



A Presidential Ghost Story in Four Acts

By Nat Cassidy

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CHARACTERS

Franklin Pierce, *late 40s*
Jane Appleton Pierce, *late thirties, his wife*

His cabinet:

William King, *Vice President*
William Marcy, *Secretary of State*
Caleb Cushing, *Attorney General*
Jefferson Davis, *Secretary of War*
Robert McClelland, *Secretary of Interior*
James Guthrie, *Secretary of the Treasury* }
James Campbell, *Postmaster General* } *Played by the*
James Dobbin, *Secretary of the Navy* } *same actor*

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Daniel Asbury

Millard Fillmore } *Portrayed by the*
General Winfield Scott } *same actor*

SETTING

The Executive Mansion

TIME

Winter 1852 – Fall 1856

To Brent Gibbs,
Who taught me everything I know.
So blame him.

On Lighting

To the furthest extent possible, the production should be as dark candlelit as possible. This will not only give further validation to the script's sense of time and place, but will create a murkier, more ominous atmosphere that will help the audience towards feeling the requisite fear and dread. Or, if you wanna be Hollywood about it: think *Alien-meets-Barry Lyndon*.

On Staging and Transitions

This should be staged in as wide a playing space as possible, in order to facilitate scenes bleeding in and out of each other. This should also be achieved by keeping all of the physical set pieces onstage so, when it comes time to shift locations, the servants simply bring whatever pieces are needed down, or put them back up—like a manual rotating stage. This will give us the sense of always being *in* the house, and will also allow moments of unscripted scenes occurring in the background (for instance, it would be nice to see Jane praying at the bed when it's upstage and not in use, while another scene is going on downstage).

As for transitions, while it might not always be explicitly stated in the stage directions, every scene transition should make use of whatever characters are not either playing servants or directly involved with the next bit of action—simple, purposeful crosses, most likely with papers in hand, just to help fully create a world in which the business never stops, and the hustle and bustle are omnipresent.

As for the servants, these roles are to be played by actors not onstage at the moment. The servants are portrayed thusly: black stockings over the face, tucked into the neck of the shirt, and black gloves on the hands. In other words, all exposed skin is covered by tight, featureless black material. No one onstage pays these servants any attention or even gives them acknowledgement—they are, in every sense of the word, dehumanized. The servants are always upstage of the other characters, almost like specters. The effect should be unsettling, uncomfortable, and just a little creepy.

On Tempo

It's exceedingly important that, particularly in all of the cabinet scenes, things move as fast as possible. We want to create a world in which no one gets a chance to even take a breath without someone else taking that as their cue to start talking. In acting and in writing, I'm a firm believer in the idea that people know what someone is saying before the completion of a sentence and also that overlapping dialogue is a delight to hear (provided it doesn't become unintelligible or unrealistic). So, don't be too polite. Overlap. And **pace, pace, pace**.

Still, there will be a connection with the long past—a reference to forgotten events and personages, and to manners, feelings, and opinions, almost or wholly obsolete—which, if adequately translated to the reader, would serve to illustrate how much of old material goes to make up the freshest novelty of human life. Hence, too, might be drawn a weighty lesson from the little-regarded truth, that the act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil fruit in a far-distant time; that, together with the seed of the merely temporary crop, which mortals term expediency, they inevitably sow the acorns of a more enduring growth, which may darkly overshadow their posterity.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*

Neither asleep or awake. A middle-of-the-night state of consciousness that isn't hypnogogic either. Meta-wakefulness. Meta-sleep.

Someone in the room.

Someone by the bed.

Someone coming to get me. I'm too afraid to open my eyes, and too aroused to go back to sleep.

—Melanie and Steve Rasnic Tem, *The Man on the Ceiling*

Who's Frank Pierce?!

—Whig Party chant during the election of 1852

ACT ONE

Scene One

A park outside the Executive Mansion – March 3, 1853

Darkness. We hear the sounds of trains in the distance.

