

Auto-da-Fe

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EXT. TOWN COMMONS. LATE AFTERNOON.

Four men are hard at work scraping the grass and topsoil away from an area of the commons. They labor in silence, their expressions grim. One worker pauses, straightens his back, and peers at the western horizon. Night will soon fall.

So begins a sequence of shots alternating between the laboring men and scenes from the recent past. A man's voice, deep and authoritative, narrates off screen.

VOICE

(against the sound of shovels  
breaking the earth)

We had long thought the burning  
times were far behind us. Surely  
the good Lord would never again  
call upon His servants to force  
another soul into the fires...

A number of boys bearing armloads of kindling and scrap wood approach the commons to dump their burdens in accumulating piles adjacent the exposed soil.

VOICE

(cont.)

Such was our hope, a delusion born  
of complacency as peace endured in  
our little village. Peace, sadly,  
is oftentimes nothing more than the  
calm before the storm...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. NURSERY. DAY

A young peasant woman, LUCILLE, mid 20s, appears in the doorway to a small nursery room. Her head is turned as she carries on a conversation with her husband who is elsewhere in the house.

LUCILLE

(over her shoulder)

No, Isaac, I haven't seen Abe since  
I let him out last night.

ISAAC

(off screen)

Then where could he be? It's not  
like the damned dog to just up and  
vanish.

(CONTINUED)

LUCILLE

Language, dear, language. You don't want the baby learning such profanity.

ISAAC

He's not yet one, Lucy, you needn't worry about such things.

Lucille, shaking her head, steps into the room and crosses to the cradle.

LUCILLE

(to herself)

Stubborn, just like a man...

She reaches into the cradle, pulls away a blanket..

LUCILLE

How's my little angel this morn-

In her hands, the blanket is speckled with blood. The cradle is empty. A whining sound is heard on the other side of the cradle. Lucille steps around to where sunlight falls on the floor through a window.

There, lazing in the sunshine, wagging his tail, is the dog, Abe. His muzzle is covered in blood, the source of which is nestled between his forepaws.

A tiny mangled corpse.

Lucille begins to scream.

EXT. TOWN COMMONS. LATE AFTERNOON.

A circle of scraped earth, some twenty feet in diameter, now mars the grass of the town commons. The piles of wood have grown to a considerable size. The men lean on their shovels, the boys stand to the side.

One of the workers motions off screen. Three men enter the circle bearing a lengthy wooden beam.

VOICE

Regardless of circumstance, evil can surface at any time. When it does, God mandates that His people act to purge the wickedness before it spreads to further blight His green earth...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. BARN. DAY.

An aged farmer stands in the door of the barn, his expression conveying horror.

The livestock housed in the barn, two horses and two cows, lay dead on the packed dirt of the floor. Winding over the bodies and through the scattered hay are dozens of copperheads and rattlesnakes.

CUT TO:

EXT. ORCHARD. DAY.

Two youths, a boy and a girl, race through the ranks of fruit trees, screaming. Blood runs from numerous shallow wounds on their faces and bodies. Pursuing the kids are dozens of crows, swooping and pecking at their exposed flesh.

VOICE

Sometimes, even the most fervent of prayers fail to rid us of the serpents in our midst. At such times it is only with iron and fire, blood and sacrifice that abomination can be exorcised...

CUT TO:

EXT. CHURCH. LATE AFTERNOON.

On the verge of panic, the gathered villagers argue with one another. Lucille, her apron bloodied, stands sheltered in the arms of a man, presumably her husband. She seems shell-shocked, neither speaking nor gesturing with others in the crowd. Instead, she gazes with dull eyes at the cross mounted atop the church's steeple.

As evening begins to fall, many of the menfolk, armed with torches and sharpened farming tools, conduct a house to house search, determined to root out the cause of the horror that has befallen them.

CUT TO:

EXT. VILLAGE STREETS. NIGHT.

Three men, armed like their compatriots, creep up on a ramshackle shed, through the cracks in the walls of which can be discerned a fire burning within.

VOICE

Abomination can assume the shape of  
any living thing, be it animal, be  
it man, be it woman...

INT. SHED. NIGHT.

The men kick in the door to the shed. Within they find a little girl, BETHANY, 9 years of age, eviscerating a dead rat with a dagger. Revealed in the firelight are numerous live snakes coiled about rusting equipment. The inner walls are decorated with pentagrams and mysterious sigils rendered in blood.

VOICE

...or be it a child.

BETHANY, her expression angelic and innocent, smiles sweetly at the aghast men.

CUT TO:

Darkness.

VOICE

No matter the guise he takes, the  
devil remains the devil. As such,  
when unmasked, he and his minions  
must be sent back to hell in the  
manner determined by the ancients.

