

Take Me to Church

By Tina Morganella

You want to go to church. You want to look for God, despite your cynicism. The Duomo in Milan seems a good place to start. Centuries old, a seat of authority. You feel sure God is there and that you could sense him again. You haven't been to church in years and you confess that you don't remember your last confession. But now and then something flutters on the fringes of your mind, your hopeful curious mind, and forms a simple question: what's that?

The Duomo contributes 82 billion Euro to the overall 400 billion Euro 'Milan' brand.

Entering church should be easy. But it's not. There is a security check. Guards, armed police, army fatigues. Absurd feathered hats on solemn boys. Men in training. Serious, swarthy faces rifle through your bag while they stare at you blankly. They border on menacing when you remark, in your rudimentary Italian, that it's a shame all this is necessary. You falter. This has started all wrong.

It's dark grey inside. The light is filtered through stained glass windows. There are spots of colour, flashes of rich reds and blues. Some of the church marble has been cleaned and some of



it hasn't, so there are also shades of grey. But the ambient lighting and spotlights pick out some of the church's more impressive figures. You try to imagine the Duomo in the dead of medieval winter. How dark it would have been five hundred years ago, without the clever lighting. Hard, cold marble beneath your thin leather shoes. God does not reveal himself in shining glory, but lurks morosely in fathomless corners.

It's the hour for Mass. You look towards the altar but there's no one preparing to spread the Word of God.

A silver mask, eerily animated, in perfect repose, faces the worshippers. Serene and benign but still powerful. Enduring.

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There is a modern sculpture exhibit inside the church. Abstract pieces taking up aisle space. You didn't come to the Duomo for modern art. The contrast between acute modern angles and medieval curves and columns hurts your eyes. Each chapel is a relief from this, even if they're gaudy in their own way. You slip into a pew so that you can tilt your head all the way back to look at the lofty ceiling. And you want a moment of quiet too. But the organ is being tested and tuned. Every note sounds slightly off-key. The long single notes are hypnotic. They can't drown out, though, the thousand-voice choir of tourists who sing an international song. Whirrs and snaps recall the clicking languages of Africa. But it is not the cacophony of Babel—only the machinations of cameras and phones.

A young girl with red lipstick, dressed in a sweet summer frock, quick and bright, stands waiting to go into confession. She breathes out and clenches her hands, preparing herself, but for what? In she goes. You cannot go that far. You quietly pray for your loved ones. You light a candle. You even pray for yourself. And out of the corner of your eye you notice a scruffy middle-aged woman, who is slouching and looks fast asleep, but then suddenly comes to life. She scowls. She wears that angry look of someone

who has been woken too early. She rubs her face, she shouts “fuck off” at anyone who will understand, and then snatches her handbag off the floor and stalks out.

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The organ notes linger in the corners and tickle your ears. You think you can feel the vibration in your chest. You're not disappointed, just disorientated, confused. You hear Latin being spoken. You hear a priest's voice, over the siren call of the organ. He's preparing Communion. You stand on tip toe, amble down the naves, but still you cannot find the Mass. No, it's not at the centre end of the church as you would expect. It is in a side chapel somewhere. You wander. You wonder.

At the empty altar at the front of the church, you turn right and take stone steps down to the crypt. The crypt has a little *entrata* and *uscita*, an entry and exit that might have been used for pilgrims as much as the modern-day visitor. It is dark, very dark. Such a low ceiling, such a heavy, closed atmosphere. The tiny room is stifling and your heart beats a little quicker because you're alone with the saint. He lies in a lead and glass coffin, centuries old. You try to commit this beautiful sarcophagus to memory because it

pulses with an energy your phone camera can't capture. His bones are covered with a white and gold lace. A silver mask, eerily animated, in perfect repose, faces the worshippers. Serene and benign but still powerful. Enduring. Inside the darkened room there are bas-reliefs and tapestries picking out all his good deeds. Undoubtedly, that's what they are, even if you don't understand. There is no tourist information. You are strangely taken with San Carlo Borromeo and you only leave when others crowd in and the intense moment between you is broken.

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When you leave the crypt you notice for the first time a security clerk sitting behind a desk, reading a book and every now and then glancing at a four-screen closed circuit monitor. Behind him is a room with vinyl flooring, a soft drink vending machine and plastic chairs. A working church then—the office of God. It feels like you're peeping backstage while watching a play. The actors are blowing their noses and scratching the back of their thighs and that gossamer of fantasy, like layers of tissue paper between old photos, disintegrates in your hands.

Every time you see a painting of the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus you are overwhelmed. You don't even know why. You are not a devotee. But there is some arcane sadness it arouses in you, an emotion that is ancient and creaking, swaying

gently on rocky foundations. You stand there now, staring at an oil painting, cheeks hot, clutching your hand bag, sneaking a fingertip to the corner of your eye to dab at the tear, at once embarrassed and moved. Uncomfortable. Outside, life carries on. People are laughing, hurrying, dying.

“The body of Christ.” You hear the words, you hear the priest's steady voice, but he's still far away. You know he's holding aloft the Communion wafer and you're annoyed, you're almost desperate, to witness this, to know it's real and happening and not just some trick. You wanted to find God but you're failing.

You wonder if it's a sign.

You resign yourself to having missed Mass, to having missed an opportunity you can never retrieve. You walk back towards the entrance, past all the side chapels again, past the Madonnas and crucifixes, the silver abstract sculptures and rows of lit candles. The sense of disappointment swells and swirls inside your chest, bringing on nausea and a bitter taste in your mouth. The daylight stings your eyes and you gaze out at the chaos in the Square and realise nothing has changed.