

THE SILENT TREATMENT

Nan Parry reports on how she fled her manic city life for the peace and quiet of a spiritual retreat - and found comfort in calmness

So you won't be allowed to talk for four whole days?' The news that I have booked into a silent spiritual retreat has split my dinner-party table into two camps. The first, mostly female, group finds the idea of trading modern-day chaos for monastic austerity strangely appealing; the second faction thinks I've gone mad.

Arriving at Loyola Hall, a Catholic retreat near Liverpool run by Jesuit priests, I can still hear the debate. I keep reminding myself why I am here - the work-hard-play-hard lifestyle that helped me cope with my divorce has left me feeling empty, exhausted, emotionally strung out. But, as the centre's iron gates swing open, the doubts of the second group grow louder. Am I being masochistic? Conditions here are stringent - no books, no telephones... no escape. What will happen when I just stand still?

A friend had told me that at Loyola Hall it doesn't matter if you're not Catholic - you just need to be open to the idea that God exists. 'Is this your first time?' asks Kathleen, the homely receptionist, as she ushers me into the grand 19th-century building and sketches out the skeletal structure of the day - breakfast, lunch, supper, and two half-hour slots with Father Ian Tomlinson, my spiritual director. The founder of the Jesuits, St Ignatius, was a believer in Spiritual Direction, a sort of 'assisted soul-searching', whereby an elder in the community helps you look at where you are going in life and how to live more fully. 'It'll make a change for you,' says Kathleen. 'Things can get a bit manic in London, can't they?' It is my own manic tendencies I'm faced with, as I struggle to slow my step to match hers on our way to the residential wing. What am I rushing for? As the door to my room shuts, my eyes fill with tears. The scrupulously clean room stares back - single bed, wooden desk, en suite bathroom... Why am I crying? As I gaze into the mirror, reaching for the eye make-up remover, my phone rings; I switch it off.

At seven, I head to the dining room. A dozen men and women, aged from their 20s to their 60s, are clustered round a large table. The only strange thing about this group is that they are eating their tuna salad and toast in silence. I am seated, as I will be for the next four days, at a separate table with two nuns, who I later learn are here on a 30-day retreat. Even nuns need retreats, then, I console myself. They eat with a calm that makes me feel like Maria in *The Sound of Music*. How do you solve a problem like my unconscionably loud toast-scraping? My fear that they might think me a flibbertigibbet is assuaged when nun number one lets out a muffled burp.

As I climb the staircase to meet my spiritual director, my angst grows intolerable. Will I never find a degree of peace, not even here? 'What can we do for you, Nan?' asks Father Ian. Something compassionate in his smile makes me feel more upset, not less. Within minutes I am sobbing, confiding the details of my inner restlessness to a man I have just met. Just being with this wonderfully gentle human being is like taking a sleeping pill. 'There's a verse in the Psalms, Nan,' he says: "'Be still, and know that I am God.'" That's your only task while you're here - to stay still and not float up into your

head.' 'But I'm like a helium balloon,' I whisper. He pauses: 'And when the balloon bursts?'

It is a question that hovers over the increasing steadiness of the next few days. As I loll about the lush gardens, sipping tea and writing in my journal, the teariness expends itself. I came here searching for answers, but the urgency to find them has subsided - and this feels like an answer in itself. In the silence, my jostling thoughts have given way to a spacious emptiness that seems, quite simply, heavenly.

Loyola Hall is a strangely timeless place and my departure day arrives like a thief in the night. My taxi arrives and this time I know why I'm crying - I don't want to leave.

A month on and the underlying sense of calm has not subsided. My mind feels freer, roomier, more fluid - less prone to cling at thoughts or worry at them. Of course, my problems have not been magicked away - the hills, as it were, are not alive with the sound of music. But then sometimes, it seems, what my busy, overactive life requires is the sound of silence.

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