CUT TO:

EXT. TOWN COMMONS. DUSK.

The entire village has congregated on the green to view the raising of the stake.

VOICE

Just as the Good Book decrees,  
"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to  
live."

(CONTINUED)

The stake towers at over a dozen feet above the ground. Standing between the amassed wood piles is REVEREND JOHANN, mid-50s. He is tall, broad-shouldered, imposing. In his hands he holds a leather bound Bible.

When he speaks, his voice matches that of the narrator. The crowd is hushed.

REVEREND JOHANN

(loudly)

Good Christians, we've gathered at this hour of evil to carry out the will of God. A plague as foul as any that befell Egypt has taken its dreadful toll among our livestock and our children. We are tasked with purging ourselves of the wickedness here rooted in our fair village. Yes, the Devil this day wears the face of a child. (*raises his hands to quiet the murmurs of uncertainty and outrage*) This is but one of Hell's many tactics in its eternal war against us. Let not the serpent exploit the mercies of our hearts. This child, one Bethany Midlaine, we have accused of witchery. The events of recent weeks render all evidence irrefutable. Under the law of the Lord, we are without recourse. She must be burned.

At this point a woman cries out in a shrill voice. She is GRACIE MIDLAINE, mid-30s, mother to the condemned. She is being restrained by two able-bodied men.

GRACIE MIDLAINE

(despairing)

Please, Reverend Johann, I beg of you...She is but a child, a little girl, no more than that.

REVEREND JOHANN

She once was a little girl, but no longer. Now, she is naught but a jackal of Satan.

GRACIE MIDLAINE

No, no, do you not see? She is being *used* against her will. She-

(CONTINUED)

REVEREND JOHANN

Do you not see, woman? No one so young can be so manipulated unless her very nature allows it.

GRACIE MIDLAINE

But how can her soul have been corrupted? It doesn't make sense that-

REVEREND JOHANN

(pointing a finger at the distraught woman)

You are the one no doubt responsible for the blight upon her spirit, Goodwife Midlaine. You who bore her out of wedlock, you who denied her baptism until-

GRACIE MIDLAINE

Those are *my* sins, not hers!

REVEREND JOHANN

All of your sins will soon be brought into the light, let me assure you. That imp you mothered is not the only demon present. Tonight, Bethany burns. Tomorrow, perhaps yourself...

Gracie can only scream and struggle against those who grip her arms. Other men come to assist as her thrashings become more violent.

REVEREND JOHANN

Take her away and chain her!

Gracie is forcibly carried from the scene.

REVEREND JOHANN

(cont.)

Bring forth the witch-child!

The crowd at one side of the commons parts, women quickly pulling away the children who do not move quickly enough. Bound in rope, Bethany is dragged between two men to where the cleric stands.

Reverend Johann lifts the girl's chin to stare into her eyes. The little girl's expression is placid, peaceful. She only smiles.

The priest steps away in disgust.

(CONTINUED)

REVEREND JOHANN  
Bind it to the stake.

The girl is bound.

The villagers watch, terrified yet fascinated, as the collected scrap wood and hay are piled around the condemned. When all men but two move away, Bethany is neck deep in the tinder. Her expression never changes.

REVEREND JOHANN  
Let it burn!

The torches are thrust into the tinder. The fire builds quickly, it's increasing intensity reflected in the eyes and faces of the crowd. Many cringe and avert their gazes. Several women break away and flee to their homes, sobbing. Most can do little else but watch, spellbound.

Bethany's face, wreathed in smoke, conveys only peace.

Stars are visible in the night sky. Seen from a distance, the pyre burns, one great pillar of flame.

EXT. VILLAGE. DAWN.

As the sun edges above the eastern horizon, the village begins to stir.

A lone dog wanders through a garden, seeking any morsels he may find, only to be scared off when an old woman emerges from her home brandishing a broom.

In another yard, two women hang laundry over a line.

A man pushes a wheelbarrow along a rutted road.

Though subdued, life goes on.

EXT. CHURCH.

Reverend Johann inspects the clapboard siding of his church. He hums a hymn as he does so, seemingly without worry.

A young man, PETER, early 20s, approaches.

PETER  
G'day, Reverend Johann.

(CONTINUED)

REVEREND JOHANN

A good day it promises to be,  
Peter. A very good day, indeed.

PETER

I don't mean to be a nuisance,  
Reverend, but, well...some of us  
are just curious as to...um...

REVEREND JOHANN

(turning to the youth)  
Yes, what it is?

PETER

Well, who's gonna take care of the,  
ah...the girl?

REVEREND JOHANN

You need not worry yourself,  
Peter. I've several men who've  
volunteered to help remove the  
remains.

PETER

Yessir. (looks off down the  
street) Say, Reverend, is that Will  
Cyrus comin' this way? He's  
staggerin' like he's drunk.

