

Criterion

by

Anonymous

FADE IN:

EXT. CAMP LAUNDRY - MORNING

Covered shack with a clothesline that extends so far the eye cannot discern its end. Piles of red sheets heaped for their turn on the line:

White sheets wave dry in the wind.

CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)

Come now, let us reason together,  
saith The Lord, though your sins  
are as scarlet, they shall be  
white as snow...

INT./EXT. CAGE ON HILL - MORNING

Locked behind the iron bars:

A hard way to view the distant woodland, as a caged girl.

Far off, the meadow retreats to evergreens. The eastern horizon has the sun on the rise to the left.

A loud morning stillness. From outside the bars:

This girl in the cage, TELANU, 14, not mentally there, but present enough at the sound of a CHOP! She hisses and

Flings herself back to the corner of the cage, as the first sound of the wood chopper's hand breaks the quiet.

At the woodpile: Axe on wood. A rhythmic CHOP. CHOP.

Out of focus. Everything. Then the bars, they have their diaphanous twins-- long shadows touch the ground.

EXT. TRAIL AROUND CAMP - MORNING

Horse hooves make their soft CLIPPITY-CLOP.

The trail carves neatly on... THE HORSEMAN, as he will be known, does his daily rounds, but he is nothing more than a black sheet, slightly humanoid, upon a horse.

CAGE HILL

Telanu stretches through the bars to reach something: The corner of a flapping white sheet.

200 feet away, a high pitch TRILL spackles the air waves.

YDRRRRRRAH! TETETETETET-TET.

Telanu grunts like a moose, responsive to the trill. Her alertness peaks as her heart quickens. THUM-THUMP.

She remembers: A melody plays faintly. The trill, again.

Desperation has her frantically reaching.

STAND OF PINE TREES

There. The distant shape of the owner of the call. Her burnt orange dress is soaked along its hem in water.

No, it's blood. The boney hands that rise to cup around her lips that trill again: YDRRRRRRAH! TETETETETET-TET.

This is a matriarch who will quell the evil of her tribe. GELDEZ KERUB, 75, lowers her hands, trills, no more.

GELDEZ

I am requesting...

INT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT - MORNING

The mellow light upon the brown canvas, the tinkle of a bell in the wind, it can't conceal the obvious.

MIN, 13, sits on the ground sheet, hugging her legs.

MIN

I'm so hungry! Why can't we eat?

Min's mother, ESTER, 40, threads beads onto a string.

ESTER

Correction.

Min shudders. She's heard it hundreds of times.

ESTER

I can eat. Initiates wait.

MIN

Mom, what was it like for you?

ESTER

I never worried. I knew I would never be the Selectee... The Selectee has an evil where they cannot possibly meet Criterion.

MIN

What is Criterion?

ESTER

Whatever it is, they never tell.  
Perhaps it's different each year.  
I don't know. But don't complain  
It's a sign of weakness.

MIN

When can I leave the tent?

ESTER

When Geldez is finished her  
trills. It should be soon.

STAND OF PINE TREES

Geldez stands so upright, her arms spread like wings.

GELDEZ

I am requesting.

She waits for response, then reaches in her pocket for a handful of red berries. She pops them in her mouth.

GELDEZ

Perhaps a little encouragement.

She chews them only seconds then spits them out as red rose blossoms. They flutter then SHWUP!

A wind vacuum sucks them up to become a thin White Linen Sheet as the likeness of a human form. Much like The Horseman, but without the horse-- horseless Horseman.

GELDEZ

Knew you couldn't resist.

The White Sheet dances what might be a jig.

GELDEZ

You make a terrible apparition. I liked you better last year when you came as a black dog...

The Sheet throws its sheetly arms in question.

GELDEZ

I guess I'm to blame though. I had a terrible year growing canine spawn. I went gallivanting to Lang Syne with the other Horseman.

She swoons, prayer hands to the side of her cheek.

GELDEZ

He's so tall dark and handsome.

HUMPH! The White Sheet turns away.

GELDEZ

No offense. But yes, We had a  
fling and drinks and casinos and  
well, what happens in Lang Syne,  
stays in Lang Syne.

The Sheet remains hurt.

GELDEZ

Oh come on now. White is the color  
of the celestials. It's the full  
spectrum. It's the very best!

The Sheet turns around-- face, back. No dif.

GELDEZ

Now, if you please, do give me  
this year's Criterion and you can  
go back to bed.

The Sheet flip flaps and a TOWEL falls at Geldez' feet.

GELDEZ

Merci, blanc-et.

She picks it up then squeaks and winks.

