboard with a few fingers in some very derogatory triplet routine; he gets higher and higher, and then he looks over the end of the piano, as if over a cliff. But not in a show-off way: the song makes him do it.

He loves the way they all play, too — all those next to him. The far section of the band is all studious — wearing glasses, every one; they don’t count. Only those playing around Powerhouse are the real ones. He has a bass fiddler from Vicksburg, black as pitch, named Valentine, who plays with his eyes shut and talking to himself, very young. Powerhouse has to keep encouraging him: ‘Go on, go on, give it up, bring it on out there!’ When you heard him like that on

records, did you know he was really pleading?

He calls Valentine out to take a solo.

‘What you going to play?’ Powerhouse looks out kindly from behind the piano; he opens his mouth and shows his tongue, listening.

Valentine looks down, drawing against his instrument, and says without a lip movement, ‘Honeysuckle Rose.’

He has a clarinet player named Little Brother, and loves to listen to anything he does. He’ll smile and say, ‘Beautiful!’ Little Brother takes a step forward when he plays and stands at the very front, with the whites of his eyes like fishes swimming. Once when he played a low note Powerhouse muttered in dirty praise, ‘He went clear downstairs to get that one!’

After a long time, he holds up the number of fingers to tell the band how many choruses still to go — usually five. He keeps his directions down to signals.

It’s a bad night outside. It’s a white dance, and nobody dances, except a few straggling jitterbugs and two elderly couples; everybody just stands around the band and watches Powerhouse. Sometimes they steal glances at one another. Of course, you know how it is with *them* — they would play the same way, giving all they’ve got, for an audience of one. . . . When somebody, no matter who, gives everything, it makes people feel ashamed for him.

II

Late at night, they play the one waltz they will ever consent to play. By request, 'Pagan Love Song.' Powerhouse's head rolls and sinks like a weight between his waving shoulders. He groans and his fingers drag into the keys heavily, holding on to the notes, retrieving. It is a sad song.

'You know what happened to me?' says Powerhouse.

Valentine hums a response, dreaming at the bass.

'I got a telegram my wife is dead,' says Powerhouse, with wandering fingers.

'Uh-huh?'

His mouth gathers and forms a barbarous O, while his fingers walk up straight, unwillingly, three octaves.

'Gipsy? Why, how come her to die? Didn't you just phone her up in the night last night long distance?'

'Telegram say — here the words: "Your wife is dead."' He puts four-four over the three-four.

'Not but four words?' This is the drummer, an unpopular boy named Scoot, a disbelieving maniac.

Powerhouse is shaking his vast cheeks. 'What the hell was she trying to do? What was she up to?'

'What name has it got signed, if you got a telegram?' Scoot is spitting away with those wire brushes.

Little Brother, the clarinet player, who cannot now speak, glares and tilts back.

'Uranus Knockwood is the name signed.' Powerhouse lifts his eyes open. 'Ever heard of him?' A bubble shoots out on his lip, like a plate on a counter.

Valentine is beat ing slowly on with his palm and scratching the strings with his long blue nails. He is fond of a waltz; Powerhouse interrupts him.

'I don't know him. Don't know who he is.' Valentine shakes his head with the closed eyes, like an old mop.

'Say it again.'

'Uranus Knockwood.'

'That ain't Lenox Avenue.'

'It ain't Broadway.'

'Ain't ever seen it wrote out in any print, even for horse-racing.'

‘Hell, that’s on a star, boy, ain’t it?’ Crash of the cymbals.

‘What the hell was she up to?’ Powerhouse shudders. ‘Tell me, tell me, tell me.’ He makes triplets, and begins a new chorus. He holds three fingers up.

‘You say you got a telegram.’ This is Valentine, patient and sleepy, beginning again.

Powerhouse is elaborate. ‘Yas, the time I go out — go way downstairs along a long *corridor* to where they puts us. Coming back, steps out and hands me a telegram: “Your wife is dead.”’

‘Gipsy?’ ‘The drummer is like a spider over his drums.

‘Aaaaaa!’ shouts Powerhouse, flinging out both powerful arms for three whole beats to flex his muscles, then kneading a dough of bass notes. His eyes glitter. He plays the piano like a drum sometimes — why not?

‘Gipsy? Such a dancer?’

‘Why you don’t hear it straight from your agent? Why it ain’t come from headquarters? What you been doing, getting telegrams in the *corridor*, signed nobody?’

They all laugh. End of that chorus.

‘What time is it?’ Powerhouse calls. ‘What the hell place is this? Where is my watch and chain?’

‘I hang it on you,’ whimpers Valentine. ‘It still there.’

