

THE VANISHING OF SISTER AIMEE

(As the houselights and stage lights
dim to half, we hear the hiss of
radio static followed by ...)

AIMEE [RADIO]

Beloved ... The devil has only one favorite word. "Stay."
Stay where you've always been. Stay ashamed. Stay afraid.
Stay the woman everyone has decided you are. Stay the man
your failures have named. Stay buried beneath yesterday.

(A low organ begins to play the
opening strains of "Just As I Am,"
an 1836 revival hymn.

The house and stage lights go dark)

AIMEE [RADIO] (Continued)

But Christ has another word in this year of our Lord,
nineteen hundred and twenty-six. That word is *Come*. Come
out from doubt. Come out from fear. Come out from
addiction. Come out from your secret life. Come out from
your public one.

Lazarus did not resurrect himself; the Lord called his name.
Tonight ... He is calling yours.

(A phone rings as the lights snap
on.

LOCATION: AIMEE'S suite.

Late afternoon. Venetian blinds
cut the sunlight into prison bars.

After several rings of the phone,
the hallway door explodes open,
followed immediately by MINNIE
'MOTHER' KENNEDY.

MINNIE races to the phones and
picks up the one not ringing)

MINNIE

Hello?! ...

(Hearing a dial tone, she quickly
hangs up and picks up the phone
that's ringing)

MINNIE (Continued)

Hello? ...

(We hear what MINNIE does, just a man breathing)

MINNIE (Continued)

Are you there? ... Speak or don't, I have no patience for breathing ...

(Three faint taps on the line)

MINNIE (Continued)

Are you there? ... Listen, friend, either talk or get out of my afternoon ...

(On the phone, a distant train whistle. Then a woman's voice, too faint to identify)

VOICE [AIMEE]

Not yet.

MINNIE

Hello ... Hello, what did you say? ... I'm hanging up now.

(She does)

MINNIE (Continued)

(to herself)

Chaos can wait in the hall. It doesn't get an office.

(The room is quiet now. Too quiet.

MINNIE straightens everything she touches -- pictures, papers, money, collars, people -- with the cold precision of a firing squad.

EDDIE 'DOC' DOYLE enters quickly from the hallway, slightly out of breath.

From down the hallway comes the distant murmur of reporters, parishioners and opportunists)

MINNIE (Continued)

Doc, where's Emma? I told her to guard this phone like the gates of Heaven.

(DOC goes to the radio broadcast console and begins flipping switches)

DOC

I saw her in reception.

(donning headphones)

Do me a favor, Mother Kennedy, and speak into the microphone.

(MINNIE positions herself at the mic. The second she faces it, something in her changes. The room may be a church office, but the microphone makes it a pulpit)

MINNIE

This is KFSG, Foursquare Gospel radio, broadcasting from the Angelus Temple in the heart of Los Angeles, California.

(in a normal tone, away from the mic)

Did I make a mistake, Doc, by bringing the police into this?

DOC

Careful with that microphone, it cost more than my first divorce.

MINNIE

I brought in the cops before the newspapers could accuse us of keeping them out. Why are you testing the mic?

DOC

(still fiddling)

I need her at that microphone tonight. If KFSG goes silent, the government can take the frequency. Then fifty people lose their paychecks and five thousand lose the voice they've built their lives around. I'm not losing this station because one woman wandered into the ocean.

MINNIE

I don't think she's coming back.

DOC

Everybody comes back. The lucky ones do so upright.

(EMMA SCHAEFFER appears from the hallway, stopping in the door frame.

Perfect posture. And the expression of someone who apologizes before saying hello.

EMMA gestures to someone as yet unseen)

EMMA

Right this way, Captain.

(CAPTAIN HERMAN CLINE enters. Fedora in hand, eyes that miss nothing)

CLINE

Thank you, Miss.

EMMA

(by way of introductions)

Captain, this is Mrs. Kennedy, Sister Aimee's mother, and Eddie Doyle, our new radio man.

CLINE

(taking MINNIE'S hand)

Ma'am. I'm familiar with your work.

MINNIE

Did I hear Emma call you "Captain"?

CLINE

Yes, ma'am. Captain Herman Cline. Chief of detectives. L.A.P.D.

DOC

We expected a couple o' flatfoots.

CLINE

(shaking DOC'S hand)

Well, you got *me*, Mr. Doyle. The governor sent me over, special delivery.

DOC

That makes you special. Delivery remains to be seen. Oh, and everybody calls me 'Doc.'

MINNIE

Captain, shouldn't you be down at Ocean Park Beach?

CLINE

I was just there. We've got two squads scouring the beach and the water. Reporters breathing down their necks. Beachgoers staring at the Pacific like it owes them money.

(CLINE moves so that his back is not to either door. He never stands or sits with his back to a door.

He casually rearranges himself, and others, to make this so)

CLINE (Continued)

I want a timeline before the tide, the press and this Temple trample it flat.

EMMA

Are there crowds at the beach?

CLINE

Hundreds.

MINNIE
(sotto voce, to DOC)
Should be thousands.

CLINE
I'm here to talk to *you*, Miss Schaeffer.

EMMA
But I was interviewed earlier by a Sergeant Winters.

CLINE
Yes, we have the part you gave away.
(to MINNIE and DOC)
May I have the room?

