

THE OPENING OF PURGATORY – Pilot Screenplay

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CHAPTER 1 — WHEN THE TRUMPETS SOUND

I was seven years old the first time I stood for God, and even then, I knew standing was dangerous. Standing makes you visible. Standing invites judgment. Standing suggests belief before understanding. Church was already standing before I was.

The building had weight to it—not physical, but accumulated. Like every prayer ever spoken there had soaked into the wood and refused to evaporate. The pews were polished thin where hands had gripped them too tightly. The floor creaked under movement like it remembered who walked where. Even the air felt used, recycled through decades of breath, sweat, perfume, and whispered repentance.

I sat beside my grandmother—my Gma—my legs too short to reach the floor unless I leaned forward. When I leaned back, my shoes hovered just above the wood, and I learned early how to hold my body still so I wouldn't draw attention. Her purse rested against her side like an extension of her hip. Inside it were peppermints, tissues, folded money, and authority. The kind of authority that didn't need to raise its voice.

Her Bible lay heavy across her lap.

It wasn't decorative. It was worn. Corners bent. Pages softened by touch. Notes filled the margins, not as explanations, but reminders—things she'd learned the hard way and didn't want to forget again. That Bible had survived loss. It had weight because it had been carried.

I watched everything.

Children don't listen the way adults do. We don't filter. We absorb. We notice what changes when the rules stop being enforced.

Bishop Jordan stood at the pulpit.

Tall. Calm. Controlled.

He didn't shout to command attention. He already had it. His voice moved with the confidence of someone who expected agreement before he spoke. He preached like a man explaining a system he understood better than anyone else in the room.

He never looked at anyone directly.

That mattered.

He spoke over us, not to us, like the congregation was a single organism instead of hundreds of individual lives.

That morning, the roof was leaking.

Not dramatically. Just enough to remind you that the building was old and the world didn't pause for worship. A metal pan sat near the third pew on the left, catching water in a steady rhythm.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The sound cut through the music if you listened for it. I did.

The choir finished their song. The organ lingered, humming low, vibrating through the floor. Bishop Jordan wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief, folded it carefully, and placed it on the pulpit like even sweat required order.

"At this time," he said, leaning slightly into the microphone, "we will have our A and P selection."

My Gma squeezed my knee.

Not hard. Just enough.

That was the signal.

I stood.

Standing felt like crossing a line I didn't know existed until I crossed it. My legs locked. My chest tightened. The song—When the Trumpets Sound—began slow, then swelled. I didn't know what

trumpets really sounded like, not heaven trumpets, not judgment trumpets. But I imagined them loud enough to shake the floor, loud enough to erase hesitation.

Hands went up across the sanctuary. Eyes closed. Mouths opened.

That's when the first saint ran.

At first, she only trembled. Hands shaking. Shoulders rolling like something inside her was trying to escape. A sound came out of her throat—not a word, not a scream. Something uncontained.

Then she ran.

Her shoes slapped against the floor as she moved down the aisle, arms flailing, voice rising into sounds I didn't recognize. The music grew louder, chasing her movement like it needed her to justify itself.

People shouted encouragement.

"Thank you, Jesus!" "Have your way!" "Let Him use you!"

I stayed standing.

My heart pounded, but I couldn't tell if it was fear or excitement. At that age, they feel identical—pressure, heat, awareness. The saint circled the pulpit, slowed, and collapsed into Bishop Jordan's open arms. He caught her like he'd been waiting.

Then the second one fell.

She didn't run.

She stood straight up, stiff, eyes rolling back until there was nothing human left in them. For a split second, the room froze. Then she tipped backward like someone had pushed her.

She hit the floor hard.

The sound cut through everything.

She missed the pew behind her by inches. If she'd fallen differently, she would've cracked her skull open. I heard my Gma gasp.

For half a second, silence.

Then Bishop Jordan raised his hands.

"Thank you, Lord," he said calmly.

The music resumed. Louder. Someone rushed to cover the woman with a cloth. Another fanned her face. The congregation shouted praise like nothing had gone wrong.

I stood there, seven years old, asking myself two questions I didn't have language for yet.

Is this God?

And if it is— why does it scare me?

When the song ended, everyone sat.

