

Claire Beaver

Hortus Conclusus

What happens after the credits roll? Black. Nothing. But then Sophia would go up to the booth to start the movie again and then the credits would roll and so on and so on and so on. Before he worked up the courage to talk to her, James would turn around in his seat and look up to the projection booth, where he could catch glimpses of her as she prepared to play the movie again for the next crowd of people. He wondered what she saw up there, all the little movie goers, from the avid wanna-be critics to the handsy teen couples making out to the families trying to keep the kids from talking too loudly. They had known each other only from glances in math class, and his seeing her in the movie theater tonight felt something like fate to him, though he knew he didn't buy that. Either way, he felt that he just had to talk to her; he would sit through the same movie a million times if it meant he could see her again.

James sat. He shifted in the bowed pew, scratched his lower back, crossed and uncrossed his legs. He even put his hands together and got down on his knees at one point, pulling down the cushioned kneeler attached to the pew in front. The tan pleather was cracked, worn from years of devotion. His knees hit the prayer books tucked into the wooden slots, Italian and English, and he adjusted himself again. Was it rude to sit back on his thighs or should he be erect? Can you say erect in church? He couldn't remember the etiquette.

Then he waited for it, something, to happen. But nothing did. He didn't feel God. He didn't feel lighter; he didn't feel relief. He felt tired. And guilty about being tired and

not feeling lighter and not feeling relief. He pushed himself off his knees and slid back against the hard pew to the warm spot he had created. He realized he'd never been the only one in a church before.

He'd been in Florence for two weeks now at an academic conference on astrophysical research and had passed the same small, dark church every day. Santa Something. He didn't even know the name of the church, set back from the street that his hotel was on, near the Duomo. Every morning when he got up he passed it, and every morning he actively chose not to enter. But today somehow felt different. He saw it and couldn't resist, and now he was sitting in an ancient, cold church alone, looking up at a painting of the Virgin and Child hung in the massive apse above the altar. The Virgin stared at him while Jesus blessed the center aisle, his chubby little hand extended with two fingers up. James couldn't come close to guessing how many different versions of this he had seen in his lifetime, how many artists across full centuries had painted and sculpted and worshipped some version of this image, believing that somehow it would inspire them, bring them closer to what they thought was above.

What was actually above was a ceiling painted what was now a cracked blue and was additionally dotted with chipped yellow stars. James thought that at one time it must have stunned the masses, imagining themselves peering upon an artistic illusion that God himself approved of. He thought it was a little kitschy, like the artist who had been commissioned to paint it decided to phone it in a bit when he was almost done; he couldn't compete with Michelangelo so he might as well do something simple, something easier.

He stared down at the red velvet carpet running up the aisle, clearly not from the early ages when this cathedral had been born. It looked new, as if a priest had decided

the dark, wooden place needed a pop of color. Competing with the likes of Santa Croce and Santissima Annuziata, this church felt insignificant to the city. A forgotten relic. James wished Sophia were here to sit with him and explain what the priest was saying in his ear softly. She did this when she made him go to mass with her on holidays, but there was no priest here now, and he found it funny how much he really didn't mind going to church then, not because of his devotion or even belief in a higher power but because he got to sit with her in a beautiful place for an hour or two, because there was comfort living in the routine of it all, and because after the service he and Sophia got to watch the little kids run around in the field beyond the church afterwards and look at the horses in the stables adjacent to the property. The priest at the parish (Michael? Mark?) had an affinity for horses, and everyone thought it was just great that he got to keep them close by. A priest with an affinity for horses. He remembered thinking at the time that priests shouldn't have affinities for anything except for God, and Michael or Mark's horses indicated that he likely wasn't very good at his job.

A slice of light shot down the aisle as James heard the first noise he had outside of his own mind since he sat down, the huge wooden doors opening and allowing another soul entry. A couple walked in, arm in arm and more slowly than James had ever seen anyone move. For some reason he felt intruded upon, as if he had been walked in on while in the bathroom. He fixed his blazer and faced forward after he realized he'd been staring. The couple strolled agonizingly toward the altar, slow and soundless.

“So you don't believe in God, like, at all?” Sophia asked, throwing a piece of popcorn in the air and catching it in her mouth. Her skill indicated that she had clearly done this before.

“I have morals, if that’s what you mean,” James replied as he leaned over the counter to get closer to her. This was his third consecutive week visiting Sophia at the Harbor Theatre after he had gathered up the courage to hang around after a movie one night in a totally cool and casual way and talk to her. It had been one week since they first kissed in the back, after he’d helped her take out the trash. He liked her because she asked big philosophical questions, even if they were whispered in his ear during fourth period math class. That, and she was a good kisser. He watched her throw and catch another piece of popcorn, his eyes on her mouth as she chewed.

