

FADE IN:

EXT. DEEP HOLLOW NIGHT

CROWS, CRICKETS, and JARFLIES. Up in Appalachia, somehow, the woods are darker, the folks harder. These grassy roads hold secrets and heartache.

SUPERIMPOSE TITLE: EAST KENTUCKY, TWENTY YEARS AGO

INT. ANGLE ON BIBLE

Shadows. An ancient, well-loved Bible is opened by a crippled, snakebit hand.

PREACHER (V.O.)
(Appalachian accent)
From the gospel of Mark... He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe...

EXT. HOLINESS CHURCH OF GOD NIGHT

A full moon through thick pines dimly illuminates a decaying tarpaper and cinderblock building with outhouse to the side. Lit by coal oil and passion, it looks nothing like a church.

The crudely lettered sign: "Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name Only With Signs Following" is nearly ruined.

Inside, YELLING, MOANING, and GUITARS and TAMBOURINES. A rhythmic, compelling rising CHANT.

Through the windows, sweating MOUNTAIN PEOPLE raise their hands in exultation. They're simple and good. No money or education, but they do have a powerful faith.

INT. HOLINESS CHURCH OF GOD NIGHT

A STRONG MAN carries a wooden box up the aisle, sets it down front. HISSING and RATTLING inside. Nobody takes their eyes off that box. The PREACHER waves the Bible.

PREACHER

(quoting scripture)

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned! And these signs shall follow them that believe! In my name shall they cast out devils, they shall speak with new tongues, they shall take up serpents and if they drink deadly things it shall not hurt them, they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover!
Praise Jesus!

Clumped together, three young hellions, HARLAN MAGGARD, ARNETT BLEDSOE, and PANE CUMPTON stare at the box.

Harlan's oddly exotic complexion is darker than his friends's.

[n.b. Harlan is Melungeon, a mixed-ethnic race which, from parts unknown, came to the Appalachians long before the first Anglo settlers. Melungeons might be Portuguese, Moors, Jews or Arabs. Like Gypsies, they are outcasts. In Turkish, "melun jinn" means "cursed soul."]

Arnett is dumb as a box of hammers, but good hearted. Pane is angular and edgy.

Terrified, Harlan clutches the edge of a pew.

Next to him, his buddy Arnett picks a scab and fidgets. He leans over to study the box of snakes. Pane glances out the window, as if expecting someone.

Harlan's light-skinned mother, IDELL MAGGARD, sits next to him. A righteous woman deep in the faith, she steps into the aisle, dances in the spirit to the front of church, SHOUTING. Waving her hands toward heaven. Beside her is her sister, PANE'S MOTHER.

INT. CRATE

Seething with rattlers. Copperheads.

ANGLE ON CHURCHGOERS

Idell quivers above the box. Nearly unhinged by frenzy. A member of the congregation hands her a mason jar with clear liquid swirling.

IDELL

I drank this strychnine poison in
your name, Lord Jesus!

As she gulps it, she winces, gasps, and launches deeper into the trance.

IDELL

Hooo! Praise JESUS!

Idell gives the jar to another church member, who drinks and passes it on.

Nervous, Harlan watches his mother. The churchgoers SHOUT in ECSTASY. MUSIC reaches a crescendo.

IDELL

(growing incoherent)

Oh, Jesus, we all wanna live with
you forever, and not burn in that
fiery lake. But they don't know
they got to be washed in your
blood and to get your love they
got to show you how much they love
you sweet Jesus! Walk with 'em,
help these poor sinners to know
your precious love! Thank ye
Lord, thank ye Jesus!

On a wave of religious power, Idell bends and thrusts her arms into the box of snakes.

She snaps back -- for a moment we think she's bit -- and stands, waving two fat copperhead snakes. One wraps around her arm. She pays them no mind. She's in a trance.

