

Devotion

"Cult Classic"
(Pilot)

written by

JB June

TEASER

INT. PODCAST STUDIO, EARWAVES NETWORK - DAY

A cozy acoustic-foam-lined podcast recording studio--

TOPHER (30)-- boho linens, beaded crystal necklace, man bun -- sits at a table cluttered with notes, audio cables, and microphone stands.

Across the table, producer HANNAH (late 20s) works the audio board like she's been doing it for years and rocks a hoodie so tattered it looks like she's been wearing it just as long.

She clicks a button on her computer. Gives a thumbs up.

Topher checks his notes. Adjusts his mic. Clears his throat.

TOPHER

The story I'm about to tell you is absolutely true. At least, the truth as I remember it. I'll tell you how I witnessed transcendence beyond physical reality and found the answers to the universe's greatest mysteries. How I became the voice of the commune cult known as Dawn of Our Divinity. But first, how it all started.

INT. CHAPEL, PAXTON MEGACHURCH - DAY

THROUGH CAMERA POV-- Unfocused blurry shapes sharpen into nervous eyes darting beneath a big, sweaty forehead.

The frame erratically zooms out to a talking-head interview medium shot of a 25-year-old, clean-cut TOPHER-- As buttoned-down as his Oxford shirt. Like the knot on his tie, uptight.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Topher Paxton. Charming all-American Youth Pastor. Youngest member of the so-called Perfect Paxton Family. Role model of idyllic Christian morality.

WIDE-- He shifts uncomfortably on an ornate chair, seated on the pulpit in a giant church chapel, a TV CREW sets up around him for a remote interview.

TOPHER (V.O.)
At least that's how the world
wanted to see me. But all that
changed after the big interview.

A GRUFF GAFFER adjusts a fill light. Topher watches him work.

TOPHER (V.O.)
After that day, I was reborn in
the spotlight. My name suddenly
everywhere. My opinion mattered.

Topher fidgets with his tie.

TOPHER
So, uh...it's Mark, was it?

GRUFF GAFFER
We don't have to do names. We're
live in five and I just need to
set the lighting.

Dressed in Sunday best, JOEL & BETH PAXTON (50s) enter with
daughter SARAH (30s) right behind.

TOPHER (V.O.)
And I wasn't even the one on TV.
My whole life, metaphorically, and
that day literally, I was barely
an adequate stand-in for my dad.

Joel takes the interview chair from Topher, who gladly
relinquishes the hot seat.

An AUDIO ENGINEER assist Joel with his mic and earpiece.

TOPHER (V.O.)
Joel Paxton: Pastor and founder of
the Calvary of Christ megachurch.
Lord's shepherd to a flock of over
12,000 congregants. Paxton family
Patriarch. My father. In that
order, exactly. He made sure I
knew it, too.

Topher joins Beth and Sarah off the pulpit nearby.

TOPHER (V.O.)
Don't be fooled by the first class
attire and holier-than-thou
attitude. We cleaned up nice, but
we're totally full of shit.

(MORE)

TOPHER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
We were supposed to be the Lord's
Favored Family, the Perfect
Paxtons, but the reality was
closer to the emotionally-abusive
end of dysfunctional.

Sarah flashes a smug grin at him, excited to tease.

TOPHER (V.O.)
My sister, Sarah, never misses an
opportunity to be sanctimonious
and disparaging.

SARAH
(quietly)
What's with the wet look? Felt
repentant about jerkin' to so much
porn you went and got re-baptized?

Topher frantically mops his face with his sleeves.

TOPHER
Shut up! It's hot under those
frickin' lights.

Despite Topher trying to keep it down, Beth overhears.

BETH
Christopher! Bite your tongue.

TOPHER
Did you not hear what she said?

BETH
Your father's dealing with far too
much for you two to be screwin'
around on his big day. I swear to
the good Lord himself, if you are
not on your best behavior...

SARAH
Yes, ma'am.

TOPHER
Sorry momma.

TOPHER (V.O.)
Mom's default mode was always
high-strung and scolding. With her
hand on a Bible, she'd swear she's
just stressed about Dad's
interview, but I don't remember a
time when she wasn't like this.

Beth hands Topher napkins from her purse.

BETH
Now mop the flop sweat, honey,
you're making me uncomfortable.

A PRODUCTION ASSISTANT hands each of them a headset.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT
You can listen to the interview
with these.
(pointing to a monitor)
And watch it there.

When Topher puts his headphones on, we hear the AUDIO FEED of
PRODUCER talking to Joel through an ear piece.

PRODUCER (O.S.)
...answer as best you can. It's as
easy as that. Just relax. My
crew'll make sure you look and
sound great.

JOEL
If the Lord so wills.

He looks down. Composes himself. Looks up, smiling with the
biggest shit-eating grin.

PRODUCER (O.S.)
Back in ten. Ready title one. In
5...4...3...2...Take title. Ready
camera four. Take, mic and cue.

ON THE MONITOR-- The Rachel Maddow Show graphics dissolve to
RACHEL MADDOW at her desk.

RACHEL MADDOW	PRODUCER (O.S.)
Welcome back. Next we have	Ready boxes.
Joel Paxton, pastor and	Take boxes.
founder of the famed Calvary	
of Christ megachurch.	

ON THE MONITOR-- Joel joins Rachel in boxes on screen.

RACHEL MADDOW	PRODUCER (O.S.)
Reverend Paxton, how's the	Ready mic two.
weather in Southern	
California today? Better	
than the miserable cold we	
have here in New York, I	
hope?	

PRODUCER (O.S.)
Mic and cue.

The FLOOR DIRECTOR points to Joel.

JOEL

The sunshine is as beautiful and radiant as God's grace. Y'know, I founded the church here under divine inspiration, and the Lord surely has provided a wonderful environment in which his message can flourish.

His smile grows cartoonishly big.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Soon as the camera's on he's all "God's grace" and Southern Charm. Don't get me wrong. It's not totally fake. He is Southern. But he left Arkansas thirty years ago, so he's not that Southern.

RACHEL MADDOW

With the President-elect's tax records still being kept from the public, the only information we have is from campaign finance sources.

JOEL

Now hold on. I can see where you're going with this.

RACHEL MADDOW

These records have reflected a number of large donations by shell companies that all seem to tie back to you.

JOEL

I keep hearing about these so-called connections to my financial portfolio but I have yet to see any evidence of direct links to anything from my--

RACHEL MADDOW

(over)

-- Three FOIA requests have turned up investments that indicate substantial and quite possibly illegal--

The audio CUTS OFF in Topher's headset. He taps it aggressively. Turns to Sarah.

TOPHER
I can't hear.

SARAH
I can. If you shut up.

She listens intently and stares at the monitor-- Rachel gesticulates emphatically. Joel's smile fades and face reddens.

JOEL
It doesn't seem fair to paint me
and my congregation in such a
light. I have registered my church
with the IRS and provide financial
statements despite no legal
obligation to do so. We are a
family-run, non-profit, charitable
organization that--

He stops to listen to an unheard interruption.

Topher tries to get the attention of the AUDIO ENGINEER.