The Reverend peers down the road as a man approaches,  
stumbling as he does.

REVEREND JOHANN

It is William. He shouldn't be  
drunk...I tasked him with keeping  
the children and dogs away from the  
commons.

Both the Reverend and Peter walk to meet the man, who at  
this point is in the shadow of a house.

REVEREND JOHANN

(shouting)  
Hail, William! What is wrong with  
you, why do you stumble so?

Peter stops, his expression one of horror. The Reverend  
does the same as William steps out of the shade.

In the light of the morning sun, it can be seen that the man  
is missing his eyes.

(CONTINUED)

REVEREND JOHANN

Dear Lord...

William drops to his knees in the dust. He raises trembling, bloody hands to the sky.

WILLIAM

We are damned...We've damned ourselves. *Oh, God take me now!*

PETER

Wha-what happened to him?

REVEREND JOHANN

I don't know, he must have-

At this point, William begins to scream.

WILLIAM

*Hell would not have the child! She lives, unburned!*

The reverend begins to run through the town to the commons. People begin to emerge from the houses, drawn by the wounded man's raving.

EXT. TOWN COMMONS.

The Reverend is not the first to reach the commons. Several people stand outside the circle of scraped earth, staring mutely. A few have dropped to their knees in prayer.

When the cleric arrives, he can only gape in disbelief.

Bethany Midlaine remains bound to the blackened stake, surrounded by the ashen remains of the fagots. It is not rope that holds her in place, but vines and creepers that have grown miraculously to twine about the girl's body. These growths bear gorgeous white blossoms in such profusion that they modestly conceal her flesh where the clothes have been burned away.

Her hair, instead of being scorched from her scalp, has grown in tandem with the budding plants. The two are densely woven together in such a way that Bethany seems crowned by the snowy flowers.

Her skin is milky white, unburned and unblackened by any trace of soot.

Bethany's eyes are closed, her expression beatific.

It is obvious that she still breathes.

(CONTINUED)

The gathering villagers can only tremble and sob.

PETER

(standing behind the reverend)

My Lord, Reverend, what is this? You said she was a witch. You called her an imp and had us set fire to her...

ELDERLY WOMAN

(on her knees)

Reverend Johann, what does this mean? She has been spared from death...

Other persons voice the same frightened queries. From within the crowd, someone recites the Lord's Prayer.

REVEREND JOHANN

It...it is obviously a...well, it can only mean that-

From behind the crowd comes the voice of Gracie Midlaine. People shy away from her as she advances to where the Reverend stands.

GRACIE MIDLAINE

What it means is that you, the self-appointed emissary of Heaven, the pompous voice of our good God, has erred.

REVEREND JOHANN

(his voice quavering)

You...you were bound. I had you tied down in your cellar. I l-locked you in myself.

GRACIE MIDLAINE

(holding a tangle of ropes for all to see)

Bound by these, you say? Reverend Johann, it takes more than hemp to restrain the Devil's own...

Gracie drops the tangle to the ground. The ropes twist and writhe in the dust; in the blink of an eye, they've become live serpents.

The villagers scream. Several try to flee from the commons only to find all paths blocked by venomous snakes that emerge from the shadows. Walking among the reptiles are dogs, both domestic and feral.

(CONTINUED)

Dozens upon dozens of these creatures are converging on the green.

Screams and shouted prayers fill the morning air.

GRACIE MIDLAINE

Beg, you Christian dogs. You condemned an innocent and feeble-minded child to die for crimes she could not have perpetrated unaided.

REVEREND JOHANN

(verging on panic)

God shall damn you, woman. You will not escape His judgement-

GRACIE MIDLAINE

None of us shall escape His judgement, Reverend, not today. We are all hellbound. Myself for witchcraft, and all of you for your sanctimonious hypocrisy.

REVEREND JOHANN

No...no, that cannot be...

The cleric's denial is echoed by his congregation. Gracie gestures to the sky. From all points of the compass flock thousands of carrion birds, their wings overlapping to blot out the daylight.

GRACIE MIDLAIN

(raising her voice to be heard over the raucous tumult of the crows and the villagers' screams)

This day we are reconciled to the Father of Lies. Abandon all hope, children of iniquity! Curse God and the moment of your creation!

The woman's laughter is scarcely heard over the cacophony of the condemned and the screeching of hungry flock.

GRACIE MIDLAIN

(screaming in triumph and pain)

The abyss embrace us!

Everything and everyone vanishes under the cyclonic fury of the birds.

At the eye of the storm, opening her eyes to gaze about her serenely, is Bethany. An immense serpent has coiled itself around her. It's head now level with her own, it tickles the girl's cheek with it's forked tongue.

Bethany giggles with delight.

END