There it rides on Powerhouse’s great stomach, down where he can never see it.

‘Sure did hear some clock striking twelve while ago. Must be *midnight*.’

‘It going to be intermission,’ Powerhouse declares, lifting up his finger with the signet ring.

He draws the chorus to an end. He pulls a big Northern hotel towel out of the deep pocket in his vast, special-cut tux pants and pushes his forehead into it.

‘If she went and killed herself!’ he says with a hidden face. ‘If she up and jumped out that window!’ He gets to his feet, turning vaguely, wearing the towel on his head.

‘Ha, ha!’

‘Sheik, sheik!’

‘She wouldn’t do that.’ Little Brother sets down his clarinet like a precious vase, and speaks. He still looks like an East Indian queen, implacable, divine, and full of snakes. ‘You ain’t going to expect people doing what they says over

long distance.’

‘Come on!’ roars Powerhouse. He is already at the back door; he has pulled it wide open, and with a wild, gathered-up face is smelling the terrible night

III

Powerhouse, Valentine, Scoot, and Little Brother step outside into the drenching rain.

‘Well, they emptying buckets,’ says Powerhouse in a mollified voice. On the street he holds his hands out and turns up the blanched palms like sieves.

A hundred dark, ragged, silent, delighted Negroes have come around from under the eaves of the hall, and follow wherever they go.

‘Watch out, Little Brother, don’t shrink,’ says Powerhouse. ‘You just the right size now — clarinet don’t suck you in. You got a dry throat, Little Brother, you in the desert?’ He reaches into the pocket and pulls out a paper of mints. ‘Now hold ‘em in your mouth — don’t chew ‘em. I don’t carry around nothing without limit.’

‘Go in that joint and have beer,’ says Scoot, who walks ahead.

‘Beer? Beer? You know what beer is? What do they say is beer? What’s beer?’

Where I been?’

‘Down yonder where it say World Cafe, that do?’ They are across the tracks now.

Valentine patters over and holds open a screen door warped like a seashell, bitter in the wet, and they walk in, stained darker with the rain and leaving footprints. Inside, sheltered dry smells stand like screens around a table covered with a red-checkered cloth, in the centre of which flies hang onto an obeliskshaped ketchup bottle. The midnight walls are checkered again with admonishing ‘Not Responsible’ signs and blackfigured smoky calendars. It is a waiting, silent, limp room. There is a burnt-outlooking nickelodeon, and right beside it a long-necked wall instrument labeled ‘Business Phone, Don’t Keep Talking.’ Circled phone numbers are written up everywhere. There is a worn-out peacock feather hanging by a thread to an old, thin, pink, exposed light bulb, where it slowly turns around and around, whoever breathes.

A waitress watches.

‘Come here, living statue, and get all this big order of beer we fixing to give.’

‘Never seen you before anywhere.’ The waitress moves and comes forward and slowly shows little gold leaves and tendrils over her teeth. She shoves up her shoulders and breasts. ‘How I going to know who you might be — robbers? Coming in out of the black night right at midnight, setting down so big at my table!’

‘Boogers,’ says Powerhouse, his eyes opening lazily as in a cave.

The girl screams delicately with pleasure. Oh Lord, she likes talk and scares.

‘Where you going to find enough beer to put out on this-here table?’

She runs to the kitchen with bent elbows and sliding steps.

‘Here’s a million nickels,’ says Powerhouse, pulling his hand out of his pocket and sprinkling coins out, all but the last one, which he makes vanish like a magician.

Valentine and Scoot take the money over to the nickelodeon, which is beginning to look as battered as a slot machine, and read all the names of the records out loud.

‘Whose “Tuxedo Junction”?’ asks Powerhouse.

‘You know whose.’

‘Nickelodeon, I request you please to play “Empty Bed Blues” and let Bessie Smith sing.’

Silence: they hold it, like a measure.

‘Bring me all those nickels on back here,’ says Powerhouse. *Look* at that! What

you tell me the name of this place?’

‘White dance, week night, raining — Alligator, Mississippi — long ways from home.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today’ plays.

The waitress, setting the tray of beer down on a back table, comes up taut and apprehensive as a hen. ‘Says in the kitchen, back there putting their eyes to little hole peeping out, that you is Mr. Powerhouse. . . . They knows from a picture they seen.’

‘They seeing right tonight that is him,’ says Little Brother.

‘You him?’

‘That is him in the flesh,’ says Scoot.

‘Does you wish to touch him?’ asks Valentine. ‘Because he don’t bite.’

‘You passing through?’

‘Now you got everything right.’