TOPHER
Excuse me, my headphones--

Audio Engineer holds up his hand to stop Topher. Points to a
GLOWING RED LIGHT with a piece of tape labeled-- LIVE

JOEL
I have been nothing but
cooperative with the
investigation, despite the
hardship it puts on my church, my
congregation and my family. So far
the IRS has found nothing. I think
it's clear I'm being framed here.
Now I thought we had a rule in
this country: Innocent until
proven guilty. Am I not?

Topher rushes back to Sarah. Tries to pull her headphones off
to listen in. She struggles against him, ultimately pushing him
away, but not before Topher catches a few snippets--

RACHEL MADDOW (O.S.)
...you mention family...
...your son...
...whistleblower...

Joel's face falls, shocked and angry.

JOEL
Impossible! My son would never--

He stops as he catches Topher's guilty face-- Maybe not "never"

JOEL (CONT'D)
This interview is over.

He stands. Struggles to rip the mic from his lapel. Huffing in frustration, his face reddens alarmingly.

JOEL (CONT'D)
I don't need to deal with this.
I'm Joel Paxton, for Christ's--

He stumbles. Grabs his left arm. Collapses into a light, knocking it over, SMASHING the bulb.

Everyone except Topher rushes to Joel on the floor.

TOPHER (V.O.)
It wouldn't have been the first
time he faked a medical emergency.

BETH
Lord, Jesus.

Beth holds Joel, weakened by a very real-looking heart attack.

TOPHER (V.O.)
But never this convincing before.

CAMERA MAN
I'm calling 9-1-1.

Joel glares at Topher. Struggles to talk through the pain.

JOEL
You...you did this.

BETH
(comforting Joel)
Just breathe, my darling. Breathe.

JOEL
(weakly)
Not my s-son...F-Fuckin J-J-Judas.

He slips into unconsciousness. Beth SOBS HYSTERICALLY, hugging his head close. She turns to Topher--

BETH
How could you do this to us?!

SARAH
You killed daddy!

Topher freezes. Sweaty face full of guilt and fear. Speechless.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Those were the last words they ever said to me. They blame me for Dad's death. Maybe they're right, but I argue that though my actions might've induced the cardiac event, the cause was really the last thirty years of rage, red meat, and occasional piles of cocaine. Though to be fair, they didn't know that last part yet.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, LEGAL OFFICE - DAY

Topher sits across a table from Beth, Sarah, and a LAWYER.

TOPHER (V.O.)

After everything came out. They did have one last message for me.

The Lawyer reads a prepared statement--

LAWYER

You have reserved your place down with Satan for tarnishing the reputation of your father, our church, and all followers of Christ. When the Paxtons return to Arkansas to rebuild, you are not welcome. We hereby excommunicate you from our community and our life. You are dead to us.

He looks to Beth for her approval of the statement. She nods.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Not that any of that mattered. I'd already committed the greatest sin of apostasy. I gave up on them long before they gave up on me. Still a bit harsh though, right?

END TEASER

ACT ONE**INT. PODCAST STUDIO, EARWAVES NETWORK - DAY**

Back to the podcast recording--
Hannah pushes a button. The RED LIGHT turns off.

HANNAH

Great story. And I get that it's important to show where you came from, but I thought you didn't want to be associated with your family anymore.

TOPHER

I don't really, but I feel like it provides context for listeners. I want them to know who I was before I found my true calling.

She scoffs derisively.

HANNAH

Right. "Calling".

TOPHER

Anyway, it's my origin story. I'll tell it how I want.

HANNAH

Fair enough...What's next?

She spoons herself noodles from a styrofoam cup of ramen.

TOPHER

I'm thinking of telling my Dream.

HANNAH

Oh yeah. You had a vision, right?

TOPHER

Well, yes. But The Vision was much later. This first thing was more of a cosmic connection through my unconscious awareness. A message. Like a nocturnal premonition.

HANNAH

Ew. I thought only pubescent boys had those.

TOPHER

No. Premonition not emission. Like a prophetic dream.

He looks through several pages of dense text.

HANNAH
Is that your script for it?

TOPHER
Yep.

She holds her hand out to ask for it--

HANNAH
Mind if I...?

TOPHER
Guess not.

He hands the pages over. She flips through them disapprovingly.

HANNAH
No way. This is way too much detail.
(reading)
This whole page is about how a stone wall represents emotional barriers and fears of rejection.
(reading on)
Doesn't seem to get any better. You are aware that dreams are only ever interesting to the dreamer?

TOPHER
I think there might be some important symbolism in--

HANNAH
Nope. No. Hard pass. None of this is relevant. Not until...

She circles the last paragraph of the last page. Hands it over.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
Here.

Topher examines the remains of his script.

TOPHER
But this won't make any sense without the rest of--

HANNAH
Dreams never make any sense. Trust me. I know compelling audio storytelling. Okay?

He SIGHS, relenting.

TOPHER
Fine. But I would like to remind
you I maintain creative control of
this podcast. Okay?

HANNAH
Sure.

TOPHER
We ready?

She clicks a button. RED LIGHT turns on. Thumbs up.

EXT. MYSTIC FOREST, DREAMSCAPE - DAY

Topher walks up to a violet-skinned PURPLE GODDESS in a misty,
mystic forest.

PURPLE GODDESS
What do you seek from the Oracle?

TOPHER
Are you the Oracle?

She does not respond. Her shimmering skin changes. Patterns of
light wave across its surface. Intricate patterns emerge.

TOPHER
Okay...so what's it all about? The
universe, existence, or whatever?

PURPLE GODDESS
All that is is for you. For you
are all that is.

TOPHER
What the fuck does that even mean?

PURPLE GODDESS
Seek the rainbow to find truth.

TOPHER
I don't understand.

He looks around-- No rainbow. No clouds.

TOPHER (CONT'D)
I don't see a rainbow.

PURPLE GODDESS
To see the rainbow, wait for rain.

TOPHER
Again, what the fuck are you--

THUNDER GROWLS in the distance as it SUDDENLY DOWNPOURS.

A RAINBOW appears in the mist. Grows larger. Envelops him.

INT. TOPHER'S ROOM, CLERGY HOUSE - MORNING

Water drips onto Topher's closed eyes. He startles awake. Stares at the ceiling.

Another droplet falls from a leak in the ceiling. He scowls.

INT. BATHROOM, CLERGY HOUSE - MORNING

Topher brushes his teeth slowly. Staring down his reflection-- A few years older and schlubbier. Scruffy and unkempt.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Five years later, life had become nearly unrecognizable. After Dad's various financial and ethical sins were revealed, I lost faith in humanity, Christianity, and religion in general. I went from theologist to atheist, and with Jesus no longer my co-pilot, I became utterly lost. I was slowly spiraling down the drain of depression and irrelevance.

He spits into the sink. Rinses.

TOPHER (V.O.)

The IRS froze my family's fortune during the investigation and seized basically everything.

He wipes his face with a used paper towel folded on the sink.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Considering it was mostly embezzled from Dad's charities and tax-free church donations, I suppose that seems fair.

