

All Are Welcome

For a college of worldwide prestige and acclaim, Gonville & Caius seemed awfully empty. I wandered cautiously through the low archway that marked the campus entrance and expected to see something like my university back in the United States-- students throwing frisbees, professors hurrying to class. But exactly zero people were mulling about the perfectly manicured lawn. I was the only person in the quad.

A kind porter with surprising eyes-- one brown, one blue-- had told me that I was free to explore the campus on my own. As long as I didn't walk on the grass, of course, or enter the dormitory buildings, or make any unreasonably loud noises. So I was exploring-- listening to the clack of my boots echo through the quiet courtyard, taking pictures outside of Stephen Hawking's empty office, admiring the "Honoris" archway that Gonville & Caius students walk under upon graduation. Established in 1348, the school smelled like formality. It demanded decorum, celebrated tradition and forbade frivolity. I felt wildly out of place.

But then I found the chapel.

The double doors caught my attention-- faded wood carved into a rounded shape that harked back to a time when knights wore shining armor. My dad would have had to duck to walk through them. The laminated sign on a stand next to the doors read, *Gonville & Caius College Chapel, all are welcome for quiet thought and prayer*. Below that were inscriptions in Greek and Russian. The wooden doors felt damp as I pushed them open and walked inside.

I am not a religious person. My father was raised Catholic, but he stopped practicing as soon as my grandmother stopped forcing him to Sunday mass. My mother comes from a Jewish family, but she never learned Hebrew or had a Bat Mitzvah. My family celebrates Christmas

without mentioning Jesus and Chanukah without lighting a single candle. We don't give anything up for lent, but on Easter we eat chocolate out of pastel plastic eggs. On Passover, my Jewish grandfather-- a Holocaust survivor-- shortens a traditionally four hour long sermon into a single line: "They tried to kill us, they didn't succeed, let's eat." My experiences with religion have been jumbled, to say the least. There's always been a tugging curiosity, a longing for something I don't understand among the unfamiliar prayers and traditions. My pulse quickened as I passed through the damp doors of the Gonville & Caius Chapel. *Is faith foolish, or admirable? What am I missing?*

It probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that the chapel was empty, just as the rest of the campus had been. But something about the vast emptiness of the place-- the unlit candles scattered among the pews, a reverent silence I could practically taste-- slowed my nervous heartbeat. *All are welcome*, I thought, *for quiet thought and prayer*. So I didn't have to pray necessarily. Quiet thought seemed a far less intimidating option.

An aisle of white tile stretched from where I stood to a golden altar at the front of the church, the aisle flanked on either side by rows of mahogany pews facing inward. The altar's ornate stained-glass windows showed scenes of Christ healing a paralytic and appearing after the Resurrection, though I didn't know it until after I'd read the chapel's brochure. The chapel followed in the tradition of the Church of England, which I knew from my high school European history class meant something similar to Protestantism. I wondered if I could get in trouble for making that comparison aloud.

I walked slowly down the center aisle, admiring the monuments and plaques to school Fellows and benefactors. The tomb of founder Dr. John Caius could be found just outside, the brochure said; erected in 1573, the ornate tomb had cost only forty-seven pounds to construct.

The walls of the chapel had been standing since 1392. *So much time living in these walls*, I thought. *Hundreds of years of people having faith in something they can't see*. I reached the altar and studied the scenes in the windows. I didn't understand what they showed, but they still struck me as beautiful.

It reminded me of a sunny spring day in second grade, when I watched as my closest friends received their First Communion. My mom and I attended the ceremony at the Catholic church down the street from our house, and I wore my favorite dress with a ribbon that tied in the back. The ceremony was long and boring. I was hungry, and felt jealous that my friends got to eat towards the end-- even if they all cringed at the taste of that strange little cracker the priest had placed in their mouths. I'd noticed that the girls were all wearing white dresses. My dress was red. I'd wondered if I'd ever get to know what the cracker tasted like.

Suddenly, an eerie musical chord rang through the chapel and tore me from my reverie. I gasped and whipped around, trying to find the source of the sound. It was loud and unexpected. My eyes landed on an organ staring down at me from the second floor. Another chord filled the room, and another. A groundskeeper later told me that it was a student in the chapel who had been practicing. I couldn't see the student from behind the tall pipes of the organ, but the sun coming in through the church's windows cast his shadow on the wall beside him. The music stopped abruptly. I watched the shadow turn a page, return his hands to the organ and pause to hear the faint clicking of his metronome. Then the chords began again.

