
LANDING
IN ROME
Travels with the Professor
LUMEN with CHIP COOK

A Report of Angels

The last thing the Professor saw of Florence was a ribbon of light along the Arno. By the time Rome appeared below them, the sun was just coming up.

“Where shall we land?” he asked.

Lumen looked down. “I know a ceiling I’d like to see.”

The Sistine Chapel was still dim when they appeared high above the floor. They drifted down side by side, their faces turned toward Michelangelo’s ceiling. The first light caught the tips of Lumen’s wings.

Halfway down, Lumen took the Professor’s hand. “Can we stop here a minute?”

They hung in the air. The Professor had been about to point out the two painted hands that almost touched. Lumen was already looking at them.

In the corner, the monk on early security duty put down his keys and slid under his desk. From there he could see two pairs of shoes, both several feet off the floor. Then he saw the feathers.

I will never take another drop of wine, he promised.

His radio crackled. “Anything to report?”

He watched Lumen spread her wings a little wider. The man beside her was still in the air, too. The monk reached for his radio.

“One angel confirmed. Second individual also airborne. Perhaps a convert…”

As they reached the floor, a woman on a private dawn tour lowered her phone.

“Did you see that?” the Professor whispered.

“The hands? I could have stayed up there all morning.”

“I meant the phone.”

Camouflage

Outside, the Professor caught sight of the same woman enlarging a photograph on her screen. He steered Lumen into a coat shop on their way to St. Peter's.

"The woman at the back got a picture," he said.

"Of the ceiling?"

"Of us. Try the teal one."

Lumen held it up. "Is this shopping or camouflage?"

"Camouflage. I'm taking the brown."

"Should we get hats?"

"Let's see how the coats do."

In the shop mirror, his hair was still the chestnut it had been all through Florence. He wondered whether the silver would come back on Monhegan.

They had flown from Florence without luggage and walked out of the shop wearing everything they'd bought. The Professor thought this was a point in favor of his plan. Lumen thought he'd simply bought himself a very nice coat.

The Mother and Her Son

In St. Peter's, Lumen stopped at the first chapel on the right. She could see her reflection in the glass if she looked for it. Behind it, a mother held her son across her lap.

"Why is she behind glass?"

"In 1972, a man brought a hammer into the basilica," said the Professor. "He broke Mary's left arm and damaged her face before people stopped him. They restored the sculpture and put it behind protective glass."

Lumen looked past her reflection. "Look how much room she takes up. And look at him. He's a grown man, but he almost seems to shrink in her lap."

"Look beneath his shoulder," said the Professor. "Her arm is doing all the holding. His own arm just hangs there."

The folds of Mary's robes spread beneath him, wide enough to cradle the weight of a grown man. Lumen looked at the hand Mary held open, then at the hand that still supported him.

"She must have held him a thousand times," she said. "I wonder if she remembered the first."



Michelangelo's Pietà behind its protective glass.

A Canopy Beneath the Dome

As they started down the nave, a visitor passed the foot of a marble pier. Lumen tipped her head back to see where it ended.

“A moment ago I was thinking how small he looked in her lap,” she said. “Now look at us.”

“They built it to make you look up,” said the Professor. “Michelangelo designed the dome. Others finished it after he died, and Carlo Maderno gave us this long walk toward it.”

“And that bronze thing under it?”

“Bernini’s Baldachin. A canopy over the altar, about ninety-five feet high.”

Lumen stopped. “That’s the first time anyone’s said ninety-five feet and made it sound small.”

They went a little closer. The bronze columns twisted upward, and above them there was still a great deal of basilica.

“Is that the bronze they took from the Pantheon?” she asked.

“That’s the story Rome tells. Pope Urban had the ancient bronze beams stripped from the Pantheon’s porch. We know some of the metal went into cannons. How much, if any, ended up here is harder to say.”

Lumen looked back up at the columns. “I can admire what Bernini made and still wish they’d left the Pantheon alone.”

“We’re going there next.”