He places it back on the sink. Frowns at his reflection.

EXT. CLERGY HOUSE, CALVARY OF CHRIST COMPOUND - DAY

Clerical family residence-- Massive compound of a mansion. Less humble parsonage, more Paxton Palace. But shabby and overgrown.

TOPHER (V.O.)
Without my inheritance, I lived
off my small whistleblower reward
money for a time. Wasted too much
of it self-publishing a book that
undersold. Luckily, I was able to
maintain my residence in the
Calvary of Christ clergy house
while the feds took their time
investigating and processing my
dad's many financial crimes.

Topher exits the front door. Locks it behind him.

TOPHER (V.O.)
Sure, I was technically squatting.
But is it my fault they forgot to
change the locks?

He passes a posted NOTICE OF IRS PROPERTY SEIZURE.

TOPHER (V.O.)
The same week I was told my book
printing order had been cut, the
IRS finally sold the property at
auction. I was just weeks from
homelessness and destitution.

He walks down the driveway. Pushes the gate open. Exits.

TOPHER (V.O.)
I'd lost my faith along with
everything else. Admittedly, I was
pretty desperate.

He closes the gate and repositions it to look chain-locked.

EXT. FARMER'S MARKET, SAN BERNARDINO - DAY

A BUSTLING farmer's market.

Hannah aggressively peruses a green leaf bin at an organic
vegetable stand. Dissatisfied with the findings, she HUFFS and
moves on. Bumps into SOMEONE's back.

HANNAH
Oh, sorry.

The Someone turns-- It's Topher!

TOPHER
Hannah!

She recognizes him. Looks disappointed.

HANNAH
Nice to see you again, Topher.

TOPHER
I was hoping I'd bump into you here. I had to get some stuff anyway, and I remember you said you love this market too.

HANNAH
Did I?

INT. WAITING ROOM, EARWAVES NETWORK - FLASHBACK

Topher and Hannah sit in a swanky lounge area outside a conference room.

HANNAH
I love that farmer's market right over by your church. I'm there like every week.

Earwaves PRODUCERS and a NETWORK EXEC enter.

PRODUCER 1
Have you read the pitch deck?
Completely unproducable.

PRODUCER 2
Unoriginal.

PRODUCER 1
Unnecessary.

NETWORK EXEC
Yeah, it's definitely a pass.
(to Hannah)
When does this guy get here?

HANNAH
(Pointing to Topher)
Meet Topher Paxton.

The Producers cringe. Network Exec is unflustered.

NETWORK EXEC
(re: conference room)
Come on in. We're super excited to hear your ideas.

EXT. FARMER'S MARKET, SAN BERNARDINO - DAY

Back to the Market--

TOPHER

Uh huh. Anyway, while I've got your ear for a sec--

HANNAH

I'm sorry we didn't go for your pitch. It's just not our brand.

She turns away. Leafs through a basket of kale.

TOPHER

I just think if we could all sit down again to discuss it, we could maybe figure something out.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I knew I had nothing of interest to a big podcast network like Earwaves. I was grasping at straws. But desperate times, desperate measures and all that.

HANNAH

I tried, Topher. I honestly fought for you. I mean, sure, your ideas were a bit underdeveloped, but I like the concept of you as host. I can see the foundation of an engaging personality in there.

She moves to the next stand over. Topher follows.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I thought my personality was already engaging. I spent all my young adult years captivating thousands of church youth from the pulpit. But back then I was preaching to the converted, metaphorically and literally.

HANNAH

I was the only one at the network who read your book. I actually liked it. My uncle's a Rabbi. My whole family takes religious stuff so seriously, so I've got a lot of that same baggage. I get your whole vibe.

TOPHER

Okay, so you get me. You could help make me a good host.

HANNAH

But, I mean, like, you're way more, I don't know, angry about it? Maybe it's the daddy issues stuff. Could be a Christian thing. I don't know, I guess I don't totally get all of it.

TOPHER

Daddy issues?

HANNAH

Yeah. That's what the whole thing is about, right? Withholding father-god. Existential quest for approval. Classic daddy issues.

TOPHER

It's a bit more complicated than that. But sure.

HANNAH

No, I know. I'm just saying that's your unique perspective, right? So maybe there's a more interesting take on the anti-religious shtick than awkward interviews with mildly-relevant church leaders.

TOPHER

I'm still workshoping podcast ideas, okay? What else can I do?

HANNAH

I don't know. Get more creative. Use your perspective and passion and find a theme or gimmick. Earwaves loves gimmick. We can promote the hell out of a gimmick.

TOPHER

Gimmick? Like what?

HANNAH

Have you heard of one our other podcasts, Semi-Science? This guy interviews pseudo-scientists from the back of a moving semi-truck. It's fun, and a little edgy.

TOPHER
Seems a bit extreme.

HANNAH
It doesn't have to be. It just has to be specific and marketable. If you can figure out something worth saying, maybe I can sell you.

TOPHER (V.O.)
I thought I had a lot worth saying. I sure felt a lot anyway. It seems I just didn't know how to articulate any of it yet.

HANNAH (CONT'D)
Sorry, I'm just being direct and honest. It's my thing. But your thing is this passion you have. I admire that. Now you just have to use it to find something worth saying. Then we can talk.

TOPHER
What if we just pencil in a meeting? I can come back with a more marketable, gimmicky ideas.

HANNAH
You have my phone and email. Next time try the normal methods of business communication. Not stalking me at a farmer's market.

TOPHER
I'm not stalking you...

TOPHER (V.O.)
Not technically. I simply showed up where I knew she'd be.

TOPHER (CONT'D)
...I happened to bump into you at the market. And actually, you bumped into me.

HANNAH
Either way. Let's keep this to official channels, okay?

She walks away. Topher's face falls, deflated.

INT. PODCAST STUDIO, EARWAVES NETWORK - DAY

Back to the future podcast recording--

HANNAH

I think you're editorializing our interaction a little there.

TOPHER

How do you mean?

HANNAH

I mean that's not exactly how it went down. Not that I disagree with the need to exaggerate for effect. It certainly makes for a better story, but I feel like you made me a little cuntier than you had to.

TOPHER

I'm just telling my experience. The truth from my point of view.

HANNAH

So you're saying in your experience, your truth is that I am that cunty?

TOPHER

Y'know, I think it's a good time for a break. My throat's a little scratchy. I'll go get some water.

Hannah's dagger stare follows Topher out of the studio.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. FARMER'S MARKET, SAN BERNARDINO - DAY

Topher approaches a stand with a hand-painted banner--
D.O.O.D. RANCH PRODUCE

TOPHER (V.O.)

I was inches from hopeless,
thinking about my complete lack of
useful ideas or plan for the
future when I walked right into
the cosmic web of fate. I went to
a market stand that I visited
regularly. But nothing about it
was regular. Starting with Her.

RAYNE (late 20s)-- SoCal boho-hippie Millennial in a peasant
blouse and flower crown -- organizes a RAINBOW OF FRUITS AND
VEGETABLES.

TOPHER (V.O.)