She waits like a drop, hands languishing together in front.

‘Babe, ain’t you going to bring the beer?’

She brings it, and goes behind the cash register and smiles, turning different ways. The little fillet of gold in her mouth is gleaming.

‘The Mississippi River’s here,’ she says once.

Now all the watching Negroes press in gently and bright-eyed through the door, as many as can get in. One is a little boy in a straw sombrero which has been coated with aluminum paint all over. Powerhouse, Valentine, Scoot, and Little Brother drink beer, and their eyelids come together like curtains. The wall and the rain and the humble beautiful waitress waiting on them and the other Negroes watching enclose them.

‘Listen!’ whispers Powerhouse, looking into the ketchup bottle and very slowly spreading his performer s hands over the damp wrinkling cloth with the red squares. ‘How it is. My wife gets missing me. Gipsy. She goes to the window. She looks out and sees you know what. Street. Sign saying “Hotel.” People walking. Somebody looks up. Old man. She looks down, out the window. Well? . . . *Ssst! Plooeey!* What she do? Jump out and bust her brains all over the world.’

He opens his eyes.

‘That’s it,’ agrees Valentine. ‘You gets a telegram.’

‘Sure she misses you,’ Little Brother adds.

‘Now, it’s nighttime.’ How softly he tells them! ‘Sure. It’s the nighttime. She say, “What do I hear? Footsteps walking up the hall? That him.’ Footsteps go on off. It’s not me. I’m in Alligator, Mississippi; she’s crazy. Shaking all over. Listens till her ears and all grow out like old music-box horns, but still she can’t hear a thing. She says, “All right! I’ll jump out the window then.” Got on her nightgown.

I know that nightgown, and she thinking there. Says, “Ho hum, all right,” and jumps out the window. Is she mad at me! Is she crazy! She don’t leave *nothing* behind her!’

‘Ya! Ha!’

‘Brains and insides everywhere — Lord, Lord.’

All the watching Negroes stir in their delight, and to their higher delight he says affectionately, ‘Listen! Rats in here.’

‘That must be the way, Boss.’

‘Only, naw, Powerhouse, that ain’t true. That sound too *had*’

‘Does? I even know who finds her,’ cries Powerhouse. ‘That no-good pussyfooted crooning creeper, that creeper that follow around after me, coming up like weeds behind me, following around after me everything I do and messing around on the trail I leave. Bets my numbers, sings my songs, gets close to my agent like a betsy-bug — when I going out he just coming in. I got him now! I got him spotted!’

‘ Know who he is ? ‘

‘Why, it’s that old Uranus Knockwood ! ‘

‘Ya! Ha!’

‘Yeah, and he coming now, he going to find Gipsy. There he is, coming around that corner, and Gipsy kadoodling down — oh-oh! Watch out! *Ssstflooy!* See, there she is in her little old nightgown, and her insides and brains all scattered round.’

A sigh fills the room.

‘Hush about her brains. Hush about her insides.’

‘Ya! Ha! You talking about her brains and insides — old Uranus Knockwood,’ says Powerhouse, ‘look down and say, “Lord!” He say, “Look here what I’m walking in!”’

They all burst into halloos of laughter. Powerhouse's face looks like a big hot iron stove.

‘Why, he picks her up and carries her off!’ he says.

‘Ya! Ha!’

‘Carries her *back* around the corner . . .’

‘Oh, Powerhouse!’

‘You know him.’

‘Uranus Knockwood!’

‘Yeahhh!’

‘He take our wives when we gone!’

‘He come in when we goes out!’

‘Uh-huh!’

‘He go out when we comes in!’

‘Yeahhh!’

‘He standing behind the door!’

‘Old Uranus Knockwood!’

‘You know him.’

‘Middle-size man.’

‘Wears a hat.’

‘That’s him.’

Everybody in the room moans with reassurance. The little boy in the fine silver hat opens a paper and divides out a jelly roll among his followers.

And out of the breathless ring somebody moves forward like a slave, leading a great logy Negro with bursting eyes, and says, ‘ This-here is Sugar-Stick Thompson, that dove down to the bottom of July Creek and pulled up all those drowned white people fall out of a boat. Last summer — pulled up fourteen.’

‘Hello,’ says Powerhouse, turning and looking around at them all with his great daring face until they nearly suffocate.

Sugar-Stick, their instrument, cannot speak; he can only look back at the others.

‘Can’t even swim. Done it by holding his breath,’ says the fellow with the hero.

Powerhouse looks at him seekingly.

‘I his half-brother,’ the fellow puts in.

They step back.