IDELL

(speaking in tongues)

Ah de ah, coddley oh, tilley oh,
giddey oh, oh de de oh dee, kitty
oh, kiddy oh, oh coddy ah tiddey
tilley oh, oh oh, tilley oh praise
you Jesus, oh, Jesus, oh Jesus,
shiddy oh, oh dee oh dee oh dee,

tiddly oh, deedly oh, Jesus... oh
tiddly oh, oh dee oh dee, dee
oh...

People CHANT louder and louder. A SKINNY MAN dives to the floor, YOWLING IN TONGUES. His shivering shakes the pews.

Idell comes out of it a little, turns to her son. She motions for Harlan to take the writhing snakes. He's scared to death, keeps his hands under his legs.

IDELL

(shaking)

Harlan Maggard... prove your
love... take up the serpents my
son... show the Lord... show Jesus
you have his love strong in you...
show the Lord, praise God!

She's going faster and faster. Close to having a stroke. Harlan doesn't want near those snakes.

The church is hysteria.

EXT. HOLINESS CHURCH OF GOD NIGHT

CATERWAULING and SOBBING. A man moves from the shadows to a window. VELL CUMPTON. Thin, friendly.

INT. HOLINESS CHURCH OF GOD NIGHT

Through the window, Pane sees his daddy nod. Pane scoots out of there.

Harlan wishes he could leave too.

EXT. HOLINESS CHURCH OF GOD NIGHT

Pane slips his hand in his father's. They slide into darkness.

CUT TO:

EXT. EMPTY FIELD NIGHT

Across the hollow... Moonlight on a grassy field. Peaceful and serene. No one in sight.

Then, a beat-to-hell pickup truck drifts out of the trees. Lights blink, and a man steps from the darkness and leans on what seems to be a thick stick.

The rawboned man, dark-skinned and exotic looking, HASKEW MAGGARD, is frightening just to look at. Evil flows in him. He carries a mason jar of moonshine.

Vell Cumpton comes from the pickup truck.

VELL

'Come you're not up preachifying
with Idell and little Harlan?

The question irritates Haskew.

HASKEW

(proffers the jar)
A draw?

VELL

Yeah.

He takes a powerful pull on the moonshine. Wipes his chin.

VELL

You ain't forgot how.

INT. CHURCH NIGHT

The commotion boils like lava. Idell sleepwalks down the aisle with those snakes. Stops right next to Harlan, about to force them on him.

Intercepting her, Arnett reaches past Harlan and takes one snake, and steps full into the aisle, holding the copperhead at a distance. Pretending to shake like he's in the spirit, trying to keep that snake from biting him.

Harlan is afraid for his deliverer. Despite his anguish, he can't look away.

Idell dances in the spirit.

Arnett shakes, tries to dance and keep the snake at bay.
Electricity courses through the room. MUSIC booms and the
snake twists round his arm.

Harlan watches, frozen. Tears roll down his cheeks.

CUT TO:

FIELD - ANGLE ON PICKUP TRUCK

In the truck, little Pane hunkers down, spying.

VELL (O.S.)
You bring the squeeze?

ANGLE ON THE MEN

The two men are uneasy.

HASKEW
Got the money?

VELL
Yeah.

HASKEW
It's ten dollar.

VELL
Ten dollars?
(angry)
Hit went up, didn't it? I'an get
it over at Flat Gap for eight, by
God.

HASKEW
Well now, you don't want your
wife's sister, settin' up there at
church, knowin' you's buyin'
liquor, what with you being back
at the foot of the cross and all!

VELL

Thought we had a deal.

HASKEW
Thangs change.

Furious, Vell Cumpton reaches in his pocket for his money.

VELL
(under his breath)
God damn Melungeons.

Haskew hears it. His expression hardens.

With ease, Haskew reaches for the thing he's leaning on.
It's a maul.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH NIGHT

MUSIC and MOANING reach a howling climax.

The copperhead jerks back, opens its white mouth and sinks
its fangs into Arnett's hand. He SCREAMS.