MINNIE
Certainly.
(as they start out)
Doc, tell the press the Captain came at the governor's request. Then move tonight's broadcast up twenty minutes and keep the phone lines open. I want to hear every rumor before it reaches a typesetter.

(MINNIE and DOC exit into the hallway, closing the door)

CLINE
Please, Miss Schaeffer, have a seat.

(She sits.

CLINE lights a cigarette)

CLINE (Continued)
Smoke?

EMMA
Of course not.

CLINE
You've already given a statement.

EMMA
Yes.

CLINE
Good. Then we won't waste time repeating it. I'm here for the part you buried.

(CLINE slips a small leather notepad from his coat and puts a pencil to work)

CLINE (Continued)
Full name?

Emma Rose Schaeffer. EMMA

Occupation? CLINE

Personal secretary to Sister Aimee. EMMA

Aimee Semple McPherson. CLINE

To the newspapers. To me, she's simply Sister. EMMA

You admire her. CLINE

Everyone admires her. EMMA

I asked about you. CLINE

I often think the apostles must have felt like this. EMMA

Useful? CLINE

Necessary. EMMA

You were with her today. CLINE

All day. EMMA

Start at the beginning. CLINE

Well // the day-- EMMA

No. Start from the first moment you're certain of. Not the version you rehearsed for the papers. CLINE

(EMMA takes the hit, recalculates.

She fishes for a sugar cube from
her pocket and slips it between her
lips)

EMMA

Um, okay. We went to Bullock's to buy a dress for Margaret. Her daughter.

CLINE

Age?

EMMA

Fifteen. Then we picked up Sister Aimee's new car.

CLINE

Make?

EMMA

Black Kissel sedan. Then we went to the Ocean Park Hotel in Santa Monica. Then the beach. No other stops. We arrived at the hotel at one o'clock. Exactly one.

CLINE

Nobody remembers time that precisely.

EMMA

I do, because Sister Aimee checked her watch and said something about a 4:30 meeting back here at the Temple.

CLINE

So you're working backwards.

EMMA

Well, yes. I guess.

(stammering)

I, uh, we, uh ... I remember it clearly. I wrote it down.

CLINE

You're doing very well. Liars usually hurry. You're placing each word like a brick. What is that in your mouth, if you don't mind my asking?

EMMA

(embarrassed)

Oh, that, it's a sugar cube. I eat them when I'm nervous. I didn't even realize I did it.

CLINE

That's fine. You have nothing to be nervous about. You said you arrived at the Ocean Park Hotel at 1 pm.

EMMA

Yes, then we went up to her room.

CLINE

Her room?

EMMA

Yes. Sister Aimee has a room at the Ocean Park. Room 202. She frequently goes there for a day of writing sermons on the beach.

CLINE
I get that. But why the standing reservation at the hotel?

EMMA
She needs a place to change into her bathing suit. And to conduct business, when necessary.

CLINE
What kind of business?

EMMA
I don't follow.

CLINE
Maybe a meeting. Private. With a man.

EMMA
Certainly not.

CLINE
That word "certainly" is doing a lot of work there. What happened next?

EMMA
Next, well, Sister Aimee changed into her swimsuit and cap, and we // started to--

CLINE
Color?

EMMA
Her suit was emerald-green. Her cap was brown.

CLINE
(writing)
That's good. Precision is helpful. The bathing suit and cap ... she walked to the beach like that?

EMMA
She wore a white terry cloth robe. But she was barefoot.

(The office melts into a California beach. The surf and sea gulls can be heard. Lights create reflections of moving water.

EMMA goes to a file cabinet, opens a drawer and removes a large bag)

EMMA (Continued)
It was warm. Bright. Too bright to miss anyone.

(The lighting cooperates)

CLINE
Did she go into the water straight away?

EMMA
No. She put down her Bible and asked, "Calendar?"

CLINE
You remember the word.

EMMA
I remember the way she said it. As if time itself worked for her.

CLINE
And you answered?

EMMA
"In my bag." Then she said, "Good. Let's build ourselves a little kingdom."

(EMMA takes out a folded beach blanket from her bag. She holds one end, then waits -- as if another pair of hands should take the other. They do not. She spreads it herself.

During the following, EMMA arranges the Bible, notebook, pencil and white robe with devotional precision)

CLINE
Then what?

EMMA
We sat.

CLINE
Doing what?

EMMA
I read a book.

CLINE
And Mrs. McPherson?

EMMA
Wrote. Crossed things out. Wrote them again. Watched the water.

CLINE
Watched the water, or watched the pier?

EMMA
The water.

CLINE
When did she decide to go into the water?

EMMA

After about an hour.

CLINE

"About." Was it an hour? Or does an hour sound reasonable?

EMMA

It was an hour.

CLINE

Good. Let's use that. Go on.

EMMA

Sister Aimee stood up and said, "I need ten minutes in the water. Call the Temple. Tell them I'll be late. And cancel my 4:30."

CLINE

Three instructions.

EMMA

She could make one breath feel like a staff meeting.

CLINE

Did she remove the robe?

EMMA

Yes.

(EMMA lifts the white robe from the blanket. For one moment she holds it upright, facing her, almost embracing it. Then she folds the robe and stuffs it in her bag)

CLINE

You didn't want to join her?

EMMA

I can't swim.

CLINE

She needed to be alone.

EMMA

She needed me to make the call.

CLINE

Same result. How long were you gone?

EMMA

Only a few minutes.

CLINE

How many?