GELDEZ

Get it? Blanc? Blanc-et?

The blanket sheet waves bye and leaves into the trees.

SERIES OF SHOTS - GELDEZ PREPARES THE CRITERION

\* Geldez opens THE CRITERION, drops it in the washtub,  
scrubs it on the board, lifts the wet towel that reads:

\* 1. Overly curious

\* 2. Especially vain in matters of appearance

... that's as far as we get when she squeezes it out.

EXT. CAMP - LANDMARK CENTRAL - AFTERNOON

Clear blue with a scattering of cumulus clouds. Shafts of sunlight converge together at a single point:

A wooden pole rises thirty feet in the air and appears as Landmark Central amid a scattering of eight brown tents.

FOOTFALLS approach the pole. A heavy rope hits the ground along with a pail of water.

The person dropping the rope and pail wears the sturdy black boots of a male and the bloody skirt of a women.

Geldez turns to the source of blood, the blood of berries, piled in bowls. She sends them through a press and collects their blood into a bucket.

She sponges the blood onto her dress, higher than the hem line, higher still, until the work is done-- a red dress.

CAGE HILL

Geldez squats to look at Telanu. Telanu grunts again, begs for the white sheet that flaps outside her reach.

GELDEZ

You know you deserve this. You know you can't be trusted.

TELANU

Mo-gu. Mo-gu.

GELDEZ

I can't give your words back. Not until you are well again.

TELANU

Mo-mo.

GELDEZ

No. You cannot have the sheet until you can manage it.

EXT. CAMP TENTS - AFTERNOON

Geldez approaches each tent in succession:

DING! She rings a small bell each time before she speaks.

Her spiel is pronounced to each tent, it would seem. The people inside remain hidden, enclosed in their shelters.

GELDEZ

Every year our tribe selects one thirteen year old girl and you, might be the one. If you are chosen, and become our Selectee, you will be tested for one full night on the pole...

INT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT - AFTERNOON

Min looks in a small hand mirror. She powders her face, applies gloss to her lips, smooths her hair. She shifts her head toward Geldez' far off voice.

MIN

I think I hear her.

ESTER

Shush. Concentrate on your soul, not on her business with others.

MIN

What do I say when she comes?

ESTER

You say nothing unless she asks.

MONTAGE

-- The Horseman walks Telanu on her leash to pick berries. She tugs childlike at the Black Sheet.

-- The Sheet stops, while she lies down, rolling on the warm ground, as a cat on her back.

-- Geldez moves from tent to tent, giving recitations.

-- Streaks of sun glaze on the Landmark Pole. Later, the sun dries a waning day. Geldez drags Telanu on her leash, against her will, toward The Pole. A raven soars nearby.

GELDEZ (O.S.)

Do you understand now? Deep in your bones? Practical wisdom.

EXT. CAGE HILL - CAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

Geldez gives the sheet to Telanu. Her eyes flame to life.

The clothesline reels the melody: I have known prison I will be free... a white sheet catches wind and sails off.

INT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Ester fitfully washes Min's tearful face as her uncontrolled hiccups have her throat in spasms. How long she's been crying-- long enough to be out of tears.

ESTER

You must stop this now. I never behaved this way. What's wrong with you?

MIN

I'm scared that I'm going to be the one. They're going to tie me to the pole and...

FLASHBACK - LANDMARK POLE - NIGHT

Thunder CRASH. Telanu's hands tied high upon the pole.

FLASHBACK - CAGE HILL - DAY

Min approaches Telanu whose erratic jumps be the devils in her skin. Telanu barks as a dog.

DISSOLVE TO:

ESTER

A slight bark escapes Ester's lips. Min steps back.

ESTER

You know that no one's permitted on Cage Hill but the sages!

MIN

I couldn't--

DING!

EXT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Geldez sniffs the air, her lips curl downward.

GELDEZ

Every year...

EXT. RED DINING TABLE - DUSK

A violet cappa of sky arcs down to the edge of camp:

A finely laid table, as if for royalty.

Plentiful food. Drinks in vessels both tall and stout.

Geldez and Ester prouste. They raise green shooters.

ESTER

Green apple baijiu. Who knew?

GELDEZ

Gam-bei!

INT./EXT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT/DINING TABLE - DUSK

Min lies stiff upon the ground sheet. Her eyes large saucers of coal, her lips quiver.

MIN

I can't just stay here and wait. I need to know the Criterion.

Min sneaks outside the tent. She crawls around the camp to where Ester and Geldez dine. She halts to drop eaves.

