

# If I Stay (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 43 min.

Our content ratings (0-5): Violence 2; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (0-5): 2.5

*Our God is a God of salvation, and to God, the Lord,  
belongs escape from death.*

*Psalms 68:20*

Director R. J. Cutler's film, based on the young-adult novel by Gayle Forman, transports us to that mysterious border between living and dying. Set in Portland, Oregon, this romantic tale involves a teenaged girl who seems to have everything—a loving, supportive family; great talent as a cellist; and the love of the most popular boy at school. Mia's major problem (Chloë Grace Moretz) is between choosing whether to leave home to attend the prestigious Julliard or to go with her lover Adam (Jamie Blackley), whose popular regional band is about to break into the big time. Then comes the time when she faces a far greater decision.

A heavy snow day had shut down schools and businesses, so Mom and Dad (Mireille Enos and Joshua Leonard), always ready for a good family time, decide to pack up the family and head out into the country. Mia at first wants to stay home, but is persuaded to come along. The slippery road leads to a collision. Mia sees the emergency staff and the wreckage, but no one seems to see her. She sees a body covered by a cloth, and then as her unconscious body is loaded into an ambulance, she hastily climbs in. (We realize before she does that she is now a spirit or soul. Or whatever, so the question of why she needs to "ride" to the hospital when she ought to be able to

get there faster is not addressed.)

At the hospital her out of body self hears an ER staff member say, "The kid's waking up an orphan – if she wakes up." A compassionate nurse, whom we will see several times, whispers into her ear that the decision is now up to her, whether to live or die. There follows a lot of flashbacks to her past life and scenes of her visiting her critically injured brother, as well as being visited by the anxious Adam. Most moving of all is the vigil of her grandfather (Stacey Keach) who reveals to her the great sacrifice that her father had made when she was in grade school—first to quit his rock band because its touring would keep him away for too long; and then his selling his equipment so that he could buy for her her own high quality cello.

This story has much to commend it—a family that actually enjoys being together, rather than the usual Hollywood dysfunctional one; an important moral that love means sacrificing for another (I think stated by Gramps). But it also has some believability problems, as well as a major omission as far as people of faith are concerned. Unless the state liquor laws are a lot more lax in Portland, Oregon, it is hard to believe that Adam's teenaged band is allowed to play gigs in bars. And that Mia would be allowed in with other teenagers to hear the band. Also, in the vein of the miserable *Endless Love* (the 1980's version—I skipped the remake), the film shows Adam having easy access to Mia's bedroom and, as far as I could see, engaging in sex without thought of "protection." I know I might seem like a prude at this point, but I am concerned that entertainments directed to "the young adult" (which means teenagers in the case of this book) sometimes regard premarital sex as acceptable and as ordinary as drinking a glass of water to satisfy thirst. I have seen numerous films in which a virgin teenager is made to seem weird or deficient because "everyone," or so they are told, is "doing it."

From a spiritual viewpoint, the disappointment is that a film dealing with death and life makes no reference to God or to the possibility of anything beyond this life. It is true that a person hovering at the brink of death needs a strong will to live—as the nurse says, “If she wants to live, she better start fighting.” But it just might be possible that there is an equally important divine input to her predicament. Despite this film, I believe that the psalmist got it right. If I were a parent, or still ministering with a group of youth, I would want to be sure to talk over the values and beliefs that underlie such a film that treats life and death in such a secularized way.

*The review with discussion questions will appear in the October 2014 issue of Visual Parables.*