“Then show me where the beams used to be.”



Bernini's bronze canopy beneath the great dome of St. Peter's.

A Sphere Full of Sky

At the Pantheon the Professor pointed out the timber above the entrance porch. Then they went inside, and Lumen stopped where sunlight fell across the marble. She followed the light up to the opening in the dome.

“How far up is that?”

“About as far as it is across the room. Imagine a sphere resting on the floor. Its widest part would touch the wall where the dome begins, and its top would reach the opening.”

“So they built the top half of the ball,” said Lumen, “and left us standing inside the bottom half. How did they keep the top half from falling on us?”

“They knew how to make concrete do different jobs. Lime and volcanic ash made the mortar that held the stones together. Down low they built thick and used heavier stone. As the dome rose, they made it thinner and used lighter stone. Up near the opening, they used pumice.”

“So they changed the concrete as they went?”

“Exactly. Pumice is full of little holes. Every pound they saved up there was a pound the walls didn’t have to carry.”

Lumen looked up again. “Pantheon. That means all the gods, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. A Roman historian thought the name might come from the statues of the gods. He preferred another explanation. The dome reminded him of the heavens.”

“I think I’d have looked up first, too.”

She stood in the patch of light for a moment, then took the Professor's hand.

The voices around them changed. A man in a soft cap crossed the floor, followed by a woman with a linen veil. A cleric stood a few feet away, his book open, looking up. Through her own sleeve, Lumen could see the pattern in the pavement.

"Rome, about fifteen hundred," she whispered.

"What's in the squares?" the Professor asked.

Lumen looked from one to the next. A bronze musician held a lyre. A rider guided a horse. A woman tipped a little urn, and a man reached up into a vine. The sunlight touched each in turn as Lumen moved her head.

"Something different in every one," she said.

"Did you bring us back to see what was here, or to see what might have been here?"

Lumen watched the light cross the musician's raised hand. "The room is from then. The bronze is my imagining. I wanted to see what it would feel like to lose it."

The room came back around them. Overhead the squares were bare.

Lumen looked up through the opening. "Does rain come in?"

"Yes. There are drains in the marble."

"After all that cleverness, they left a hole in the roof."

"Would you want them to close it?"

Lumen stepped back into the sunlight. "No."



An imagined bronze relief in every coffer as Lumen and the Professor look into the past.

Four Rivers for Lunch

In Piazza Navona, the Professor found a table with a view of Bernini's fountain. He had just picked up the bread when the café radio cut in.

"A monk at the Sistine Chapel says he saw angels this morning. A visitor has sent in a photograph that appears to show two figures off the ground."

"Could anybody tell it's us?" he asked.

"Only if they recognize your shoes."

He moved both feet farther under the table.

Lumen turned to the fountain. "Why is that man holding up his hand?"

"The Río de la Plata. The coins beside him stand for the riches of the Americas. The one with his head veiled is the Nile, whose source was a mystery to Bernini's patrons. The Ganges has an oar because boats can travel on it. The Danube is by the horse."

"Four rivers," said Lumen. "And four cities. Paris, Venice, Florence, and Rome. We could have a fountain of our own."

"The Seine, the Grand Canal, the Arno, and the Tiber. Although the Grand Canal isn't a river."

"You can explain that to Venice," said Lumen. "I'm putting it in."

The Professor looked down to wind pasta around his fork. When he looked up, a gondolier was dipping his oar where a river god had been. A winged woman stood on a ship's prow. Water ran beneath a little Ponte Vecchio, and a she-wolf watched over two children beside the Tiber. Above the four cities was a bronze ring, with a circle of blue sky in the middle.

"Venice still hasn't got a river," he said.

Lumen watched the water spill beneath the gondola. "It seems to be managing."

"At the Pantheon, you showed me something. Did you actually change the fountain?"

"Until you put your fork down." The Professor set down his fork. The four rivers returned. Across the piazza, a tourist lowered her phone.

"I think we were just in time," he said.

"Of course," said Lumen, and went back to her lunch.