Lights rise to find President MILLARD FILLMORE on a park bench, trying to feed a squirrel. It's not going well.

FILLMORE

Here. Just. Come on, you dumb bastard, just eat the f—
Eat the—EAT IT—

FRANKLIN PIERCE, the soon-to-be-President enters, behind.

PIERCE

Mr. President.

FILLMORE spins around. Rises. There's a definite tension between them.

FILLMORE

Mr. President-Elect. Thank you for—

PIERCE

No, no. Nice enough day.

FILLMORE

I hope it snows. Takes the sting out of the air. *(Pause.)* Goddamn, I'm just so sorry about what happened. Are you //well?

PIERCE

What did you want to talk about, Millard?

FILLMORE

I don't have much to say. At the inauguration. I hope that's okay

PIERCE

And you wanted to warn me?

FILLMORE

I want it over and done with. As quickly as possible.

PIERCE

I'm in no mood to linger, myself.

FILLMORE (*with sympathy*)

No, I don't imagine you are.

PIERCE

I'll be swearing the oath on a lawbook, //making a quick speech—

FILLMORE (*Jesus!*)

—a lawbook?—

PIERCE

—yes, and then going home.

FILLMORE

Home.

PIERCE
(*gesturing*)

Well, *there*.

They stare at the Executive Mansion in the distance.

FILLMORE

I'm not going to miss spending another night in that damned house.

PIERCE turns to him, interested.

FILLMORE

Not one bit. (*Beat.*) I don't want to lie to you. Your life is about to change—

PIERCE

I appreciate the thought, Millard, but—

FILLMORE

Shut up and listen to me. I don't mean the job. The job's easy enough, once you get used to being hated. I mean ... that house. That house is not a healthy place.

PIERCE

You're starting to sound like my wife.

FILLMORE

I wish I'd had as much sense as her to stay away. (*Beat.*) Sorry. Christ, this is harder than I thought.

*FILLMORE gets up. Doesn't look at
PIERCE.*

FILLMORE

We would have won, you know. If we hadn't given the nomination to Scott. I've been wanting to say that for—

PIERCE

Millard—

FILLMORE

Just do yourself a favor. Sleep deeply. And if you hear any scratching in the walls, ignore it. Especially in the attic.

I really am so, so sorry for ... you know.

I'll see you at the inauguration.

*Blackout. In the darkness, a man enters and
addresses the audience. He is jovial, almost
Falstaffian, and knows how to tell a story.
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.*

HAWTHORNE

(in the darkness)

What awaits you tonight—what awaits us all, sooner or later—is a ghost story. Fitting, then, that we, dead some hundred and fifty years now, shall serve as narrator, right?

*He lights a candle, illuminating his face.
The rest of the cast, save PIERCE and
JANE, is behind him.*

HAWTHORNE

Boo.

MARCY

“No man in modern times has inflicted such serious and lasting injury upon his country as Franklin Pierce.” Representative John P. Hale, New Hampshire.

HAWTHORNE

And how appropriate is it that this tale is also a tale of our great nation's history! For what else is history but the long, echoing shriek of the restless dead?

DAVIS

“President Pierce eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on the states.” Walt Whitman.

HAWTHORNE

Let us cut to the quick, something no editor has ever accused me of doing! I'm going to assume we're not all caught up on the intricacies of the mid-19th century American politics?

EVERYONE

Right.

HAWTHORNE

There are three things you need to know in order to understand where we are at this point in our country's turbulent adolescence. The first two are:

EVERYONE

The Compromises!

HAWTHORNE

Two compromises, both alike in ignominy, trying to assuage the tensions between our two purportedly God given rights: slavery and westward expansion. The first compromise says: no slave states north of the famous Mason-Dixon Line. But then we get ahold of territory like California, which leads to a compromised compromise, known as the Compromise of 1850. It goes into effect? Very good, 1850, you're smart enough to watch the rest of the show.