She was new and intriguing.
Nothing like the regular guy. I
felt compelled to talk to her.

TOPHER

Excuse me. Where's Leaf?

RAYNE

He's no longer with us. I'm taking
over the market stand now.

TOPHER

Where'd he go?

RAYNE

Leaf's essence has transmigrated
to another plane.

TOPHER

Where is this plane's destination?

RAYNE

His soul ascended to a higher
plane of existence.

TOPHER

Oh, so he...died? Jesus. Sorry to
hear that. He was a nice guy.

RAYNE

You knew him?

TOPHER

I've seen him here. I come around occasionally for your amazing strawberries. One time he gave me a basket of pears for free.

RAYNE

He's a kind spirit.

TOPHER

They went bad of course. It was like ten pears, which was way too many, 'cause I don't really even like pears so they mostly just sat there. Rotting.

RAYNE

They were probably already bad anyway. He often gave away fruit he knew he couldn't sell anymore.

TOPHER

Yeah...Tragic loss though, huh?

RAYNE

Not really. We always grow a lot and with organic farming, the fruit doesn't last that long.

TOPHER

I meant Leaf dying, not the pears.

RAYNE

Oh, he didn't die. He transcended.

TOPHER

Right.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I'd known Leaf was a member of this cooky "Dawn of Our Divinity" commune, but I didn't yet know the extent of their spiritual beliefs.

TOPHER

So you believe in all this culty hippie bullshit too?

RAYNE

Hippie bullshit? Wow. You're so edgy and cool. You must be really smart too.

TOPHER

No, I'm sorry. You're right. It's just...Leaf and I always had our little back-and-forth shit talk, busting spiritual chops. It was kind of our thing.

RAYNE

(realizing)

Oh! You're the Atheist Asshole!

TOPHER

Excuse me?

RAYNE

Yeah, that's what he called you. He fucking hated you.

TOPHER

That can't be right.

RAYNE

He really did. He was just too softhearted to ever say it. Lovely man, but kind of a pussy.

TOPHER

Wow. He just died.

RAYNE

Transcended.

TOPHER

Whatever.

Her face reveals a drop-off in her interest in conversation.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Clearly I still had some resentment issues and quite the ego to work through. But even then I wasn't oblivious to how badly I was blowing it.

He takes a breath.

TOPHER

As accurate of a description as it might be, my name isn't Atheist Asshole. It's Topher.

He holds his hand out-- she shakes it.

RAYNE

Rayne.

He's struck by realization.

TOPHER (V.O.)
It all suddenly hit me like a
lightning bolt.

THUNDER CRASHES, echoing from Topher's memory.

The dream goddess ECHOES-- *"See the rainbow, wait for rain."*

RAYNE
Gonna give me shit for my hippie
name too?

TOPHER
Uh...
(Collecting himself)
No. Wouldn't give you the
satisfaction.

RAYNE
I don't expect you to ever give me
satisfaction.

TOPHER (V.O.)
A little flirty. Glimmer of hope.
Maybe I hadn't blown it quite yet.

TOPHER
So is that like a you and Leaf
thing or does everyone from your
commune have a bohemian name?

RAYNE
Both. After being anointed,
Devotees can take on a new name,
tied to their new cosmic identity.
But I've actually been Rayne since
birth. Well before the formation
of the spiritual community we now
call Dawn of Our Divinity.

TOPHER
What exactly is your divinity?

RAYNE
(re: herself)
Not our divinity.
(re: Topher and herself)
Our Divinity. The source of
everything surges deep within all
of us, even you.

Topher chortles instinctively.

TOPHER

Sorry. Just sounds like you're describing The Force. Y'know, from Star Wars?

RAYNE

The concept of a source energy or collective oversoul has been a shared belief of nearly all cultures for thousands of years. But sure, it's like The Force. Whatever metaphor helps. They point to the same truth: A divine essence connects everyone like branches of a cosmic tree.

TOPHER

And what's the "Dawn" part then?

RAYNE

Our spiritual leader, Aurora, teaches us how to awaken our cosmic identity and build the spiritual strength to reach Our Divinity from within. The more we grow as Devotees and as a community, the closer we become to a global awakening of cosmic existence. That is the true Dawn of Our Divinity.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I struggled with how to feel. On the one hand, my spiritual-bullshit-detector triggered the usual desire to condescendingly assert my superiority, but there was something about the way she described it that made me want to listen. Could she really be the "rain" I was supposed to wait for?

RAYNE

I can see I'm losing you. Here. We have some information.

She grabs a pamphlet from the table nearby. Hands it over.

RAYNE (CONT'D)

The first bit is about our organic produce and the D.O.O.D. Ranch, but you can read about our cult on the last page.

Topher flinches.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I was not prepared for the casual way she just dropped the word "cult" like that. After a childhood spent in a church where my dad was basically worshipped like a charismatic cult leader, I mentally categorized all religions as some form of cult or another, but to hear it worn like a badge of honor was something new.

RAYNE

It's okay. I'm not afraid to call it a cult. The word has no power over me. It doesn't necessarily have to be such a bad thing by definition. It's only what we've made cults out to be that makes them scary. I'm fucking proud to be a cultist.

TOPHER

So it really is a cult? Which flavor? Sex? Drugs? The scary kind with a secret army that ultimately attempts a misguided revolution?

RAYNE

Nah. Those cults are just lonely messed up kids brainwashed by pervy creeps and militant predators. We're more like the ancient mystery cults devoted to the wonders of the universe.

TOPHER

Less new cult, more cult classic?

RAYNE

Go ahead, make fun. But we're actually good people.

TOPHER

I'm sure you think you are.

RAYNE

If you're interested, we're having kind of a party tonight. You should come check it out. We won't pressure you to join or anything. Just come see for yourself. Here--

She grabs a pen and scribbles on Topher's pamphlet.

RAYNE (CONT'D)
That's my number. I'd love it if
you came, but really no pressure.

TOPHER
I dont know. I think I'm good.

RAYNE
Alright. But if we really are a
sex cult, you want to miss out?

TOPHER (V.O.)
I had to wonder if I was the first
desperate man she tried to lure in
with the potential for sex.

RAYNE
Kidding, of course. We can't risk
losing our pool of virgins to
sacrifice.

He breaks a smile.

TOPHER (V.O.)
I couldn't believe I was even
considering her invitation. I
think I knew even then that this
was a life-changing opportunity.

TOPHER
(re: pamphlet)
Thanks for this. Great meeting
you, Rayne. I'll think about the
cult stuff. Really. I, uh...yeah,
bye.

He walks off, lost in thought. She grabs a strawberry basket--

RAYNE
You forgot your strawberries!

EXT. FARMER'S MARKET, SAN BERNARDINO - DAY

Topher catches up to Hannah as she loads up her market
purchases into her car parked on the street.

TOPHER
Hannah! Hold on!

She slams her car door and turns to him.

HANNAH
We talked about the stalking.

TOPHER

I just couldn't get enough of you.

She doesn't laugh.

TOPHER (CONT'D)

Oh we're not joking? Okay. Sorry.
I know it's fast, but I have a
podcast idea.