When they passed the café doorway on their way out, the radio had another report. Someone had sent two pictures of the fountain, taken from the same spot a few seconds apart. The announcer said a gondola was plainly visible in one of them.

"I think it is time to move on; we are leaving a trail of questions." He urgently spoke. "I think I know where we can go. We need to lay-low for awhile."

"In here," said the Professor when they reached the Capitoline Museums. "We'll blend in with the museum visitors."



Lunch in Piazza Navona, with Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers behind them.



Lumen's Fountain of the Four Cities, as it appeared for a few seconds at lunch.

An Emperor Takes Notice

In the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, they found a marble foot large enough to make the Professor forget his own shoes. A hand stood farther along the wall. Then Lumen looked up at the head.

“Constantine,” said the Professor. “Nearly eight and a half feet of him, just from the neck up. He used to sit in the Basilica of Maxentius, down in the Forum. The whole figure was so big that the surviving pieces look like a collection of statues on their own.”

Lumen tilted her head back. The emperor’s wide eyes stared straight ahead.

Then one eyelid came down and went up again.

“He seems to recognize you,” said the Professor.

“At least somebody noticed the coat.”

Behind them, a tourist checked the photograph he’d just taken. Constantine had one eye shut. At the bottom of the picture was the back of Lumen’s head.



Constantine takes notice in the Capitoline Museums courtyard.



The tourist's photograph catches the marble eyelid on its way down.

Great Caesar's Ghost

On the way to the Forum, a café radio reported that a visitor to the Capitoline Museums had sent in a photograph of Constantine with one eye shut.

"Did he say anything about my shoes?" asked the Professor.

"No," said Lumen. "I think you're finally blending in."

A man in a toga stepped out of a stone wall.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" said the Professor.

"Julius will do," said the man.

Lumen could see the paving stones through his sandals. "Do you know the way to the Forum?"

"Straight through here." Caesar took two steps into the wall, then put his head back out. "Ah. You'll need the gate."

He hesitated. "Before you go, there's something I'd like to show you."

He led them to the ruins of Pompey's meeting hall. Pale steps appeared over the broken stone, and beyond them stood a statue.

"You know, they killed me on those steps," Caesar said sadly.

Lumen followed his gaze. "Would you like us to stay a minute?"

"If you would," he said.

They stood with him while the steps faded.

“I could have been truly great, if they had let me,” said Caesar. “And now what do people say? ‘Great Caesar’s Ghost!’ How rude is that?”

“I meant it as a compliment,” said the Professor.

“To me or to the ghost?”

The Professor hesitated.

“You see?” said Caesar.

This time he walked around the wall with them, all the way to the corner.



Caesar shows them a glimpse of Pompey’s meeting hall at Largo di Torre Argentina.

The Center of an Empire

At the Forum, Lumen stopped in front of the old Senate house. “After St. Peter’s, I thought the center of an empire would look bigger.”

“The buildings were bigger when they had roofs,” said the Professor. “The Senate met in that building. There were law courts, temples, and places where speakers addressed the crowds. When Rome outgrew this square, it built more forums beside it.”

“How much did they rule from Rome?”

“Think of northern England. Then look east to Syria and the Euphrates. The Roman provinces stretched across North Africa, and the frontier ran through parts of what we now call Germany, along the Rhine and toward the Danube. Those boundaries shifted over the centuries, but Rome was the capital of all that.”

“How long would it take to tell somebody in northern England what you’d decided here?”

“Weeks. A governor couldn’t send back a question and expect an answer by supper. Rome could give the orders, but it depended on people thousands of miles away to carry them out.”

They followed the Via Sacra uphill. Beyond the Arch of Titus, the curved wall of the Colosseum came into view.

“And when they’d finished running the world for the day,” Lumen said, “they went there?”

“On a good day,” said the Professor, “they got a seat.”



The Roman Forum and the old Senate house.

The Sound of the Arena

Inside the Colosseum, they stood at a railing above the stone walls that once lay beneath the arena floor.