California becomes a free state (*some figures upstage "Yay," and some "Boo"*), but the Fugitive Slave Law is strengthened (*some figures upstage "Yay," and some "Boo"*). And it introduces the concept of popular sovereignty. More on that later. There's one more important ingredient to remember, and that is:

EVERYONE

The railroad ...

HAWTHORNE

The railroad. (*We hear the sound of a train in the distance.*)

It's hard to imagine now, but when my dear friend Franklin Pierce took his place as our nation's fourteenth president in 1853, the future was as inscrutable as it is now. We didn't know what was coming. As for the *past* ... We had thought, as most men stupidly do, that we had laid the past to rest. But, of course, the past never rests. We all know that, right? Down in the depths where fears are made manifest and walk around the candle-glow of consciousness. The past never rests. (*Beat. He smiles.*) That is why we have ghost stories.

He blows out the candle and, in the dark, exits. The sound of the train grows louder until it crescendos into the hideous noises of a derailment. Screams. Panic. Utter chaos. Horror. Then silence. Then, in the darkness, we hear a child sing a few bars from a ghostly lullaby.

Scene Two
The Executive Mansion - March 5, 1853

The child's song fades away. In the darkness, we hear a man coughing. Lights rise. We are inside the Cabinet Room in the Executive Mansion.

In the center of the room is a large table. WILLIAM KING, the soon-to-be Vice President, sits, coughing violently and occasionally vomiting into a bucket. He looks deathly ill.

A young man, DANIEL ASBURY, clean-cut and eager, enters. KING attempts to stand in salutation, but is unable.

DANIEL

Mr. Vice President? I was told I—

KING vomits into the bucket.

DANIEL

Oh my god, are you //alright, sir?

KING hurls again, then spits the remainder. He waves a greeting and an invitation to sit.

DANIEL

Should I go get someone? I'll go get s—

KING

Sit down. Ugh. This weather is like a rabbit in a deadfall. It crawls inside you and then fights like hell to get out. *(A final cough and spit. Wiping his mouth.)* And none of this “Mr. Vice President” crap, please. I haven't been sworn in yet. //You should know that.

DANIEL

No, sir—I mean, yes, sir. My apologies.

KING

You're the—//oh, right.

DANIEL

Yes, sir.

KING

I didn't realize we'd be doing *this* right away.

DANIEL

We could try another //time if—

KING

Good a time as any if we make it quick. (*Cough.*) Truth be told, I don't even know why I'm here. I'm supposed to leave for Cuba within the week and every damn minute I spend away from my bed is another damn minute I crawl towards the end of my term, if you get me.

DANIEL

Cuba?

KING

Don't know much, do you? Lucky me, granted—(*He begins to cough and retch again.*)—granted permission to have my oath of office administered in a nicer climate than this swamp hole.

DANIEL

Well. Thank you for allowing me—(*KING begins to cough violently*)—such access to you and your peers—(*KING's coughs become more productive into the bucket*)—particularly so early into your administration. I'm sure this must be a sensitive time, especially considering what the President has—(*KING is vomiting loudly by this point*)—Are you sure you don't need anything?

KING

(*a spit and a wipe*)

Wanna give me your lungs?

DANIEL

(*a weak laugh*)

Ha. (*Beat.*) Um, well, for starters, *The Sentinel* wishes to extend its enthusiastic congratulations to you and President Pierce. As well as their condolences for his recent—

KING

You'll do well to stop there. Particularly when the President gets here. *For starters*, we're all of us aware your paper endorsed 4 other men before it decided to cascade our Pierce with its ambivalence. (*DANIEL begins to speak.*) But, relax, no one's gonna begrudge you that. However: condolences?

DANIEL

(*jotting a note*)

“Don't.”

KING

(Cough.) I mean, it's only been two months. You mention condolences, or hell, anything about families or trains, for that matter ... he'll just ... poof, like a ghost. *(Cough.)* Incidentally, that is all very much "off the record." *(He glares at DANIEL, a very different person suddenly.)* You catch me?