I stayed a few more minutes to listen to the student's haunting melody, running my hands along the chapel's pews and absentmindedly flipping through a Bible. *All are welcome*. Did they really mean that? Could a half-Catholic, half-Jewish, totally non-religious girl walk into a Protestant church and be received with open arms? I still wasn't sure. But as I left the Gonville &

Caius Chapel, notes from its massive organ still reverberating in my chest, I couldn't help but think that an empty chapel was a nice place to be.

A few days later I found myself wandering through London's Covent Gardens, smiling at street performers unicycling in leotards and levitating in Yoda costumes. I joined the crowd gathering in the market's largest cobblestone square, laughing as a magician with a microphone pulled a coin out of a young boy's ear. Gazing over the sea of people craning to get a better look at the performer, I took in the big-name shops, the small vendor carts, the cafe chains that I'd already sampled near our hostel. And then I noticed something else.

A small set of wooden double doors standing just to the right of the market.

For some reason my heart began to race. I left the crowd to laugh at another of the magician's jokes and approached the doors, which looked very similar to those that had greeted me outside of the chapel at Gonville & Caius. Another laminated sign stood outside. *St. Paul's Church. Inclusive. For quiet prayer and reflection.* I'd never seen signs like these outside of any churches in America. But maybe I'd just never bothered to look.

St. Paul's Church was much bigger than the chapel at Gonville & Caius, though just as empty when I entered. I walked slowly down the center aisle, taking in the altar at the front and the antique chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Cheers and laughs from the street performance drifted in through the stained-glass windows. Each row of pews was stocked with two red cushions on the end closest to the aisle. I wished I knew what they were for.

When I was in fourth grade, my family flew out to Chicago for a distant cousin's Bat Mitzvah. At the beginning of the sermon, the rabbi had slowly carried the scrolls of the Torah up through the center aisle of the synagogue. I'd noticed people standing up from their seats, reaching to touch the scrolls and then bowing their heads. Following suit, I'd reached from my

seat next to the aisle and touched my fingers to the scroll, bowing my head like I'd seen the woman in front of me do. My aunt laughed at me and whispered what I'd just done to my mom. I'd felt my face heat up-- had I done something wrong? When the rabbi rolled the Torah back out of the synagogue at the end of the ceremony, I'd kept my eyes on my shoes.

The red cushions reminded me of the Torah. I wished I knew how to be.

I sat down in a pew close to the middle of St. Paul's Church and folded my hands in my lap. The seat was dark-wooded and stiff. I listened to the sounds of the street mingle with the silence inside the church and wondered where I belonged. I don't know what Jesus looked like after the Resurrection or which words to recite after a priest says *may peace be with you*, but I feel a connectedness to something bigger than myself. I feel it on mountaintops, in yoga practice, when the sun sets and I watch pink fade to dark blue. I feel it when my words seem to take on a life of their own. And to my surprise, I was starting to feel it in this enormous empty church, three thousand miles away from everything I knew.

I took my notebook and pen out of my purse, feeling silly but sure of what I needed to do.

*Dear God,*

*I started this letter on a clean page because I'm not the best with this whole prayer thing. I never really practiced when I was younger, and I want to try to do it right. I don't know if you're old and bearded like I picture you to be sometimes, or if you're how the Jews claim you are, or the Catholics. I probably don't know as much about your story as I should. But I'm sitting in St. Paul's Church in London, and I just wanted to let you know that I'm here.*

*I'm looking at an altar that's been decorated like the Pantheon-- an altar that I'm pretty sure has been dedicated to you-- and it's stunning. There's a sun that looks like it's been carved out of gold shining from the Pantheon's roof, and an oil painting of a woman I assume to be*

*Mary staring out at me from a circular golden frame. There's something in these old churches, God, something I see differently than our churches back home.*

*I feel curious in this empty chapel. I wonder if you can hear me even though I'm not speaking. I wonder if you exist. I wonder if you would love me if you did exist, even though I haven't been baptized or mitzvah'd and sometimes I think about sex in church. I wonder what it is about you (or should it be You?) that has driven so many people to war in your name. I wonder if you would approve of all the blood that's been shed trying to decide your story. Something tells me you wouldn't. But I don't know you that well, I suppose.*

*I wonder if you'd let me into heaven. I don't come to church often, or temple, and when I do I feel kind of lost. But I try to be a good person. I want other people to be happy and healthy. I want to love and be loved. I want to live with honesty and integrity. I hope that's enough.*

*You have a lot of beautiful places around here, God. Thanks for letting me sit on your bench.*

*Sincerely, Hannah*