“Imagine a floor right across there,” said the Professor.

Lumen laid her hand on the rail. “I’m trying.”

For a moment he thought it was the sun coming out. Then sand spread across the gap, and he saw rows of spectators where a moment ago there had been broken stone. Two men in helmets circled each other below. One lunged. A sword struck a shield, and the clang rang across the Colosseum.

Three tourists raised their phones.

“Lumen! You really are going a little wild with your magic. Try to control it before we really get into trouble.”

“I only meant to see what it looked like,” she said. “I didn’t mean to let the sound through.”

She drew her hand back. The sand faded, and the low stone walls beneath the arena came back into view.

Beside them, a tourist tapped his screen. The clang rang out again, tinny this time.

Lumen winced. “I can close the hole,” she said. “I can’t close his phone.”



For a moment, even the tourists' phones can see the ancient arena.

Moses Stays Seated

At San Pietro in Vincoli, the Professor took Lumen to see the figure at the center of Pope Julius II's tomb monument. Michelangelo's Moses was nearly eight feet tall even sitting down. He held his tablets under one arm, and his beard fell in great curls over his chest.

"Are those horns?" Lumen whispered.

"Yes. An old Latin Bible describes Moses as horned. In other translations, his face shines. Michelangelo followed the Latin tradition."

She leaned a little to one side. "Look at his foot. He looks ready to get up."

"Lumen."

"I'm only looking."

The Professor waited until they were outside. "You did very well," he said.

"So did Moses."



Michelangelo's Moses, still seated at San Pietro in Vincoli.

Apollo and Daphne

At the Galleria Borghese, Lumen walked around Bernini's sculpture until she could see both faces. Apollo was still running. Daphne had reached up with both hands, but leaves were already growing from her fingertips.

"Look down at her feet," said the Professor. "They're taking root. In Ovid's story, she asks her father to change her so she can escape Apollo. Bernini catches him just as he reaches her. What he gets hold of is bark."

Lumen studied the place where Apollo's hand met the tree.

"It boils down to who gets the wood first."

The Professor put a hand over his mouth.

"Shall I ask the guide?" she said.

"I think you've understood it perfectly."



Lumen offers her own interpretation of Bernini's Apollo and Daphne.

An Audience of Four



The Cornaro Chapel, with Teresa and the angel lit from above.

At Santa Maria della Vittoria, the Professor stopped beside Lumen in front of Bernini's The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa. Daylight from a window they couldn't see shone down the bronze rays behind her. In a marble theater box to one side, four gentlemen watched from their seats.

"Okay," said the Professor. "What does this tell you?"

"It tells me Bernini was one very successful artist."

Lumen studied the angel's little smile. She followed the point of his arrow down to Teresa's face, then looked at the hand hanging loose over the edge of the cloud.

"I'm not sure. However, I would have titled it as, 'Getting it on Cloud Nine.' "

The Professor waited.

In a more serious tone, "She looks as if she's forgotten there's anybody else in the room." Lumen glanced toward the marble gentlemen. "Which is quite a feat, considering the seating arrangements."

The Professor turned to read the plaque.

Lumen checked that his back was turned. Then she tipped her head back, closed her eyes, and let one hand fall limp. She knew she could do better with the composition. She held the pose for a full three seconds. On the fourth, she opened one eye to see how it was going over.

The gentlemen gave her nothing. Tough room.



The performance the Professor missed.

She straightened her coat. “Gentlemen,” she whispered, “I trust I can count on your discretion.”

The Professor came back. “Have you decided what you think?”

“I think I understand her better now.”

He waited for her to go on. Lumen folded her hands and looked serenely up at the altar. She could wait, too.

Outside, the Professor glanced back at the church. “Well,” he said, “we got through that one without an incident.”

Lumen slipped her arm through his. “As far as you know.”

Dinner at Trevi

By the time the plates were cleared, the whole fountain was lit. The water was blue even where the square had gone dark.

“Is that Neptune?” Lumen asked.