At that moment, we hear two men outside the room: WILLIAM MARCY, a political whippet, and CALEB CUSHING, an immense Quaker in a large, black overcoat.

MARCY

(Offstage)

Oh, I'll tell him to his face, I don't care where he received his damned "education"—

CUSHING

(Offstage)

Lower// your voice, please.

KING *(at the same time)*

Tell me you catch me.

MARCY

(Offstage)

—no, no, he reeks of a contempt and ignorance that is distinctly Southern!

The two men enter the room and notice KING and DANIEL. They change immediately, consummate politicians.

CUSHING

Gentlemen. How are you?

MARCY

(To KING, surprised)

William! How are you feeling? I was under the impression you were leaving us for a time.

KING

Don't worry, William. Just keeping my grave nice and warm for when you hop into it.

MARCY

Ouch. You kiss Buchanan with that mouth? //Stinks in here, by the way.

CUSHING

(To DANIEL)

Who are you? You're not the new Secretary of the Navy, are you?

KING

No, this is—

DANIEL

Daniel Asbury. With// the—

MARCY

The New York Sentinel!

DANIEL

Yes.

MARCY

Don't look too impressed. I'd heard there might be a reporter in our midst. Friend or foe?

DANIEL

Objective observer.

MARCY

You would be the first. (*Extends his hand.*) William Marcy, Secretary of //State.

CUSHING

(*Also extending his hand*)

I'm sure he knows that, Mars.

MARCY

Dear Lord, strike me dead if I ever get tired of saying "William //Marcy, Secretary of State"—

DANIEL

(*Overlapping; to CUSHING*)

Mr. Attorney General, it's a pleasure.

MARCY

And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company, my dear young Mr. Asbury of the *New York Sentinel*?

KING

(*Dumping the bucket out a window*)

He's been granted access to write a piece on our administration.

DANIEL

In depth, as it were.

MARCY

Surely the good people of Gotham have better things to read about than our Sisyphean hand-cranking.

DANIEL

Well, to be honest with you—

MARCY

Uh-huh!

DANIEL

—that’s exactly what I’m here to remedy. The recent election, as I’m sure you might have noticed, didn’t exactly ... capture the nation’s heart.

MARCY

Tell that to Scott. Ol’ Fuss and Feathers acted like it was the end //of the world.

CUSHING

No grown man should want something so badly in public.

DANIEL

The tactics used, by both parties, were so *personally* negative ... *The Sentinel* wishes to expose its readership to this new administration in a more positive light. Allow our readers to really feel as if they *know* the occupants of the Executive Mansion as human beings, as men.

MARCY

Lofty.

KING

Unseemly, too, given some of the men in question.

As they speak, ROBERT McCLELLAND and JAMES GUTHRIE enter, talking. They shake hands with everyone in the room, and start to set up at the table. KING begins to cough again. NOTE: Just a reminder that this—and every subsequent—cabinet scene should move as fast as possible. These are the kinds of men that are responding to what is said well before what’s said is finished.

CUSHING

How long are you planning on

DANIEL

A week? I'm hoping for a day or two to really explore the city. I've never been down this way before. *(To McCLELLAND and GUTHRIE.)* Gentlemen. Daniel Asbury of //the New York *Sentinel*.

MARCY

Once you've seen marble and mud, you've seen about all this city has to offer.

McCLELLAND

Always discounting your sunny disposition, Mr. Marcy.

GUTHRIE

Mr. Vice President-elect, how are you feeling today?

KING hacks up a response.

McCLELLAND

The President is not here yet?

CUSHING

We've only just arrived, ourselves.

The men take their seats and lay before themselves their respective dockets and papers. It's a ton of documents.

GUTHRIE

Who else are we missing? Campbell?

MARCY

Campbell's unable to attend. Train troubles.

CUSHING

Ugh.// Blasted machines.

KING

We are short Mr. Campbell, and we are waiting for the President and Mr. Davis. //It is—*(cough)*—one past.