“I see you, weirdo,” she smiled at him leaning down to break his gaze. “But I’ll ignore your incessant staring in the interest of this conversation. So you have morals, great. But aren’t you freaked out? Don’t you feel alone in the world?”

“I mean, yeah. But God never really did anything for me.”

“I haven’t done anything for you either,” Sophia smirked.

“Yeah, but you’re cute.” James kissed her over the counter, getting the sticky residue of some old spilled soda on his shirt.

When the couple finally made it to the front of the church, they both stared up at the painting. It was old and gold-encrusted, and it had been hanging there, presumably, forever. James wondered what they saw in it, why they had taken the time to come here and see it. Didn’t they know that this church wasn’t famous, that it held no *Last Supper* or a piece of the original cross? It smelled stale and he felt out of place, uncomfortable in a setting that had been created to bring comfort and inspire awe. He had always felt like the odd one out, but this was different. It had been years since he’d been in a church, and there was a new feeling. He was pissed that he couldn’t find the comfort he craved

and was sad that he would never feel it. He had never understood why Sophia had felt so at peace in spaces like this one.

The couple moved to a side chapel, one James hadn't noticed until they called his attention to it. The man put his arm around the woman's waist, squeezing her gently and kissing her temple. She picked up a votive tea candle and struck one of the tiny matches next to it; the rows of candles shone dimly, as if they struggled to keep alive the hope that those who lit them so depended on. She placed the candle at the edge of the row and blew it a kiss. The couple stared at it for a moment, hands in each other's.

"Excuse me, sir, would you mind taking a picture of us?" The old woman was now next to the pew he had parked himself in, and her words startled him. He hadn't realized he had been staring into space after watching what was for the couple a very intimate moment; he thought that oddly it seemed to affect him more than it did them. "I just don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful in my life, and I don't want to forget it." He mumbled some sort of yes and stood to photograph the couple. James took her phone from her hand and held it up as she began to scurry back down the aisle to her vested, frail husband. "I'm so sorry to be a bother, but could you get a bit closer? We would love the Virgin to be in it as well," she said as if she were asking him something much more inconvenient, like when an acquaintance asks for a ride to the airport or a sibling needs a loan. All he had to do was walk down the aisle and snap a simple picture of a sweet elderly couple.

But he couldn't. His feet felt welded to the nearly black floor, ensuring he could never leave the suddenly claustrophobic-feeling church. James simply couldn't get himself to move.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked, coming back toward him.

“Yes, sorry,” he heard himself say after a painfully long silence. He peeled his loafers up from the floor and felt the cushioned weight of the carpet. He thought that even though he doesn’t get it, they do. They feel the comfort and joy that churches are meant to hold, and he was jealous of them. Insanely jealous, actually. Then he thought about how that could’ve been him and Sophia, and he stopped moving again.

“Isn’t it weird that I have, like, all the power in this place? You could come in and buy a movie ticket and I could just choose not to play the movie and you’d just have to wait.” Sophia was sweeping the theatre after the last showing one night; she swayed with the broom as she collected loose kernels and old receipts in a little pile in the center aisle. She left the lights dim, claiming it kept the movie magic alive after the film was over.

“What would be the point of that?” James said. He was perched on top of a seat, his legs playing with the part you were supposed to sit on.

“Just to show everyone who the real boss is around here. And stop that you’re gonna break it,” she said, but she didn’t really mean it.

“You’d just have to give everyone their money back. And you’d probably get fired.” James loved coming back at her, though in reality he knew she could convince him of almost anything.

“You are so cynical,” she said. “No wonder you don’t believe in anything!” She pointed the end of her broom at him. He reflexively moved back and she saw it as an opportunity to come after him, finger out. She dropped the broom and raced towards him as he backed down the aisle and turned to run, but she got her arms around his waist before he made it very far. James turned her around and admitted his defeat.

“Can we hang out somewhere besides where I work? Maybe Friday?” Sophia asked him.

“Yeah, I was actually going to ask you that. This crusty theater is cute and all, but we should get dinner,” he grinned, fairly sure she was reading his mind at this point. She was the first girl he ever asked out.

James took their picture in a sort of haze. The woman thanked him very much and the man shook his hand.

“God bless you,” she said as she linked her husband’s arm and took back her phone. “Are you visiting as well?”

“I’m here for a conference,” James replied. He didn’t like the way his words bounced off the ceiling and were thrown back at him.

“Oh, interesting! And isn’t it lucky for us that you also happen to speak English!” The woman seemed actually amused by this. She and her husband would probably chat about it again when their trip ended and they were showing their grandchildren pictures from their trip. “Good luck with your conference, and thank you again!” The woman reached out to shake his hand and he was surprised at its firmness.

He sat back down in the pew again as the couple moseyed out, tripping a bit over their sensible shoes as they both tried to look at the picture on the woman’s phone.

