

"IN THE MOUTH OF THE LION"

FADE IN:

EXT. MBOULO, GAMBIA, WEST AFRICA -- DAY

It is ninety-nine degrees Fahrenheit and the villagers of Mboulo are working themselves into a frenzy of singing, dancing and drumming. Harkening back to ancient warrior traditions, men slash their bodies with knives and fire off homemade cannons. TWO HUNDRED BOYS AGED TWELVE TO EIGHTEEN are preparing to enter the sacred forest and undergo the rite of passage to become men.

The INITIATES are clad in grass skirts, their bare, blue-black, muscular torsos glisten with sweat. Some wear elaborate headdresses adorned with cow horns. A muscle-bound DRUMMER beats out a repetitive, hypnotic rhythm while YOUNG WOMEN clang bits of metal together. The initiates dance wildly, spinning in circles and pounding the sandy earth with their bare feet. They are encircled by HUNDREDS OF ONLOOKERS in brightly colored boubous.

Inside the circle with the initiates, OLDER MEN engage in mock battle firing old muskets into the air. They are dressed in giant-clown-like trousers and they move in slow exaggerated steps. The men and initiates are chewing on cigar-shaped hallucinogenic roots which make their eyes watery and distant. All are in a trancelike state.

Behind the large mud brick houses OLDER WOMEN cook stew and rice in twenty-gallon pots over open fires. Other women pound the hulls off of rice with four-foot-long pestles in huge mortars. Free range chickens and small CHILDREN dash about their feet.

Twenty-two-year-old CHRIS ASHLEY is the only white face in the crowd watching the spectacle. He is wearing native dress and next to him is forty-year-old KALIA GOUJABI, his host "father" in the village.

KALIA

Tomorrow they will go in the sacred forest and become men.

Inside the sacred circle with the initiates, A FEW BARE-CHESTED MEN wearing dozens of protective leather charms around their waists, wrists and ankles have joined the melee. They are stomping the ground wildly and waving knives and machetes over their heads. One of them pulls a little boy from the ring of spectators and starts cutting his neck. Chris winces.

CHRIS

Jesus! What's he doing with that little kid?

KALIA

Just watch.

The man finishes by rubbing the blade on the child's arms and legs then releases him unharmed to his mother.

CHRIS

How did he do that?

KALIA

They are protected by the charms they wear and the brown liquid they pour over their bodies.

CHRIS

You mean those leather things protect them from piercing the skin?

KALIA

That and some magic.

CHRIS

And you believe that?

Kalia laughs.

KALIA

How can I not believe it? I am watching it.

CHRIS

The blades are dull. It's a technique not magic.

One man, with eyes bulging, pulls his tongue out of his mouth and makes a long hard slash across his tongue with a sharp blade. Before it is apparent if he has broken the skin --

MATCH CUT:

INT. CHRIS ASHLEY'S BATHROOM, WASHINGTON, D.C. -- MORNING

CHRIS ASHLEY cuts his cheek shaving. He drops the razor in the sink and stares at his reflection in horror as blood flows in a rivulet down his cheek and drips off his chin into the sink.

Frantically, he splashes water on his face then washes his hands vigorously. Grabbing a hand towel, he covers his face with it, inhaling and exhaling deeply.

Chris is a shadow of his former self. He is too thin and has dark circles under his eyes.

INT. ASHLEY KITCHEN -- SAME TIME

Chris' parents, FRANK and SARAH ASHLEY, sit at the breakfast table. They are in their early fifties.

FRANK

I have a client coming in at nine.

Frank folds his newspaper, stands up and kisses Sarah on the top of her head and leaves.

Chris enters the kitchen. A piece of toilet paper is stuck to the spot on his face where he nicked himself shaving. His clothes look a size too big and one shirt tail is hanging out of his pants. Sarah turns to face him and tries to put on a happy face.

SARAH

Good morning.

CHRIS

Morning.

Chris mechanically kisses his mother's cheek. Sarah removes the toilet paper from his face. Chris slumps in a chair at the table.

SARAH

What would you like for breakfast?  
How about some eggs --

CHRIS

Mom, I'm not hungry.