MARCY

(Whispering to CUSHING)

Davis is with him? //What a surprise.

CUSHING

(To MARCY, reproachfully.)

I told you.

DANIEL ushers himself towards the back of the room, hoping not to be noticed.

McCLELLAND

Is the President aware of Campbell's //absence?

KING

As far as—

MARCY

I'm sure he understands more than anyone the unreliability of the railroad. (*The comment lands with a thud.*)

KING

In five minutes, gentlemen, we'll get started. We'll //just wait—

MARCY

President must be exhausted today, too.

GUTHRIE

Why's that?

MARCY

(A juicy secret)

Good Lord, you hadn't—? So he shows up after the inaugural reception, right? First night as President of the United States and his bedroom hadn't been prepared yet! He had to sleep in one of the guest rooms! Can you //believe it?

KING is coughing again.

McCLELLAND

That's outrageous.

CUSHING

Embarrassing.

GUTHRIE

This wretched building ...

MARCY

Thank God he's sleeping as a bachelor these days. I can only imagine how a wife might have reacted to such news.

He shudders. There are suppressed chuckles throughout the room. At that moment,

JEFFERSON DAVIS, a charming southerner, enters, the door being held open by a man who steps in afterwards.

DAVIS

Well, now, sounds like we're having fun already! (*To the man who held the door open.*)
Don'tcha think so, sir?

The men turn and see who has entered. They all rise.

KING

Mr. Pres—(*he begins to cough*)

*DAVIS makes his way to his seat to stand with the rest of the men. The man who held the door open stands before them:
FRANKLIN PIERCE. A brief beat.*

PIERCE

Gentlemen. Good morning.

ALL

“Good morning, Mr. President,” &c.

PIERCE

Should we?

They all sit—PIERCE walks with the slightest of limps. A moment. DAVIS notices DANIEL. The men all stay seated, but turn and stare.

DAVIS

Excuse me. Who are you?

DANIEL

Daniel Asbury, with the New York *Sentinel*, sir. Mr. Davis, I presume.

PIERCE

Who?

DANIEL

Mr. President. An honor to meet you, sir. I'm with the New York S—

PIERCE

Ah, right, the reporter.

Yes, sir.

DANIEL

Awkward beat.

How are you?

PIERCE

Fine, sir, thank you.

DANIEL

Are you ... ? You're not sitting in on this, are you?

PIERCE

I—

DANIEL

Ha! Hahaha!!! No, that's—no. A member of the press, sitting in on—? Can you imagine?? Hahaaaa! This isn't a country auction, or, or

PIERCE

Oh—

DANIEL

Tell you what. How about after lunch today, you and I sit down together. My secretary is down the hall—he'll have specifics. But in the meantime, uh—

PIERCE

Of course, sir. Thank you.

DANIEL

DANIEL exits.

Well. Exciting. *(Beat.)*
Whoa, whoa, gentlemen, one at a time.

PIERCE

We're just waiting for you to

KING

Of course, right. I trust we have an itinerary—*(He digs through the papers in front of him.)* Ah, here—*(he purposefully rips the paper into pieces.)*

PIERCE

McCLELLAND (*a laugh*)

Wait just a moment, Davis, since when is the rail system *your* concern?

DAVIS

Well, now, I was just getting to that, Robert.

McCLELLAND (*still politely laughing*)

Why don't you let the Secretary of Interior worry about pursuant //domestic activities?

GUTHRIE

Let's not, please—

DAVIS

(*overlapping*)

Let me guess, Lewis Cass advised you to make sure no one here gets a word in edgewise?

CUSHING

You all understand that nothing we discuss today matters unless we first discuss the Compromise, don't you? (*Beat. No one seems very keen on the idea.*)

GUTHRIE

I'm going to get us some water.

He pops his head out the door, waves to someone offstage, then takes his seat.

DAVIS

Why, Mr. Cushing, you certainly cut to the quick.