‘Gipsy say,’ Powerhouse rumbles gently again, looking at *them*, “‘What is the use? I’m gonna jump out so far — so far — *Ssssst* —” ‘

‘Don’t, Boss, don’t do it again,’ says Little Brother.

‘It’s awful,’ says the waitress. ‘I hates that Mr. Knockwoods. All that the truth?’

‘Want to see the telegram I got from him?’ Powerhouse’s hand goes to the vast pocket.

‘Now wait, now wait, Boss.’ They all watch him.

‘It must be the real truth,’ says the waitress, sucking in her lower lip, her luminous eyes turning sadly, seeking the windows.

‘No, Babe, it ain’t the truth.’ His eyebrows fly up and he begins to whisper to

her out of his vast oven mouth. His hand stays in his pocket. ‘Truth is something worse — I ain’t said what, yet. It’s something hasn’t come to me, but I ain’t saying it won’t. And when it does, then want me to tell you?’ He sniffs all at once, his eyes come open and turn up, almost too far. He is dreamily smiling.

‘Don’t, Boss. Don’t, Powerhouse!’

‘Yeahhh!’

‘Oh!’ The waitress screams.

Go on, git out of here!’ bellows Powerhouse, taking his hand out of his pocket and clapping after her red dress.

The ring of watchers breaks and falls away.

‘Look at that! Intermission is up,’ says Powerhouse.

He folds money under a glass, and after they go out Valentine leans back in and drops a nickel in the nickelodeon behind them, and it lights up and begins to play, and the feather dangles still. That was going to be a Hawaiian piece.

‘Take a telegram!’ Powerhouse shouts suddenly up into the rain. ‘Take a answer. — Now what was that name?’

They get a little tired.

‘Uranus Knockwood.’

‘You ought to know.’

‘Yas? Spell it to me.’

They spell it all the ways it could be spelled. It puts them in a wonderful humor.

‘Here’s the answer. Here it is right here. “What in the hell you talking about? Don’t make any difference: I gotcha.” Name signed: Powerhouse.’

‘That going reach him, Powerhouse?’ Valentine speaks in a maternal voice.

‘Yas, yas.’

All hushing, following him up the dark street at a distance, like old rained-on black ghosts, the Negroes are afraid they will die laughing.

Powerhouse throws back his vast head into the steaming ram, and a look of hopeful desire seems to blow somehow like a vapor from his own dilated nostrils over his face and bring a mist to his eyes.

‘Reach him and come out the other side.’

‘That’s it, Powerhouse, that’s it. You got him now.’

Powerhouse lets out a long sigh.

‘But ain’t you going back there to call up Gipsy long distance, the way you did last night in that other place? I seen a telephone. . . . Just to see if she there at home?’

There is a measure of silence. That is one crazy drummer that’s going to get his neck broken some day.

‘No,’ growls Powerhouse. ‘No! How many thousand times tonight I got to say *No?*’

He holds up his arm in the rain, like someone swearing.

‘You sure-enough unroll your voice some night, it about reach up yonder to her,’ says Little Brother, dismayed.

They go on up the street, shaking the rain off and on them like birds.

IV

Back in the dance hall they play ‘San’ (99). The jitterbugs stiffen and start up like windmills stationed over the floor, and in their orbits (one circle, another,

a long stretch and a zigzag) dance the elderly couples with old smoothness, undisturbed and stately.

When Powerhouse first came back from intermission (probably full of beer, everyone said) he got the band tuned up again not by striking the piano keys for the pitch: he just opened his mouth and gave falsetto howls — in A, D, and so on. They tuned by him. Then he took hold of the piano, like seeing it for the first time, and tested it for strength, hit it down in the bass, played an octave with his elbow, and opened it and examined its interior, and leaned on it with all his might. He played it for a few minutes with terrific force and got it under his power — then struck into something fragile and smiled. You couldn't remember any of the things he said — just inspired remarks that came out of his mouth like smoke.

They've requested 'Somebody Loves Me,' and he's already done twelve or fourteen choruses, piling them up nobody knows how, and it will be a wonder if he ever gets through. Now and then he calls and shouts, 'Somebody loves me! Somebody loves me — I wonder who!' His mouth gets to be nothing but a volcano when he gets to the end.

'Somebody loves me — I wonder who!

'Maybe —' He uses all his right hand on a trill.

'Maybe — ' He pulls back his spread fingers and looks out upon the place where he is. A vast, impersonal, and yet furious grimace transfigures his wet

face.

‘ — Maybe it’s you!’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty was a short story writer and novelist known for her portrayals of the American South. She received the 1973 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel *The Optimist’s Daughter*.