SARAH

For God's sake, Chris, eat something.  
If you keep going like this, you'll  
starve yourself to death.

CHRIS

(mumbling)  
We can only hope.

SARAH

What?

CHRIS

Nothing.

SARAH

Have some cereal at least.

He picks up a box of cereal on the table, pours some into a bowl, adds the milk and eats joylessly. After a few bites, he stops eating and plays around in the remaining cereal with his spoon. Sarah lights a cigarette.

INT. SUPERMARKET -- LATER

Chris follows his mother in a daze through the endless aisles of products.

SARAH

Get some toilet paper and paper towels, honey. You know the kind we like.

Chris goes off in search of the paper products. He finally finds the right aisle, but is overwhelmed by the selection and cannot remember which kind his mother prefers. He picks up different brands, examines them, then puts them back. Putting one on the shelf too brusquely, Chris creates a cascade of paper products. TWO STOCK BOYS approach him.

STOCK BOY I

What the hell?

CHRIS

Sorry.

STOCK BOY I

I spent all morning restocking these shelves.

Chris slowly starts picking-up the rolls of paper towels. His inefficiency frustrates the stock boy.

STOCK BOY I (CONT'D)

Forget it. We'll take care of it. Just get outta here before you do any more damage.

The other stock boy is staring hard at Chris.

STOCK BOY II

Chris? Chris Ashley?

CHRIS

Yeah?

STOCK BOY II

Andy Schaeffer.

CHRIS

Oh, I didn't recognize you.

The two shake hands.

ANDY

I didn't recognize you at first either.

CHRIS

It's been awhile.

ANDY

Are you all right? You look kinda' like you're gonna be sick.

CHRIS

I don't feel so good. Tell your friend I'm sorry about the mess.

ANDY

He's not my friend. He's kind of a jerk if you wanna know the truth.

STOCK BOY #1 is picking up the fallen paper towels.

CHRIS

I gotta go. Take it easy, Andy.

ANDY

Yeah, you too, man.

Chris walks away and Andy helps the other stock boy pick up the mess.

STOCK BOY I

You know that asshole?

ANDY

We were on the tennis team together in high school. He hung out with the smart kids, played trumpet in the jazz band... you know.

STOCK BOY I

Yeah a dork.

ANDY

Oh shut up.

Andy looks with concern in the direction of his old friend slowly disappearing down the aisle.

EXT. SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT

Sarah Ashley pushes the grocery cart quickly through the parking lot toward her car. Chris is lying on his side next to the car.

SARAH

Chris? Chris!

Chris slowly pulls himself up and tries to help load the groceries into the trunk. Sarah fights back the tears.

SARAH (CONT'D)

That's all right, honey. I'll take care of this. Just get in the car.

INT. ASHLEY DINING ROOM -- NIGHT

Sarah, Frank and Chris are eating in silence in their elegant, high-ceilinged dining room. Chris is picking at his food. Sarah looks from Frank to Chris.

SARAH

Chris? How would you feel about going to see a doctor?

FRANK

Sarah--

SARAH

I think we should let Chris decide.

CHRIS

What? Like a shrink?

Sarah nods.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

It doesn't matter.

SARAH

What doesn't matter?

CHRIS

It doesn't matter if I go to a shrink or not. It doesn't matter if I get up in the morning. It doesn't matter if I go back to school. It doesn't matter if I get laid. It doesn't --

FRANK

Stop it! It does matter. It all matters.

CHRIS

How do you know? How do you know what I feel?

FRANK

I'm your father. I know what matters.

CHRIS

That's brilliant, Dad. You've convinced me. Tomorrow I'll wake up and everything will matter. The sun will shine again and the birds will be chirping. And everything that happened will just have been a bad dream. The Ashley family lives happily ever after.

FRANK

That's not what I said.

CHRIS

Then what are you saying?

FRANK

I just think that...well that...in time, we can put this behind us, and--

CHRIS

Maybe you can, but I can't. It will always be right in front of me and it will never go away.

Chris abruptly leaves the table. Sarah lights up a cigarette.

FRANK

What?