HANNAH

It's been all of twenty minutes,
Topher. You don't want to mull it
over a little first?

TOPHER

You said my power is in passion,
right? And my passion comes from
deep-seeded resentment against
emotional manipulators disguised
as spiritual leaders.

HANNAH

Sure.

He holds up the D.O.O.D. pamphlet.

TOPHER

Have you heard of a spiritual
community called Dawn of Our
Divinity? Based on the teachings
of a woman named Aurora?

HANNAH

Oh, is it that weird new-age
millennial commune living in the
old summer camp in the mountains?

TOPHER

That's the one...So, I was
thinking, what if I went up there
and, I don't know, recorded them
spouting all their pseudospiritual
bullshit? Expose a manipulative
charismatic cult leader? What if I
joined a cult for a podcast? How's
that for a fucking gimmick?

Off Hannah's face-- "That could actually work."

END ACT TWO

ACT THREE**INT. TOPHER'S ROOM, CLERGY HOUSE - NIGHT**

Topher, in a casual suit, checks himself out in a mirror.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I admit, I might have rushed into things before I fully considered the situation. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The very little I could dig up online about D.O.O.D. was the occasional unexplained disappearances of devotees, including co-founder and retired theoretical physics professor, Dr. Albert Singer.

He unbuttons the top of his shirt. A microphone hidden beneath it becomes visible.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I like to think my mysterious disappearance would be harder to cover up, but I had to be cautious. If I was going to successfully infiltrate them enough to spill the goods on record, I had to fit in. Gain their confidence.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket.

ON SCREEN-- an image search for **hippie commune outfit man**

He scrolls through images of stereotypical 70s hippies, bald monks in bright robes, and hairy men in peasant shirts.

INT. WARDROBE ROOM, PAXTON MEGACHURCH - NIGHT

Topher picks through the costumes set aside for the Christmas Nativity scenes.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Rayne told me the party that she invited me to was their Bacchanal Night. Once a month, they spend a night indulging in whatever sensual, physical, and earthly pleasures they want, as a way to symbolically break their negative cycles for the holy Day of Devotion the day after.

He considers shepherd costumes. Tosses aside a crook and cloak.

TOPHER (V.O.)
 I know some people call any particularly drunken party a "bacchanal", but she did specifically bring up ancient cults, and from what I learned in history class, those guys were all about bloodletting and sacrifices.

INT. TOPHER'S ROOM, CLERGY HOUSE - NIGHT

Back to the mirror-- He's satisfied with his new shepherd tunic, goucho-like pants, and a leather waist-bag.

TOPHER (V.O.)
 I couldn't risk letting on about my intentions, or make myself a target for any retribution.

He carefully hides an audio recorder in a waist-bag pocket.

TOPHER(V.O.)
 ...Or ritual sacrifice.

EXT. FRONT GATE, CAMP NEWAYGEE - NIGHT

Small cabins and luscious trees dot the scenic mountainside.

A sign on the front gate--

Camp Newaygee
home of
Dawn of Our Divinity

A Prius with LYFT stickers pulls up. Topher climbs out.

EXT. FOOTPATH, CAMP NEWAYGEE - NIGHT

Rayne leads Topher down a well-trodden path through a sprawling and lightly-wooded campground.

RAYNE
 Back in the eighties, some of the old-timers bought this rundown summer camp and turned it into a commune. Then about ten years ago, Aurora came and starting sharing her wisdom and put together what has become the spiritual community known as Dawn of Our Divinity.

An AMOROUS COUPLE stop making out against a tree to GIGGLE at Topher's outfit as he passes.

TOPHER (V.O.)
I don't blame them. I looked
ridiculous.

He really does. Nearly everyone else is dressed in normal,
casual attire.

TOPHER
So this camp is named New-age-y?

RAYNE
Obviously a common mistake. But
it's pronounced nuh-WAY-ghee. It
means 'land of white clouds' in
the native language of this area.

They catch up to a diverse trio of twenty-somethings-- MILES,
DEV, and SOFIYA -- as they pause on the path to light a joint.

RAYNE
Hey! What's up Yurties? Headed
down to the fire circle?

MILES
Yeah.

SOFIYA
(in a quiet, creepy voice)
Join us.

Topher reels back, horrified.

Sofiya exhales the lungful of smoke she was holding in.

SOFIYA (CONT'D)
(normal voice)
Sorry. Do you two want to join us?

RAYNE
Please.

They walk on together, passing the joint around as they talk.

RAYNE
This is Topher, by the way.
(to Topher)
This is Miles, Dev, and Sofiya.
They're our latest Initiates.

They wave and nod at each other as they're introduced.

Sofiya offers Topher the joint. He hesitates, unsure.

SOFIYA

Don't worry. It's just weed.

He accepts. Takes a hit. Relishes it. Then remembers--

TOPHER

I'm sorry, did she call you
"Yurties"?

MILES

Yea they call us that 'cause we
live in yurts over in the woods.

TOPHER

You live in a tent? Super cool.

DEV

Until we complete our initiation
and become full Devotees, we don't
get a cabin or permanent dwelling.

They pass a DRUM CIRCLE really vibing outside a rusted out
school bus converted into an immobile motor home.

RAYNE

If you want to join, you'd have to
be a Yurty too, at first.

TOPHER

We'll see. I don't know if I'm
really ready for commune camp.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Truth was, I wasn't in a position
to say no to free room and board.
But still, there was something
unsettling about the place.

They reach the edge of a clearing. In the center, DEVOTEES
dance and hang out in a circle surrounding a fire pit.

TOPHER

For now I'm just curious. I have a
lot of questions. Like, uh...

At the far edge of the clearing, shadows dance from flickering
firelight. Suddenly ANOTHER TOPHER with a glowing crystal
necklace POPS in and out of existence for a split second.

TOPHER (CONT'D)

What the fuck?!

They follow his gaze. The apparition is gone, but in that direction a tower stands decorated with trinkets and flowers.

MILES

Oh. That's The Watchtower Shrine.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I only saw it for an instant, but whoever or whatever it was, had looked as real as anyone else at that party. The only explanations I could rationalize were hallucinations or insanity, so I chose neither. I ignored it.

TOPHER

(befuddled)

Um...And what, uh, what's that?

DEV

Aurora had her first theophany on such a watchtower, on an island in the Bengal Sea.

TOPHER

Theophany?

DEV

Vision of the divine. She glimpsed the fullness of Our Divinity.

MILES

But our watchtower is just a recreation. Aurora has secret--

RAYNE

(correcting)

Sacred. It's a sacred place. For sacred rituals.

MILES

Disciples only though. Initiates and Devotees aren't allowed.

RAYNE

But if you maintain your devotion to Aurora, someday you might.

SOFIYA

Plus, I think it looks dope as hell. All flowery and shit.

RAYNE

Fully-initiated Devotees mostly have their run of camp. But the Watchtower is off-limits to anyone except Aurora and her most trusted followers, like me. We're her Disciples.

TOPHER

What makes Disciples so special?

RAYNE

Just loyalty. I've been a follower of Aurora since the beginning.