KING

Wait. The Missouri Compromise or the 1850 Compromise?

McCLELLAND

What is there to discuss? It's a compromise. It's set.

CUSHING

Nothing is set. We are painting ourselves into a corner.

GUTHRIE

It's been over 2 years, //Caleb—all seems well so far.

KING

Ah, that one.

DAVIS

Know what, Caleb, you and I are in agreement on this one.

MARCY

Should we call the reporter back in to //commemorate the occasion?

McCLELLAND

Please don't let's turn this into an abolitionists' meeting!

The men start to react.

CUSHING

I have no interest in that—

KING

May I speak?

PIERCE

Please, William, by all means.

During KING'S following speech, two things happen: a servant enters with a water pitcher, and PIERCE begins to hear what sounds like rats crawling or chewing in the walls (as well as a subtle, high-pitched noise beneath it). It is a sound effect we can hear, as well, but no one else onstage takes notice. At first, he tries to ignore it, but soon it begins to take up his attention.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON THE SERVANT: these roles are to be played by whatever actors are not onstage at the moment. The servants are portrayed thusly: black stockings over the face, tucked into the neck of the shirt, and black gloves on the hands. In other words, all exposed skin is covered by tight, featureless black material. No one onstage pays these servants any attention or even gives them acknowledgement—they are, in every sense of the word, dehumanized. The servants are always upstage of the other characters, almost like specters. The effect should be unsettling, uncomfortable, and just a little creepy.

KING

(Almost pukes)

Damn. *(Beat. He gets it under control.)* Taylor and Fillmore handed us a mess. Let's just have that said and out.

DAVIS

Handed it? They practically *flung* it in our //faces like dog shit

KING

Okay, Jeff. But. I've made my way around this country over the years and do you know what I've seen? Stress. The kind of stress you see before something breaks or, or explodes. You know, when I was practicing law, I represented a man who accused his neighbor of feeding one of his pigs to death? Poor thing's stomach just stretched to bursting. *(The rat noises intensify.)* And that's where we're at right now. This country has to digest what it's swallowed, we can't consider cramming more down its throat! So, *(cough)* listen to an old man: let this issue alone—focus on the smaller, more important things, so we can be free to gut the fucking President with our bare hands and string him up by his own pulsating, blood-and-shit-caked intestines. Excuse me.

By that point, PIERCE has been looking around the room as subtly as he can to find the source of the chewing noises. KING'S words stop him mid-motion, unable to process what he just heard. None of the men seem to have noticed. KING gets up and pukes in the bucket in the corner. The rest of the men consider what he said. The servant retreats into the shadows of the room.

MARCY

Well, Mr. Vice President, “do nothing” is never the most inspiring rallying cry.

KING *(spitting)*

But am I wrong?

GUTHRIE

We all know what is said about apple carts, don't we?

McCLELLAND

“Haste and rashness are storms and tempests, breaking and wrecking business.” Thomas Fuller.

GUTHRIE

That's, yes, they also say that.

Beat. PIERCE is still staring agape at KING. PIERCE stands, clumsily.

PIERCE

Gentlemen, I'm sorry ... I ...

The men rise. KING begins coughing uncontrollably into his kerchief, spitting blood.

ELSEWHERE ON STAGE, unseen by those in this scene, lights fade up on Scene Three below, which overlaps.

DAVIS

Mr. President, are you alright?

MARCY

Sir?

PIERCE

(The only man looking at KING)

No, no, no, no, please, it's fine. *(He angrily waves at them to sit.)* Please! I just ... *(A weak joke)* Let's all think about what's been discussed thus far and, and perhaps meet tomorrow with heads cleared of the, uh, inaugural buzz. I'm fine—I think it's just a good night's sleep I need. I'm sure you heard, my bedroom was—*(KING is still retching.)* For god's sake, somebody help Mr. King.

PIERCE exits. KING gets his coughing under control.

KING

See? I told you, gentlemen: it is a touchy issue.

Lights crossfade fully into: