

Letters to Heaven

Letters to Heaven is a story of Leah, an 8-year-old orphan, as she makes her way to the tallest mountain in the Philippines to deliver a letter to heaven, where she believes her late parents are. Along the way, she is helped by Nanding, a 10-year-old kid who decides to take on his first job of delivering drugs to a supplier near Mt. Apo to provide for his sick mother. However, they are pursued by Joseph, an assassin who works with a local vigilante group who has taken the law into their hands by killing petty criminals and drug couriers.

The film starts with Leah, in an orphanage, listening to a nun as she tells a folktale/Biblical story of a person who was able to make it to heaven by climbing a tall mountain and crying out god's name. Realizing she can do the same to deliver her letter to her parents, she runs away from the orphanage and makes her way to Mt. Apo. However, the lost Leah soon finds herself in the slums of Davao City. Meanwhile, Nanding and Joseph's paths cross, and Joseph realizes that Nanding was the drug courier he was assigned to kill. A chase across Davao City ensues, but Nanding is able to lose Joseph. Joseph calls his boss to tell him that his target is a child. Despite his initial hesitation and after being coerced by his boss, Joseph decides to push through with the job. Leah soon meets Nanding after not being able to find shelter for the night. Cunning as he is, Nanding proposes to Leah that he bring her to Mt. Apo and that he act as her bodyguard for a measly 15 pesos a day. Unaware that Nanding is a drug courier, Leah agrees.

And thus starts the two children's journey to Mt. Apo. Leah wonders if they can take faster transportation, but the paranoid Nanding prefers to take more discreet methods of transportation. Eventually, he comes up with the idea of talking to an acquaintance: Ayesha, whose mother owns a small stall selling vegetables at the local wet market. The next morning, they head to the market to talk to Ayesha and see if they can hitch a ride with their supplier. Ayesha agrees to help them, but the supplier is still unloading some of their shipment and they can only leave after that. Leah and Nanding spend some time in the market and talk about themselves: Leah grew up in an orphanage while Nanding had to drop out of school early in his life to provide for his sick mother, who is currently in the hospital. Their brief respite is cut short when Nanding spots Joseph in the market. Realizing what is happening, Ayesha creates a distraction so that Leah and Nanding can make it out of the market safely. Leah and Nanding are able to hitch a ride with the supplier, but not before Joseph spots both of them. He soon begins to believe that he has two targets instead of one. He also finds out where the supplier is headed. Meanwhile, Leah asks Nanding about Joseph, but he refuses to answer.

They arrive in a small town in Bukidnon and they are told to head to the next town to catch another ride to Mt. Apo. Leah and Nanding decide to make it there by foot. As they do so, they talk about heaven. Leah believes in it, but Nanding is unsure. "If there is a heaven out there, maybe my mother wouldn't be as sick, and I wouldn't have had to stop going to school," he says.

Leah and Nanding make it safely to the next town, but realize that they no longer have enough money to pay for their fare. They are forced to seek shelter at an abandon factory nearby. Before going to sleep, Leah decides to pay Nanding for his protection services. However, Nanding refuses and, instead, tells Leah to ask god to heal his mother if she finds heaven. Meanwhile, Joseph finds himself in Bukidnon and finds out from the townsfolk that the two children are on their way to Mt. Apo. Realizing he has to spend one more day to complete his

mission, he calls his son and apologizes that he cannot make it home that night. In return, his son tells him to come home sooner because he needs help with his homework.

The next day, Leah and Nanding are awoken by a group of travelers who have taken a brief stop near the factory. After Leah and Nanding tell their story, the travelers agree to take them to Mt. Apo. However, they soon find drugs in Nanding's belongings. Thinking that the children mean danger, the group drops Leah and Nanding off. Leah asks Nanding about the drugs and Nanding reveals the truth to Leah. Feeling betrayed, Leah decides to set off on her own as soon as they arrive in town. After arriving in town and parting ways with each other, Nanding drops his shipment of drugs, but only gets a paltry payment. Disappointed, Nanding makes his way to the hospital where his mother is confined. However, a doctor informs him that she passed away days ago. His estranged aunt, however, has been looking for him. The doctor gives him his aunt's temporary address. On his way there, he sees Joseph heading to Mt. Apo. Realizing that Leah is in danger, he races Joseph to the entrance.

Meanwhile, Leah begins her ascent to Mt. Apo but has to pass through a forest first. She soon realizes she is being pursued by Joseph, whom she recognizes from the market. She tries to make her way out of the forest, but Joseph catches up to her and shoots her, immobilizing Leah. Joseph approaches Leah and asks her where her accomplice is. She begs Joseph not to harm Nanding, as he only needs help. She also tells him why they journeyed to Mt. Apo together. Joseph initially refuses to believe her, but he soon finds Leah's letter to heaven and realizes that she has been telling the truth. Shocked and angry, Joseph storms off and leaves Leah's body to bleed in the forest, but Nanding finds her just in time.

Leah falls into a coma, and we cut to what appears to be her spirit wondering in the dark. She hears muffled voices. Thinking that they belong to her parents, she tries talking with them, but cannot understand them. She cries out of frustration and asks them what she has to do for her to see them. Then, she begins to clearly hear the voices saying "Wake up!" She wakes up from her coma—a few hours later—to Nanding's voice. Nanding then keeps Leah updated on what has happened: about her being shot, about his mother dying but his aunt adopting him. The orphanage has also been notified of Leah's whereabouts and a nun from the orphanage is on her way. Nanding asks Leah if she saw heaven, but she says she did not.

Leah recovers a few days later and bids farewell to Nanding and his aunt. She tells her story to the nun, and apologizes for what she has done. Instead, the nun understands Leah's plight and tells her that she believes God is everywhere, and so maybe there is a piece of heaven on Earth. Meanwhile, a distraught Joseph comes home to his son and tucks him to bed. He then tells him the local legend of a girl who climbs a mountain to get to heaven.

Letters to Heaven is a road-trip dramedy that explores the concept of faith in a dangerous time in Philippine history, where vigilante groups have taken the law into their hands to kill who they think are criminals. Faith is not just a belief in a supreme being, but also a belief in the existence of goodness in spite of the wickedness that surround us. This is what Leah and Nanding experience. In spite of their hardships, they encounter, as the nun puts it, "pieces of heaven" on Earth. The film does not really paint a clear conclusion on their emotional arcs. Do they still believe in heaven after their experiences? Has Joseph changed for the good? However, the ending hands them that challenge of finding the "pieces of heaven" on Earth—on having faith that there is good all around them.