A big, white dog bounds up to offer Topher canine affection.

An aging hippie-- WILLOW (60s) -- runs up behind, with flowing long white hair and a personality as bright as her obnoxious floral-print dress.

WILLOW

Sorry. That's my husband, Winter. He loves meeting new people.

MILES

Den Ma!

DEV/SOFIYA

(joining in unison)

Den Maaa!

WILLOW

They call me the Den Mother, but you don't have to. Name's Willow. I'm kinda the Yurties' guide through their initiation phase.

TOPHER

Topher.

She embraces him firmly against his resistance.

WILLOW

And I'm a hugger.

He relents. Closes his eyes. It's actually quite comforting.

WILLOW (CONT'D)

Welcome, Topher.

The dog licks his hand. His eyes snap open.

TOPHER

Did you say "husband"?

WILLOW

Yes. He was in his human form when I married him. His physical body failed him and now his soul is inhabiting this dog's body.

DEV

Reincarnation into animals isn't an explicit teaching of Aurora.

RAYNE

But our belief system is open to personal interpretations.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I personally interpret a woman married to a dog to be pretty fucking weird. But that's me.

WILLOW

I know I sound like a space cadet, but I've felt him in this dog.

RAYNE

Many are the ways to Our Divinity.

TOPHER

Right, Divinity...

TOPHER (V.O.)

I was so ready to write them off. As people, they were clearly unhinged. And yet...as podcast material, they were a goldmine.

He adjusts his waist bag so the hidden microphone can pick up the conversation better.

TOPHER (CONT'D)

So what exactly do you believe will go down when this Dawn of Our Divinity actually happens?

WILLOW

The Age of Aquarius.

DEV

Nirvana. But like the real Nirvana, not the band.

MILES

Heaven on Earth. The return of a natural, eternal paradise.

SOFIYA

I always imagine its
like...everyone experiencing
endless orgasms all together.

TOPHER

I like the sound of that. How do
we make that happen?

DEV

The Dawn of Our Divinity is
expediated by our interconnected
spiritual strength.

SOFIYA

The more we spread Aurora's
teaching, the stronger we become
as a community.

WILLOW

Devotees practiced in Aurora's
methods build up the cosmic bridge
through ourselves to Our Divinity.

RAYNE

As we strengthen our communal
connection, we bring Our Divinity
closer to a full awakening.

MILES

That's what we'll be doing for Day
of Devotion tomorrow.

TOPHER

Sure. And how would you describe a
typical Day of Devotion?

DEV

We welcome the sun with a dawn tea
ceremony, then we spend the
remainder of the day meditating.

SOFIYA

Or doing hot yoga.

MILES

I practice intentional stillness.
Send out love to my ancestors.

WILLOW

I search within my heart to reach
Our Divinity. To commune with it.

RAYNE

Tomorrow. Everything will be made
clear during Day of Devotion.
Tonight, relax. Have fun.

WILLOW

Enjoy Bacchanal!

TOPHER

Ok. Just a couple more questions.
About Dr. Singer, and Leaf?

They freeze to avoid taking the conversation in this direction.

TOPHER (V.O.)

They weren't ready to talk about
transcendence, but clearly I
struck a nerve. They were
definitely hiding something.

MILES

Fire dancing should start soon.

DEV

You don't want to miss it. It's
mesmerizing.

SOFIYA

One time her hair caught on fire.
It was awesome!

They join a larger semicircle to watch a swirling FIRE DANCER.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I suddenly had more questions than
I had when the night started.
What was really going on? What
were they hiding?

The flickering shadows dance on the watchtower.

TOPHER (V.O.)

What the fuck did I see over
there? How was it me but not me?
Was it just the shadows? The weed?
Or was I just good-old-fashioned
losing it?

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR**EXT. THE YURTS, CAMP NEWAYGEE - PREDAWN**

Willow approaches a circle of yurts. DANCING LIGHT from her swaying lantern cast eerie shadows on the tent walls.

TOPHER (V.O.)

The rest of the night was a blur.
It was mostly uneventful and
uninformative. No one was lit on
fire, for entertainment or
sacrificial reasons. The only
thing memorable or interesting was
a brief, shared moment with Rayne.

EXT. GATHERING CIRCLE, CAMP NEWAYGEE - FLASHBACK

The night before by the fire--

Rayne laughs. Brushes Topher's arm. They lock eyes. There might really be something between them.

RAYNE

I can see myself falling in love
with you.

TOPHER (V.O.)

Okay, so she didn't that out loud.
But it was definitely in her eyes.

INT. TOPHER'S YURT, CAMP NEWAYGEE - PREDAWN

TSHK-TSHK -- Willow pulls the chain on an overhead bulb.

Darkness becomes light. A pile of blankets on a bunk GROANS.

WILLOW

Time to prepare for dawn.

TOPHER

(mumbling)
No thank you.

WILLOW

Sorry dear. If you're at the camp
on Day of Devotion, you gotta go.

She places a bundle of folded white fabric on the other bunk.

WILLOW
Put this on and I'll be back in a
bit to take you to the temple.

INCOMPREHENSIBLE MUFFLED MUMBLING from below the blankets.

WILLOW (CONT'D)
(aggressively sing-song)
I'm. Not. Asking.

She rips off his covers. Exposed, Topher squints and WHIMPERS.

EXT. TEMPLE, CAMP NEWAYGEE - PREDAWN

A PAN FLUTE CHOIR welcomes Devotees dressed in colored smocks as they ascend stone steps up a hill to a geodesic temple.

TOPHER (V.O.)
I tried to tell myself it was no
different than going to church.
Just swap out crosses and suits
for matching color-coded pajamas.

INT. TEA CEREMONY ROOM, TEMPLE - PREDAWN

A large room decorated with mandala tapestries and floral adornments. In the center, a gigantic tea urn embellished with ornate dispensing pipes sits atop a stepped pyramid next to a small, person-sized platform.

TOPHER (V.O.)
A different set of symbols than I
was used to, but their temple had
the same sense of reverent welcome
that I missed from our church.

Six DISCIPLES in blue smocks, sitting on low cushions, form an inner circle surrounding the pyramid. Dozens of DEVOTEES in surrounding circles finish the rainbow, green through red.

Topher sits with the Initiates in the outermost circle.

TOPHER (V.O.)
It felt good to participate in a
religious gathering again.
Something familiar. If only the
familiarity had ended there.

TOPHER
Why am I the only one wearing
white?

MILES
You're not. Kids wear white too.

TOPHER
Kids?

He points to a sprinkling of young CHILDREN in the room.

TOPHER (V.O.)
I don't know why it hadn't
occurred to me until then that
there would be children. I felt a
familiar resentment swelling.
These poor kids with their young
and impressionable minds.

Miles shows off his clearly still new red smock.

MILES
You earn your red after
initiation.

DEV
You want to work your way up to
blue like the Disciples up there.

TOPHER
Oh, so like karate belts?

SOFIYA
Except there's no equivalent of
black belt. Believe me, I asked.