I sat slowly, legs aching, arms heavy. The rest of the service blurred—announcements, reminders about the leaking roof, jokes about buckets and faith. People laughed.

The pan kept dripping.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

When service ended, the sanctuary transformed.

The same people who had shouted and cried were now laughing, talking about dinner plans. Someone hugged the woman who'd run. Someone joked with the woman who'd fallen, now sipping water like she'd finished exercising.

The switch happened too fast.

As we walked down the aisle, I looked at the spot where the woman had fallen.

Nothing marked it.

No crack. No stain. No memory.

Outside, the sun was bright—almost offensive in how normal it was. Children ran. Adults leaned against cars, voices lighter.

"How you doing, Sister?" "Blessed and highly favored." "You know the Lord showed up today."

I nodded when spoken to. Smiled when nudged.

But something inside me had shifted.

Like a system had misfired.

I didn't know the word purgatory then. I didn't know about heaven's mechanics or alignment or thresholds.

All I knew was this:

I stood when the trumpets sounded, and nothing sounded the way it was supposed to.

And without realizing it, I had stepped into the space between belief and understanding—the place where things look holy until you look long enough to see how they work.

That was the opening.

And I was only seven years old.

CHAPTER 2 — THE SPIRIT THAT RUNS

The first thing I learned after that Sunday was that people will forgive anything if you call it God.

They'll forgive screaming. They'll forgive falling. They'll forgive chaos wearing a choir robe. They'll forgive fear, as long as it's baptized in language.

Nobody said the word performance, but I saw the shape of it.

It started with timing.

In the weeks that followed, I learned the service had rhythms that had nothing to do with heaven and everything to do with the room. The organist played not just notes but pressure—building tension, releasing it, building again. The choir director didn't simply lead songs; she managed expectation.

Bishop Jordan didn't preach; he steered.

And the saints who ran—most of them—ran at predictable moments.

When the music swelled. When the room warmed. When attention needed a target.

It wasn't that I thought they were lying. Not exactly.

A lie is clean. Intentional. Efficient.

This was messier.

This was people discovering that the congregation rewarded certain kinds of emotion. That when you moved the "right" way, you were treated as evidence. When you moved the "wrong" way, you were corrected without anyone admitting that's what they were doing.

I was seven, then eight, and by eight I understood this much:

You could be sincere and still be shaped by the audience.

Adults like to pretend children don't know that. Adults pretend children don't understand the mechanics because children don't have the vocabulary. But children have instinct. We read rooms the way animals read weather.

I started watching before things happened.

I watched shoulders. I watched hands. I watched breathing.

I learned the early signs of a runner.

A person who's about to run doesn't look like someone being overtaken by holiness. They look like someone choosing a door.

They glance around first.

Not obviously. Not guilty. Just... checking. Making sure the moment is ready. Making sure there's space. Making sure they won't be alone in it.

The Spirit, in my mind, shouldn't need clearance.

But Sunday after Sunday, I watched people wait until the room gave them permission.

Once, the music started and nobody ran. The organ held a long note that sounded like begging. The choir rocked harder, voices rising, and Bishop Jordan's eyes stayed closed, face angled upward like he was waiting for a signal.

The room held its breath.

I didn't know they were holding it until the release came.

A woman stood up near the back.

Not shaking yet—just standing. Hands rising slow like a surrender. Then the tremble came. The sound. The tears. And then she ran. The sanctuary exhaled like a body no longer afraid. Relief rushed through the room and people shouted praise like they were thanking God for showing up—when it felt more like they were thanking her for saving the service. That scared me. Not because running was scary. Because the room needed it. Because the room depended on it. Because the service looked incomplete until someone became proof.

I glanced at my Gma. She was smiling, eyes closed, rocking gently. Her faith was real—I never doubted that. That was part of the confusion. If she believed and the others believed and God was real, then why did it feel like something else was in the room with Him? Something practiced. Something that fed on attention the way fire feeds on oxygen. After church, I asked her, “Gma?” “Yes, baby.” “Why do people run?” She chuckled softly. “Because the Spirit gets on ‘em.”

I thought about it. “Does the Spirit ever get on you?” She smiled wider. “All the time.” “But you don’t run.” She paused. It was small, almost invisible, but I felt it. Like a hinge catching. “Everybody don’t worship the same,” she said. That was true. It was also a door closed gently in my face.