

Devotion

"Cult Classic"  
(Pilot)

written by

JB June

[jaysonbryanjune@gmail.com](mailto:jaysonbryanjune@gmail.com)

COLD OPEN

UNFOCUSED SHAPES and COLORFUL BLURS sharpen into a MAN'S FACE.  
NERVOUS EYES dart around beneath a BIG SWEATY FOREHEAD.

Erratically reframe into a medium shot set for a TV interview of the sweaty man, TOPHER (25) -- as buttoned-down as his Oxford shirt, and like the knot on his tie, uptight.

**INT. CHAPEL, PAXTON MEGACHURCH - DAY**

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

A surly-looking GRUFF GRIP adjusts a fill light. Topher eyes him and fidgets with his tie.

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

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

He presses a button on his walkie headset cable--

GRUFF GRIP  
(into walkie mic)  
Can I get house lights down all the way and stage lights down about half?

TOPHER  
Pulpit.

GRUFF GRIP  
What?

TOPHER  
It's not "stage lights," it's pulpit lights. This is the pulpit. Our lighting guy probably won't know what you--

The house and pulpit lights shift exactly as requested.

With a cocky smirk, GRUFF GRIP walks off.

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

Joel takes the interview chair from Topher, who gladly relinquishes the hot seat and joins his mother and sister.

SARAH  
 (whispered teasingly)  
 What's with the wet look? Felt so repentant about jerkin' it to all that kiddie porn so you went and got baptized again?

Topher frantically mops his forehead with his shirtsleeves.

TOPHER  
 (loud whisper)  
 Shut the hell up, Sarah. It's hot under those lights.

BETH  
 (scolding)  
 Christopher!

TOPHER  
 Did you not hear what she said?

BETH  
 Bite your tongue. Your father is dealing with too much for you two to be screwing around on his big day. I swear to the good Lord himself, if you are not on your best behavior...

TOPHER/SARAH  
 Yes, momma.

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  
 Put these on to hear the control room feed and the interview.  
 (pointing to a monitor)  
 You can watch it here.

We hear the AUDIO FEED when Topher puts on his headphones.

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 ...that means your shot is live in  
 a box on screen next to Rachel,  
 but your mic will still be off  
 okay?

Joel nods.

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 When we cue you, your mic will be  
 on and you can start talking. You  
 understand?

Joel nods again.

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 I can hear you now though.

JOEL  
 Okay.  
 (adjusts IFB earpiece)  
 I understand.

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 Good. Just relax and answer the  
 questions as best you can. And  
 it's as easy as that. My crew  
 there will take care of you.  
 You'll look and sound great.

JOEL  
 If the Lord so wills.

He looks down. Takes a deep breath. 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.

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

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 Take boxes.

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

RACHEL MADDOW  
 Reverend Paxton, how's the  
 weather in Southern  
 California today? Better than  
 the miserable cold we have  
 here in New York, I hope?

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 Ready mic two.

PRODUCER (O.S.)  
 Mic and cue.

The CAMERA MAN 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.

RACHEL MADDOW  
 You certainly have built a sizable  
 audience there.

JOEL  
 You've built an audience, Rachel.  
 I merely shaped a community.

TOPHER  
 (whispered to Sarah)  
 Soon as the camera's on he's all  
 "God's grace" and Southern Charm.

SARAH  
 (whispered)  
 Daddy's from Oklahoma. He is  
 Southern.

TOPHER  
 (whispered)  
 Yeah, thirty years ago. He's not  
that Southern.

Beth SHUSHES them.

SARAH  
 (whispered)  
 Sorry, momma.

TOPHER  
 (whispered)  
 It just feels dishonest, is all.

He turns back to the monitor.

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. Shut up.

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

JOEL

(unrestrained)

It doesn't seem fair to paint me and my congregation in such a light. My church is a family-run, non-profit, charitable organization that--

Joel stops to listen to an interruption unheard by Topher.

Topher frantically tries to get the attention of an AUDIO ENGINEER.

TOPHER

Excuse me, my head--

The Audio Engineer holds up his hand to silently stop Topher. Points to a GLOWING RED LIGHT with a piece of tape next to it 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.)

...that you mention family...  
...whistleblower...  
...your son...

Joel's face falls, shocked and angry. He turns to Topher.

JOEL

My son?!

Joel, impossibly red-faced stands and struggles to rip the mic from his lapel.

JOEL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. This interview is over.  
I can't be-- I feel like--

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

Everyone except Topher rushes to Joel on the floor.

CAMERA MAN

Someone call 9-1-1.

BETH

Oh my Lord, Jesus.

Joel struggles to talk through his pain. He glares at Topher.

JOEL  
You...You did this.

TOPHER  
No, I didn't. I just wanted-- I  
had to...

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

JOEL  
(weakly)  
Betrayed by my own son. I can't  
believe this is how it ends.

He slips into unconsciousness. Beth SOBS HYSTERICALLY, holding his head in her arms. She looks to Topher--

BETH  
(between sobs)  
This is all your fault Cristopher!  
You killed your father!

SARAH  
Fucking murderer.

BETH  
(to Sarah)  
Watch your mouth in the Lord's  
house.  
(to Topher)  
But you are an effing murderer!

Off Topher's sweaty face, filled with guilt and fear.

#### **INT. WINDOWLESS PODCAST STUDIO - UNSPECIFIED FUTURE**

Topher sits at a microphone across a table cluttered with notes and audio cables from HANNAH (20s), who 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.

HANNAH  
I guess that's an interesting  
place to start, but a little  
melodramatic, don't you think?

TOPHER  
It's basically how it happened.  
How it felt anyway.

HANNAH

Why even start there? If this podcast is supposed to be about becoming the voice of The Dawn of Our Divinity cult, why not start with the commune, or The Vision?

TOPHER

It's my origin story. I'll tell it how I want. Listeners need context to know where I was coming from when it all started.

HANNAH

I didn't think you wanted to be associated with your dad.

TOPHER

It's all part of the journey. If you just listen, it's all in there. Anyway, you're just making more work for yourself. You're gonna have to cut all this out.

HANNAH

Edit point noted. Go ahead.

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

TOPHER

I did betray my father, but he betrayed his Heavenly Father. As a messenger of God, his sins...

(frustrated sigh)

Goddammit, now I hate it. It is too melodramatic, isn't it?

HANNAH

No, it's fine, really.

TOPHER

Fuck. You got all in my head.

HANNAH

Just keep going. I'll underlay some minor chords and sounds of a rainstorm so we can really nail the tone you're setting.

TOPHER

You're an asshole. I need a break.

He tears his headphones off. Storms out. Hanna LAUGHS.

END COLD OPEN