Devotees shuffle to their feet and SNAP THEIR FINGERS to
welcome AURORA (40s, ethnically-ambiguous dark olive skin).
In shimmering violet dress robes, she enters from a back door.
Climbs onto the pyramid platform.

In an vaguely-exotic-yet-unplaceable South Asian accent--

AURORA
Please be seated.

Everyone sits.

AURORA (CONT'D)
I am happy to see all of your
smiling faces this morning. We are
here to welcome the sun together,
and it is nearly dawn. Let us not
waste the dwindling time.

She opens a small velvet box and retrieves a tiny gold teacup.

AURORA (CONT'D)
 Please prepare your essential
 vessels. My Disciples will be
 around to pour sacramental tea.

Everyone besides Topher suddenly has a cup, mug, or bowl.

Disciples fill teapots from the urn. Dispense to others.

TOPHER
 I don't have a cup or anything.

MILES
 Don't worry. You shouldn't yet.

DEV
 Choosing your essential vessel is
 a sacred rite of passage.

MILES
 But choose wisely when you get the
 chance. You have to use it for
 these ceremonies for the rest of
 your time here.

Topher follows Miles's gaze to Sofiya's mug, shaped like a dead
 unicorn head and the words **"I ♥ Unicorn Blood"**

SOFIYA
 What? I fucking love my vessel.

With her filled teacup, Aurora sits on the platform.

AURORA
 As always, I urge you to use this
 ritual as a reminder that our
 bodies are vessels filled by
 divine essence. Just as the tea
 flows from this singular source,
 the essence inhabiting our bodies
 flows from the essential oneness
 of Our Divinity.

She clocks the Disciples continuing to dispense tea.

AURORA (CONT'D)
 As we wait for all to partake, I
 invite the children up.

CHILDREN run up. Hold hands in a circle around the pyramid.

AURORA (CONT'D)
 How about a little 'Good Morning
 Sun' to welcome the dawn?

The children sing, uneven at first, and never quite in unison--

CHILDREN
(singing)
*Good morning sun.
Day of Devotion has begun.*

TOPHER (V.O.)
I couldn't help but feel
triggered. Music is a known
technique for indoctrination of
children at a young age.

INT. FAMILY ROOM, CLERGY HOUSE - FLASHBACK

MIDDLE-AGED JOEL plays piano. YOUNG TOPHER & SARAH sing along.

YOUNG TOPHER & SARAH
(singing)
*Jesus loves me, this I know.
For the Bible tells me so.*

The PIANO STOPS.

MIDDLE-AGED JOEL
(shouting)
Awful! Worst than before. You
think Jesus still gonna love you
if y'all can't get this right?
Again!

He WHALES on the keys-- JE. SUS. LOVES. ME...

INT. TEA CEREMONY ROOM, TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

Topher seethes.

CHILDREN
(singing)
*Welcome, welcome, rising dawn.
Goodbye darkness, night is gone.*

TOPHER
(shouting)
Stop!

The SINGING STOPS.

AURORA
Excuse me?

Shocked Devotees watch Topher approach the pyramid.

TOPHER
Your emotional manipulation and
indoctrination rituals might fool
these weak--

Someone shouts from the other side of the room--

HARD OF HEARING (O.S.)
(shouting)
We can't hear you!

Topher climbs the pyramid. Grabs the urn for leverage.

Pipes shift and CREAK-- it could burst any second!

TOPHER
(loudly)
Everything this woman says is a
meaningless platitude or made-up
nonsense!

Rayne walks up.

RAYNE
Can you get down please?

TOPHER
If you wanna let yourselves be
fooled by a charismatic leader
spouting pseudo-spiritualist
bullshit, fine. Go ahead. Just
leave these poor kids out of
whatever crazy-flavored
indoctrination this all is.

CREAK -- Every move he makes shifts the urn dangerously.

RAYNE
Are you insane? Get down! Now!

TOPHER
I'm the only sane one here!
Someone has to protect them.

RAYNE
Protect them from what? You're
endangering them right now!

TOPHER
I'm--

RAYNE
That thing's full of scalding hot
tea that'll cover this whole area!

Willow rounds up the children and moves them a safe distance.

RAYNE

I'm sorry Aurora. I didn't know he was going to be like this.

TOPHER

It's about time someone is.

AURORA

You think you're the first to stand up to me?

TOPHER

I don't know. Maybe?

AURORA

I'm a cult leader in the 21st century. I've had journalists, activists, police, FBI, child protective services, even zoning and safety people come in here. I have nothing to hide and these people have nothing to fear.

He reads the room. No one's on his side.

TOPHER (V.O.)

I hope the fact that I'm telling this part of the story, where I certainly look like the crazy one, demonstrates how I won't be totally avoiding truth to make myself look better.

TOPHER

Fuck. Fine.

(climbing down)

I'm still onto you though. I will get this whole place shut down. Somehow.

As he steps foot back on solid ground. Rayne grabs his arm and yanks him out of the temple.

EXT. THE TEMPLE, CAMP NEWAYGEE - PREDAWN

Topher and Rayne spill out of the temple, still bickering.

RAYNE

I can't believe you just did that! What the hell is wrong with you?

TOPHER

Whats wrong with me? What's wrong with all of you? Those kids will be scarred for life.

RAYNE

Yeah, from you!

TOPHER

Any physical damage I could accidentally have caused isn't as enduring and insipid as the brainwashing you're all doing.

RAYNE

You've made your point. I don't know what your problem is with what we teach our children or how we live, but this is clearly about something else.

TOPHER

It's about everything. There's no scientific evidence for any religious or spiritual bullshit. Cult leaders, church leaders, they're all the same. It's the same lies with different words. If you buy into any of this, you're an idiot, if you actively preach and teach this to naive and innocent children and people you're crazy, evil, or both.

RAYNE

I get it. You were sold a bill of goods by hypocritical, emotionally manipulative parents, and now you think all religion is evil and instilling these beliefs in our children is abuse. But we are not your father. We're not hurting anyone. Or stealing people's money, or filling them with shame and guilt about living a proper, moral life in the eyes of some lifeguard-god.

TOPHER

You don't know me.

RAYNE

You may think I'm some air-headed hippie chick, but I know to google a guy before bringing him back to my commune.

TOPHER

What about Dr Singer's disappearance? What happened to Leaf? You're hiding something incredibly fucked up. I know it.

RAYNE

They didn't just die or disappear. They attained a level of inner strength that allowed them to join and be one with Our Divinity.

TOPHER

So they just gave up living?? People don't just meditate into nothingness. Something happens to their bodies, Rayne.

RAYNE

We all die. Leaf was dying. But he was strong enough and lucky enough to transcend to the cosmic plane, to outlive his body in a way that you can't without our training. It's an end of life goal to desire, not something to fear.

TOPHER

It's lies though. You don't have the answers. No one does.

RAYNE

You think because you don't have the answer, we can't possibly. But we're good people. We have a simple and happy way of life that we want to share. We have a way to find joy in reaching for divinity. That's an answer enough for me.

(done convincing him)

Whatever. If you don't want any part of this, you can leave.

TOPHER

Gladly! I'm calling a ride.