CUT TO:

EXT. FIELD / TRUCK

Haskew swings the maul like a flyswatter at Vell's neck
which CRACKS like a twig. Vell drops in the grass and
quivers and jerks.

VELL
OH JESUS, OH GOD, OH JESUS, OH
GOD!

Haskew watches him twitch, wallops him again.

Pane moves in the truck, makes a NOISE.

Haskew picks up the jar of shine, takes a draw off it,
wipes his mouth and looks up at the truck. We hear Vell
dying.

Haskew walks to the truck. Leans in the window.

He sticks the handle of that bloody maul in there, pushes it against Pane's face. Leans into it.

Haskew looks at him real hard.

HASKEW

Don't make me take care a you too,
boy.

He pulls back the handle. Blood, hair, and mud stick to Pane's cheek.

Haskew steps into the woods. As if by magic, he's gone.

CAMERA moves past Vell's bubbling face TOWARD the truck.

PANE

Daddy? Daddy?

VELL

Pane, Pane... Oh God...

Fear keeps the boy pinned in the truck. His daddy stretches for him to help, but Pane can do nothing but watch as life ebbs from his father.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH NIGHT

Arnett twitches and YOWLS and the snake flings free...

...onto the pew and crawls into Harlan's lap. Harlan sits, about to pass out from fear until the snake disappears under the pew. Arnett slumps over. The women start laying on hands, to heal him.

IDELL

OH JESUS, OH GOD, OH JESUS, OH
GOD!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RAINY HILLSIDE CEMETERY DAY

A clearing on the hill behind the Holiness Church. Graveyard. MOURNERS.

In an ill-fitting black suit, Pane Cumpton quivers next to his mother. Standing behind them, a tough, smart, ruthless man. Vell Cumpton's brother. Later he will become SHERIFF ESCO CUMPTON.

Idell and Haskeew walk up with Harlan. Haskeew drops back, lights a cigarette. Stays back a ways.

HASKEW

(to Idell)

Go on up there with your sister.

Idell moves forward and helps prop up Pane's mother.

Harlan wants to stand by his daddy.

HASKEW

(cold)

Go on, boy.

Harlan moves reluctantly away from his father, up the hill to the burying.

Arnett, his hand bandaged and swollen, slides from his MOMMA next to Pane.

PREACHER

Oh heavenly father, please look
down on this poor family, shower
them with your love and strength.
We ask that you take this poor man
in your loving arms, wash him
clean a all his sins. Lord please
continue to give us your gifts and
your signs. We ask these things
in your name, God. In Jesus name
we pray. Amen. Thank you Lord.

The men are somber and the women nearly riot in mourning. Vell's widow hangs on Idell, barely standing.

PANE'S MOTHER

My Vell! Oh, Vell! Oh, Lord, not
Vell...!

Pane is sobbing.

IDELL

(to Harlan)

Go be sweet to your cousin.

Harlan stands next to Pane, patting him.

HARLAN

(to Pane)

I'm sorry about Uncle Vell.

Everyone SINGS. Shape note singing, primitive acapella.

Down the hill, Haskew Maggard puts out his cigarette. Lifts his gaze toward Pane. A horrible regard, with terrifying power.

Frightened, Pane chokes off his sobs. Stops crying.

Harlan sees the look but does not understand.

The pine casket is lowered in the hole. Almost everyone cries. Haskew Maggard's not in sight.

End on Harlan's somber, intelligent face.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BUS DAY
(PRESENT DAY)

HARLAN MAGGARD, head on the window, asleep. Wearing a worn Special Forces jacket. Name: Maggard. Faded Gulf Storm patches. He's good humored but reserved.

SUPERIMPOSE TITLE: OUTSIDE KNOXVILLE - TODAY

Harlan rouses himself, looks out the window. There's something good about him.

EXT. GREYHOUND BUS DAY

Barrels down Highway 11 toward Knoxville.