The two women have the smashed look of heavy baijiu drinkers. Geldez picks up a red berry, scrutinizes it.

GELDEZ

You know what my ancestors told the white man?

ESTER

That you can tell a dogwood by its wood? Always red.

GELDEZ

And too! These 'r ed'ble. Not too tasty. We still callem poberty verries. They tole tha white man this, "ya needa eatem ta protect against Dam's Disease".

ESTER

What's Dam's disease?

GELDEZ

Damned if I know.

Geldez croaks in laughter while Ester thinks, then joins.

Min looks disgusted. She races toward Geldez' Tent.

EXT./INT. GELDEZ' TENT - NIGHT

There, it says: Private Property - No Trespassing.

Min trespasses. Digs through Geldez' property, through every bag until she finds it. THE CRITERION.

She lights a lamp to read it, a blue illumination.

The Selectee shall:

1. Overly curious
2. Especially vain in matters of appearance
- 3.

She can't read it. Her face freezes in horror.

MIN

You're not there. I won't read you!

3.

I am here, Min. Read me!

MIN

No. No I won't!

The letters ink upon the page.

3. Trespasses on other people's property

Min throws the scroll, knocking the lamp. The Criterion ignites. She stumbles to crawl, like a beast, outside.

INT./EXT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT - DUSK TO NIGHT

Min stuffs her belongings together in her largest sack.

Ester stumbles drunk, into the tent. She kisses Telanu.

ESTER

How's my baby girl?

MIN

You don't care about me. You don't care what they do to me! You eat and drink and I starve?!

Ester doesn't answer. She sees the packing job, scowls.

ESTER

What are you doing?

MIN

Leaving here. I'm running away. I don't know where, but someplace where they don't do stupid rituals and hurt innocent people.

ESTER

Hurt INNOCENT people?!

Min fixes a blank stare at Ester.

MIN

I have to leave.

ESTER

Where will you go?

MIN

I don't know. Maybe, maybe I'll be like the warrior women of the Nachi Legend. I'll travel through the woods, speak with the animals.

Ester collapses, her breathing strains.

MIN

Mom? Mom what's wrong?

ESTER

Go to the dining with Geldez.

MIN

I'm not supposed to leave the tent.

ESTER

A minute ago you were running away and now, what? You won't listen to your mother?

Min opens her mouth, but nothing comes out.

ESTER

Go! Do you hear me?!

Min patters across the camp to the dining table. Geldez rises, a cold stare eating through Min's forehead.

MIN  
Mother told me to come.

GELDEZ  
Did I invite you?

No answer.

GELDEZ  
You may sit, but you are not  
permitted to eat anything.

MIN  
I don't know what you want from  
me. I haven't done anything--

GELDEZ  
Don't lie to me in front of  
Meedath and break this Holy Table!

MIN  
I visited the cage. Telanu kissed  
me... now Mom is sick.

Geldez' anger vanishes like a thousand years. Silence.

MIN  
Where is everyone? Aren't they  
allowed out of their tents yet?

GELDEZ  
I sent them home. No need for them  
to watch this sort of spectacle.

MIN  
Not like last year?

GELDEZ  
Every year is different.

MIN  
Will it hurt me? Bad?

GELDEZ  
For me? A very painful numen.

Min's eyes glaze far off into: a clear baijiu drink.

GELDEZ  
I will give you a choice. You can  
leave our tribe freely, or you can  
go through the purification.

EXT. CAMP - NIGHT

The fire flames together with that melody again.

INT. MIN AND ESTER'S TENT - NIGHT

Mother moans.

MIN

I was curious. I was afraid.

ESTER

Go now, Min. Please.

EXT. CAMP - POLE LANDMARK - NIGHT

Geldez' two hands lift a wooden cup toward Min's mouth.

GELDEZ

Drink, except the last dreggs.

In great gulps, Min bravely drinks the mysterious liquid, leaving the final portion. She hands the cup back.

Geldez finishes it and throws the cup in the fire.

GELDEZ

Give me your hands.

Geldez ties Min's hands securely above her head to the pole. She turns and walks away.

MIN

Geldez! Geldez no! Don't leave me!

Geldez turns back once. She says nothing.

BLACK

Min hangs weakly on the pole, her feet push up for a few seconds. A shower passes over. She hangs, lifeless. Many sheets come to visit. Some black; some white. Some with horses; some without. Lightning strikes Cage Hill.

EXT. CAMP - MORNING

Telanu, Min, Ester and Geldez, dressed as royalty, clear the Red Dining Table. The horseman makes his rounds.

FADE OUT: