

Stay. Sit. Listen.

by Adam Sifre

There is a small church in the south of Italy, with a stained-glass window depicting the sister of John The Baptist. She dips her hand into the glass-blue waters of a vast river. When the morning light is just right, the ancient window transforms into something so beautiful, it hurts one's eyes to look at it.

I have no idea if this is true. I have never been to Italy — north or south. I cannot recall anyone ever mentioning a church there. I don't even know if John the Baptist had a sister. But it is both a comforting and exotic thought, and I want it to be true. It feels right to me. For as long as I can remember, I've held on to this image when I can. It flavors my small life in numerous strange and interesting ways, as I imagine, it is already starting to do you.

The walls of my office are institutional green — the previous owner's choice. I suspect this color of paint was the cheapest available, although sometimes I think perhaps some other nefarious motive was involved. On the largest and otherwise barren of these walls, I keep an enormous paper map of the world. There are no countries, towns or principalities named on the faded blocks of tans and yellows. Even the great swaths of blue are anonymous. There aren't even borders to show where one country ends and another begins. But a child can find southern Italy, even without the borders and my eye is often drawn there.

My intent, so many lifetimes ago, was to travel the world. I would ride elephants in Thailand, explore underwater caverns in Belize, or perhaps the city of bones under the streets of Paris. Upon the return from every adventure I would place small colored pins on the map to show where I had been. Each year would be assigned a color. Red for 1985, blue for 1986, and so on, until my blank map was filled with a brilliant tapestry of pins. Can you imagine such a thing?

Outside my small window, somewhere in the industrial wilds of an abandoned suburb of Pittsburgh, the world is an iron-gray mishmash

of thick, low hanging clouds, dead pavement and steady, invisible rain that can be felt even on this side of the glass. It is always November here and it always rains. I know that sounds crazy, but it's true. We all live in solitude here, among old, unwashed coffee cups, IKEA relics, and small piles of lottery tickets. I never look at my lottery tickets, not even to see if I've won. Someday, when my desk draw is overflowing with their false promise, I imagine I'll relent and look at one or two. If that ever happens, I promise you that each one will have a November drawing date. You believe me. Part of you does, at any rate.

The church has a priest, but no sermons. The village itself is beautiful, wedged between two small hills that are not quite perfect for growing grapes. People are happy there and they love their father, but few hunger for ritual in their spiritual lives. They simply come to the small church when it suits them, or perhaps it calls them. When they need to pray or light a candle, or just sit for few minutes while the morning sun ignites the colored tableau of John's radiant sister. The church is never full, but it is always filled with people who want to be there.

Most who do come when the sun is up and the dust motes are on clothed in splendor, are older. Even the most gentle passage of time takes a toll, and the old appreciate the value in reminiscing with their ghosts. The worn wooden benches of the small place is as neutral territory, acceptable to both living and dead.

When the night is warm — and it is almost always warm, I'm sure of it — sometimes young lovers meet. The small church is never locked. There is something both forgotten and intoxicating there that acts as a lodestone, attracting small declarations of love. The young are drawn to the dark, empty church on such nights, able to turn away no more than a Prometha moth following the moon.

It is a lie to believe that all moments are fleeting. Some last forever, and a great many of those are found inside the small church. They fill every space from floor to rafter, yet there is always room for more. Perhaps the church is not so small after all.

Do you see it yet? Has it flavored your day? Perhaps not. Perhaps the small, enormous church is simply a product of a lazy mind that has little enough places to wander these days. If so, I apologize. My intent was never to promise and not deliver. I beg you for the smallest indulgence, just enough to humor me. A polite smile will suffice. If not belief, sympathy then. For it is not easy living in this eternal November. This much, you *must* believe. I insist you believe. If any doubt lingers, you only have to glance at my faded, borderless map, covered only in a tiny field of dust, unmarred by even a single pinprick.

What other explanation can there be?