EXT. BUS STATION - KNOXVILLE DAY

The bus hisses to a stop. Harlan gets out, doesn't bother looking around. Nobody's meeting him.

EXT. ROAD

Harlan rides in a cab.

HARLAN

You know where the Poverty House
beer joint is?

CAB DRIVER

Unh hunh.

EXT. POVERTY HOUSE ROADHOUSE DAY

Blasting sunlight. Gravel parking lot. Concrete block
building. Neon beer signs. No money spent on decor.

From the blinding haze, Harlan walks through the dusty
parking lot. From inside pours a LUSH FEMALE VOICE,
singing a country rock ballad.

Harlan notices the MUSIC.

INT. POVERTY HOUSE

Crummy beer joint. Bar. Pool tables. Dance floor. On
stage, a BAND rehearses.

The band is FOUR GUYS and JULIE MARTIN. She'd make a glass
eye water. Tall, sexy, confident, and comfortable, she
seems game for just about anything.

Harlan enjoys looking at her from the bar. Hunched over
the far end, an OLD DRUNK lines up his nickels and dimes.
BARTENDER breaks away from his TV soap opera, nods at
Harlan.

HARLAN

Blue Ribbon.

Bartender hands him a bottle.

HARLAN

Pane around?

BARTENDER

Out back, dealing with the beer
assholes. Who's asking?

HARLAN

Harlan.

BARTENDER

Business or personal?

HARLAN

He'll know.

Bartender shuffles into the back. He watches the band.

The old drunk sways back and forth to the music.

Behind Harlan, there's a SCRAPING and Pane's office door
wrenches open. Out comes PANE CUMPTON. He's friendly
enough, but uneasy.

PANE

Harlan Maggard! Thought you was
gonna stay gone.

Harlan laughs, greets his cousin with a hug.

PANE

Long time, Cuz. That Kuwait
shit's been over for a while...
where you been?

HARLAN

Just been gone.

Pause that gets awkward. Pane stops trying.

PANE

Beer cold enough?

Harlan nods and smiles.

HARLAN

Long's it's wet.

Harlan takes in the roadhouse.

HARLAN

This's awright.

PANE

Mine. Free and clear. Good money, but you got to be around...

(pours out old drunk's booze)

...that's enough for today, Nick...

(to Harlan)

...all the damn time.

Harlan watches Julie SING. Sexxxxxy.

PANE

You goin' up home?

HARLAN

I'reckon.

Harlan studies Pane.

HARLAN

Be good to see Momma.

PANE

Sorry about your daddy.

HARLAN

Rough business.

PANE

(nervous)

Yeah. But you only got one daddy. When they gone, they gone.

HARLAN

How was Haskew's funeral?

PANE

Singin'. Cryin'. Food. Same old thing.

HARLAN

Who's there?

PANE

All our side of the family, with
your momma, and then...

(disparaging)

...all them damn Melungeons come
off the hill from your Daddy's
side.

(nervous)

You know they're hanging fire for
somebody's ass.

Harlan continues to stare away.

PANE

Lotta crazy shit goes on up there,
man.

Harlan keeps looking away, thinking. Vague tension between
the two men.

PANE

(wounded)

Yeah. You only get one daddy.

HARLAN

Well, I had mine a lot longer'n
you had yours. Knowin' Hass
though, I just mighta traded.

Pane pushes two empty bottles off the bar into the trash.
They SHATTER. The old drunk nearly jumps out of his skin.
Pane chuckles.

PANE

Where you stayin', Cuz?

HARLAN

Not sure yet.

PANE

Two ten Mynatt Road. I got two
extra bedrooms and a couple a
extra cars if ya want one. So
you're stayin' with me. And
anything else you need.

HARLAN

Sounds all right.

PANE
(to Bartender)
Another beer for my cousin.

They clink bottles.

The old drunk hums along with the music. Julie keeps
SINGING. Harlan keeps watching.