He checks his phone.

TOPHER (CONT'D)
Except there's no cell service! Of course not. In the middle of the fucking woods, miles from town.

RAYNE
We're not luddites, we have wifi. We just turn it off for the day.

TOPHER
How the fuck am I supposed to leave then? I'm a hostage here!

RAYNE
The road's right there! Feel free to start walking.

AURORA (O.S.)
Not just yet. There is much to do, and for you to learn, before dawn.

They turn to see Aurora has followed them outside.

TOPHER
No offense lady, but I think you're fucking insane.

RAYNE
How is that not offensive?

AURORA
(to Rayne)
Go on back with the others and continue with the sacraments. I will be back to join you soon.

Rayne returns to the temple.

AURORA (CONT'D)
Come with me. I have a landline in my lodge you can use.

She walks off. Beckons him to follow.

TOPHER (V.O.)
This was it. My big "fishers of men" moment. Too bad I was really just trying to get the fuck away from the crazy, not follow it.

He eyes the dark road away from camp, tempted. Reluctantly follows Aurora.

END ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE**INT. DEN, AURORA'S LODGE - PREDAWN**

Aurora leads Topher into a den decorated like a medium's study.

She sits at a desk in a corner of the room with a shelf of crystals, scriptures, magic books, and tarot cards.

TOPHER

(re: the decor)

Are you shitting me with all this?

AURORA

Oh, I don't believe any of this stuff either. I meet people where they're at and use the tools they're comfortable with to guide them to where they need to be.

She motions for him to sit.

AURORA (CONT'D)

I know why you're really here.

TOPHER

I was just here for the party.

AURORA

I also know why you think you're here.

TOPHER

Can you just cut the doublespeak and mind games?

AURORA

You think you're here to gather evidence against me and my followers. Probably for some anti-cult exposé?

TOPHER

Not even close.

AURORA

Then why are you recording?

A tip of the audio recorder visibly pokes out of its pocket.

TOPHER

For posterity.

She sets a book on the table--

"My Father Who Ain't in Heaven" by Topher Paxton

AURORA

I know who you are.

TOPHER

Jokes on you. I didn't even write that. I had a ghostwriter.

AURORA

It is still your life. Your story.

She grabs a deck of tarot cards off the shelf.

TOPHER

Oh I don't do coocoo-voodoo cards.

AURORA

Why not?

TOPHER

I don't believe in psychics or astrology. Nor for that matter leprechauns, fairies, or Santa.

AURORA

Neither do I. I just like the metaphor. Everyone needs a different way in, and this feels like a good one for you.

TOPHER

Didn't you say you had a phone for me to use?

She lays down a card.

AURORA

The king of cups in the forward position indicates an obsession and strong emotional connections with a father figure.

TOPHER

Obvious.

AURORA

(laying the next card)

The Tower here represents transformation. You must accept the bracing presence of the future bursting in on the present.

TOPHER

What the fuck does that mean?

AURORA

Just...get ready for an inevitable life-changing event.

(laying the next card)

The sun card advises confidence in your natural divinity. The sun sheds light on truth. Throw off any cultural conditioning that keeps you from being authentic with yourself.

TOPHER

Authentic with myself? I'm not the one pretending to be a guru. No way that's even your real accent.

She considers. Then, in a natural Midwest American accent--

AURORA

Okay so the accent is fake. But I'm not pretending.

TOPHER

I fucking knew it! Why are you lying to these people?

AURORA

It's not lying. I never lie, I just...

(mystic voice)

...talk like a mystic, and people think what they think.

TOPHER

That's still deceptive.

AURORA

Honestly, nobody really listened to me until I started using the voice. From a woman like me they just ignore it.

(mystic voice)

But from Aurora the Priestess, they heed the message.

TOPHER

That's fucked up. I don't know. You gotta lose the voice though.

She considers.

AURORA
I guess I can phase it out.

TOPHER
What's the big secret message that all these games are about?

AURORA
If you really want to know more, I can initiate you, and then I can reveal the sacred mysteries.

TOPHER
Why can't you just tell me? Why the bullshit ritual?

AURORA
Proves your commitment. And trust.

TOPHER
What do we have to do?

INT. DEN, AURORA'S LODGE - MINUTES LATER

Aurora drips oil in patterns on Topher's forehead.

TOPHER
I got a little in my mouth. Is that safe?

AURORA
It's consecrated oil with sacred herbs and spices. Safe to eat, and kinda delicious.

TOPHER
What's your end goal here? What do you even want from me?

AURORA
Maybe you didn't write the book. But the message is clearly yours. You hate organized religion and spiritual leaders. You're the last person anyone would think could be manipulated by a cult leader. If you show them my truth, people might actually believe it.

TOPHER
Can't you spread your own message?

AURORA

You're a natural preacher. A great youth pastor before your apostasy.

She stands back, satisfied with the initiation.

AURORA (CONT'D)

To use an analogy I'm sure you're familiar with, I need an Aaron to my Moses. You'd be my mouthpiece.

TOPHER

There is absolutely no fucking way I'd be your mouthpiece.

AURORA

Your resistance will fade when you see the truth.

She speaks directly and purposefully into the audio recorder.

AURORA (CONT'D)

My name is Aurora. I was born with a different name, that I will not give yet. I studied parapsychology & ethnobotany at Harvard. While there, I attended a lecture at MIT nearby of Dr. Albert Singer on a theoretical method of capturing data from multi-dimensional particles and storing it in crystallized structures.

She points to her crystal display like a Price is Right model.

AURORA

Turns out he was right. But at the time he was laughed out of academia, of course. He left MIT in semi-retirement and came here to Camp Newaygee to live on the commune, and continued to work on his theory in secret.

She moves a prominent crystal from the shelf to the table.

AURORA (CONT'D)

When I was finishing my thesis on entheogenic plants and studying ancient religious texts, I discovered recipes for soma, a drug that allowed Indo-Europeans to "commune with the gods."

She places the small vial of consecrated oil on the desk.

AURORA (CONT'D)

I made some, following a 5,000 year-old recipe. It really works. It allows the emergent field from our cohesive, neurochemical consciousness to interact with multi-dimensional, cosmic particles.

(Re: the crystal and vial)

Together, these two tools grant us power over our spiritual destiny. They can show you ultimate truth.

TOPHER

Bullshit.

He grimaces, suddenly feeling off.

AURORA

You feeling okay? I know it was wrong, but the initiation oil has some very mild psychoactive components of soma. You'll be totally fine though. I promise.

Concern washes over his face.

TOPHER

You fucking dosed me?! Sacred herbs and spices my ass.

AURORA

Sorry. I knew it was the only way to show you. It's just easier to experience than explain.

TOPHER (V.O.)

She was right. The complexity of my experience remains ineffable. My memories of traversing the cosmic plane could be written off by skeptics as simply psychedelic hallucinations. Or that I was just "tripping balls." Either way though, one thing's for certain: My worldview changed forever.

His nervous eyes, pupils dilated, dart around beneath a sweaty forehead. His face blurs to unfocused shapes and colors.

END OF EPISODE