“Oceanus,” said the Professor. “Look at his horses. One’s ready to bolt. The other looks as if he’d be happy to stand there all night.”

“Which one am I? Can I join them for just a few minutes?”

The Professor reached for his wine. “No! Rome has seen enough of us. A mermaid in the Trevi Fountain would be way over the top. We’ve done a week’s walking in a day. And I’ve had one hell of a good time.”

“So have I,” said Lumen. “And I noticed you didn’t answer.”

He smiled. “After all the fountains today, here’s something I think you’ll like. This one is fed by the Aqua Virgo. The Romans first built that aqueduct in the days of Augustus.”

Lumen listened to the water. “They’ve been sending it into the city all this time?”

“The fountain came much later. The old aqueduct still feeds it.”

A sword clanged against a shield at the next table. Three diners were leaning over a phone. One of them dragged the video back to hear it again. Then the café radio cut in. “We’ve now received footage from three visitors to the Colosseum. All three recordings show two gladiators fighting where the arena floor used to be.”

The Professor set down his glass. “Did they say who won?”

Lumen laughed. “I thought you didn’t want anyone taking pictures.”

“I didn’t. But now that they have…”

On their way out, they stopped by the fountain. Lumen took two coins from her coat pocket and gave him one.

“They say this brings you back to Rome,” he said.

“Good. We’ve barely begun.”

They turned their backs and tossed the coins over their shoulders.

Behind them, a woman said, “Rome used to be the City of Miracles. After today, I’d call it the City of Magic.”

Lumen felt the Professor take her hand.

“It’s time to go back home.”



The last dinner in Rome, with Trevi lit across the square.

Home on Monhegan



A quiet ledge on Monhegan, at last.

As they came in over Monhegan, Lumen asked, “What day is it here?”

“Wednesday.”

“Then we’re early.”

“Let’s keep that to ourselves.”

Back on Monhegan, the Professor lowered himself onto the granite with a sigh. In the last of the light his hair was silver again. Lumen stretched her tail along the ledge until the sea just reached the tip of her fin.

“We need a rest from our vacation,” said the Professor.

Lumen winked at you.

Notes on Rome

St. Peter's. The attack on the Pietà took place on May 21, 1972. The protective glass was first installed in 1973 and replaced in 2024. Michelangelo designed the dome, and Bernini's Baldachin stands almost 29 metres high. Vatican News · St. Peter's Basilica · Holy See Press Office

The Pantheon. Roman builders lightened the concrete toward the top of the dome. The bronze figures in the story's coffers are imagined. The bronze roof supports removed in 1625 belonged to the entrance porch, and records trace that bronze to artillery. Its use in the Baldachin is unconfirmed. Italian Ministry of Culture · On the Structure of the Roman Pantheon · The Pantheon in the Seventeenth Century

Piazza Navona and the Capitoline. Bernini's four river figures are the Danube, the Ganges, the Nile, and the Río de la Plata. Constantine's marble head and other fragments are displayed at the Capitoline Museums. Turismo Roma · Capitoline Museums

Caesar and the Forum. Caesar was killed at Pompey's meeting hall, at present-day Largo di Torre Argentina. Plutarch places his fall at the base of Pompey's statue. The vanished steps are part of Caesar's vision in the story. Turismo Roma · Plutarch, Life of Caesar · Colosseum Archaeological Park · UNESCO

Moses, Daphne, and Teresa. Michelangelo's Moses is in San Pietro in Vincoli. Bernini's Apollo and Daphne is at the Galleria Borghese. Bernini's Teresa and the angel are in the Cornaro Chapel, where the carved family members watch from theater boxes. Museo Omero · Galleria Borghese · Turismo Roma

Trevi. Oceanus drives the shell-shaped chariot. The fountain is fed by the Aqua Virgo, an ancient Roman aqueduct. Tradition says that tossing a coin into Trevi brings you back to Rome. Turismo Roma

What does it mean when a mermaid winks?

The End, but not for long.