He stared up at the Virgin and she stared back at him from her golden throne. She was prompting him, asking him to pray to her or leave, with unforgiving eyes and full command of the space. Among all this darkness there she was, yet she didn’t provide light. She was taunting him. Why couldn’t shed an ounce of sympathy for him? The baby Jesus was no help, either.

When they finally left the kitschy diner, complete with shiny turquoise booths and smiling dolphin decor leaping above the tables, James drove to a dead end so they could look at the bay. The moon shone across it, bright and quiet. Sophia and James sat there for a while, not saying anything, just looking out into the black vastness. Across the bay they saw the line of dotted lights, houses lucky enough to be parked on the water.

“Tell me about yourself, Jimmy,” Sophia turned to him and said in a deep voice. “What brings you to these parts?”

“Very funny,” James replied as he realized there were a dozen burger wrappers in the back of his car on the floor and he made a mental note to clean them out before he drove her anywhere again.

“You were right about those fries,” she said. James knew she was reading his mind again, could sense how nervous he was to be alone with her like this. For a used two-door Ford Focus, it certainly felt intimate. “They were reeeeeeally good.”

Then they were kissing. The middle console made a barrier between them. James tried twisting his torso to get at least one of his arms around her; Sophia tried sitting on it but her head hit the top of the car and she burst out laughing. “Romantic,” she whispered, eyebrow cocked.

After they attempted a little more making out, they decided a walk might work out better considering James didn’t really have a backseat.

“I don’t get how you don’t believe in anything when nights like these exist. It is so beautiful, I just don’t see how anything worldly could’ve created it,” Sophia said as they walked down the empty road and she looked up at the stars. He was holding her hand, guiding her as she had her eyes fixed on the above.

“Dense interstellar gas and a lot of pressure,” James replied.

Sophia looked back at him. “You are such a buzzkill.”

“Hey, I believe in the power of science. Maybe there’s something bigger out there, but I can pretty much explain everything.”

“You must be *so* smart,” she poked his chest.

“That’s not what I mean and you know it,” James replied.

“You know I’m not a religious freak or anything, but what do you think happens when we die?”

“Morbid.”

“You can’t explain that! There’s got to be a heaven, somewhere for us mere mortals to look forward to going after we leave this place.”

“Maybe there is, and maybe there isn’t, but let’s go back to talking about the stars. Less creepy.”

Looking around, James wished he knew more about art history. If he couldn’t connect to the religious aspect of the space, he could at least respect the artistic talent that went in to creating it. He knew there was beauty here, symbols of love and light beyond what he knew about the lamb of God depicted in a mosaic window to his right or St. Catherine (he knew because she was labeled) in the window to his left. Her face was deformed and she looked as though the glass had warped over time, leaving her once stoic face looking more like a misplaced mask. When he and Sophia traveled to Paris on their honeymoon, she described church façades and fresco cycles with the ease of a seasoned tour guide. Pointing and whispering quietly, her excited breath lingering on

his neck when she leaned in close as to not disturb those praying, she seemed to be at her happiest. Sitting in the dark, he closed his eyes.

James had finally gathered the courage to ask Sophia to marry him one day after his first article had been published in *The Astrophysical Journal*. In his realization that he had achieved all he had because of her vehement and supportive belief in him, he knew he couldn't let her go; Sophia's light shone brighter than any star he'd ever written about. James knew she would want to get married in a church, so he converted for her. It didn't mean much to him and was easy enough, so he did it and she was his confirmation sponsor. He learned the basics of the Catholic Church and got his own star of Bethlehem in return.

Any discomfort or doubt he felt while walking down the aisle of an institution he didn't believe in disappeared when those wooden doors had opened and Sophia's dad walked her towards him. They professed their love for each other and by the power vested in the priest by God and man, they were married. If anything was worth putting his faith in, it was her.

It didn't matter how long it had been, though he knew it had been exactly six years from yesterday. Being there was hard. Being there, traveling to Florence and eating gelato on the Ponte Vecchio, exploring the Uffizi to find that painting of Venus in a seashell she loved, visiting a beautifully neglected church set back from the street and taking a picture of a little old couple, even sharing his research at a respectable conference. James had tried to get out of the trip, to stay home and keep going through the motions of his life as he had been. But here he was. Alone.

The last time he had been in a church was before he buried Sophia. Her parents had demanded a full church service, though he didn't care one way or the other. After that, he didn't see the point in going. She'd been his light, his relief. James used to try and find comfort in her belief that she'd go to heaven and 'chill with the angels,' as she put it. He wanted to think she was there, in heaven, and he knew that's where she thought she was going, but he also knew better. He knew what happened after the credits rolled and there was nobody there to start the movie again.

James tried to stand again, but he couldn't muster the strength. Despite his effort, he was stuck.