

FLOWERS, BUT IN THE WRONG GARDEN

By Colm McDermott

I shuffled into the meditation hall, the last of a crowd of about twenty people, keeping my head down. I'd already scanned the faces and reckoned I was the youngest person there, which made me feel slightly proud but also a bit nervous, like I was gate-crashing someone's retirement party. When everyone was seated – the chairs had been arranged randomly throughout the hall – I found a spot near the back and sat looking down at a sad-looking carpet-stain by my foot...

It was October 25th, 2019. The Kilcuan Retreat Centre, in Clarinbridge, had been borrowed by Sunyata – a Buddhist community based in Sixmilebridge – for the purpose of holding a ten-day silent retreat in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Theravada is Buddhism's oldest school. Its adherents place enormous emphasis on the Buddha's original teachings – the Buddha Dhamma – which are contained within the Pali Canon. As you might expect, Theravada Buddhism is conservative, simple, and disciplined. On a silent retreat this means no talking, no music, no reading, no writing, no eating after 1pm, no masturbation, and – most importantly – *lots* of meditating.

Sitting in that meditation hall, hands clasped, watching through the large front window the trees flashing their rainy branches in the floodlights, I reminded myself of why I was there: to break my addiction to prescription painkillers.

I was 31.

It has puzzled me, subsequently, why painkillers offer – or at least appear to offer – so much solace for people suffering from psychological afflictions. After all, what has anxiety/depression got to do with pain? But perhaps, and this only occurred to me much later, long after I'd left the retreat, that it has *everything* to do with pain.

I took my first painkiller for a wisdom tooth that I'd gotten pulled. Within one hour, not only was my pain gone, but also that nagging feeling of self-doubt was gone. I thought, is this what normal people feel like all the time? I could think straight, at last. I could play piano better. Time slowed. I felt at ease with myself and with everyone else too. Something about that painkiller had allowed me to *let go*.

Here's my analogy for what happened: a person who's born and who grows up with static noise playing constantly in the background will assume that this noise *is* silence. What other reference have they got? By the time I took that painkiller –

I was twenty-four - I had been afraid for so long I could no longer remember what it felt like to be unafraid. Fear had become my baseline, my static noise. It was so pervasive I didn't even see it. I couldn't. The painkiller showed me - I mean *viscerally* showed me - what it felt like to be free of fear. It weighed down the flapping corners of my mind. I didn't feel high, or even euphoric: I felt like I had been reset to a previous, better version of myself.

But it's the same old story: things escalate. Years passed. Gradually my tolerance rose. Soon I was taking painkillers to manage dull afternoons and other things to manage the withdrawals. I remember lying in the recovery position on the bathroom floor of an apartment in the North Inner City, praying to a bottle of Toilet Duck, convinced that I'd overdosed. What scared me most, at that moment, was not dying - I'd made my peace with that - but what my family and friends would think. *Junkie. Scumbag. Failure.* These words, along with others, zoomed around the inside of my head. Of course, I didn't overdose, I didn't come close, which meant that pretty soon I was back to my old tricks.

Whole days went by that I don't quite remember now, like some movie I half-watched. I recall only fragments. Various times I tried quitting. In one attempt at going cold turkey, I stayed awake for three days and became convinced I was going to have a seizure. My arms and legs did this weird twitching, and I found myself prone to fits of uncontrollable crying. Eventually, the camel's back broke and my girlfriend of eleven years left me. I moved back in with my parents. The illusion that was my future came to a crashing halt. The projector had stopped projecting and I was left staring at a blank wall.

And so, at 31, I signed up for a retreat.

Days there follow a precise structure. Woken at six by a person walking the halls shaking a brass bell, then it's off to the meditation hall for morning puja, which is a kind of ceremony involving chanting, incense-lighting, and a bit of warm-up meditation. Then, breakfast, which consisted of porridge, boiled eggs, tea, and as much toast as you can stuff in your face. Then back to the meditation hall for an hour of sitting meditation, followed by an hour of walking meditation, outside, then another hour of sitting meditation. Then lunch, followed by another round of sitting, walking, sitting. The repetition, coupled with the general boredom, has a hypnotic effect, and your mind drifts frequently into weird terrain. Seemingly trivial life events get replayed and take on new significance. In the evenings, after we've each received our square of dark chocolate - dark chocolate, for some reason, is exempt from Buddha's no-food-after-midday rule - there's a dhamma talk, which focusses on one of the *core teachings* and how they can be applied to our

meditation. Lights out is at ten and, after what seems like a brief, dark moment, the whole thing creaks back to life with the awful ringing of that bell.

Looking back, now, sitting at this desk, I wonder what made me sign up for a silent retreat in the first place. I'm a qualified pharmacist and, as such, have been taught to suspect anything even remotely resembling mumbo-jumbo. I'd never heard of anyone else doing a retreat, nor had I any real interest in Buddhism. But like most of the blessings I've received in my life, this one came like a bolt from the blue - it was my mother who suggested it - apropos of nothing, and even before packing my blue Honda Jazz for Clarinbridge I remember sensing that something important was about to happen.

The first thing was I got bored and restless. My back ached from too much weird sitting and slow walking. So, I walked faster, to see if that helped, or occasionally - during fits of masochistic excess - I walked even slower than the slowest walk I'd ever walked. When you walk that slowly your muscles start screaming at you to go quicker, work harder, please, anything, just **MOVE!!!** It's horrible. It turns out that your mind, like nature, abhors a vacuum - it prefers to feel like it's accomplishing something - and will literally invent things for you to get stressed about. So, I changed my walking path, I walked backwards, barefoot, I tried it with my eyes closed. I tried full-lotus, half-lotus, kneeling, sitting, standing. Pretty soon I'd stopped sleeping: I just don't need it. I was suddenly aware of a constant, deafening ringing in my ears and wondered how long it had been there. I became attuned to my body, its noises and changes. I felt certain that the sound of my lunch digesting was driving the others nuts. I was victim to sudden bursts of emotion. Tears. Laughter. I flew into a dozen silent furies whenever someone touched my favourite cup. I looked around and assumed that all the other pious shaky zombies knew way much more than me. I went back over all the awful, hurtful things I'd done. I pictured the faces of the people I'd loved and hurt. I punished myself by sitting longer in my pain, walking slower. I meditated late into the night, night after night, without cease. Because I felt I had to get clean, I had to get my act together, I pushed and pushed and pushed, and thought and thought and thought. And then, at one point, my mind ran out of fuel, I couldn't think anymore, and I cracked.

It was the fourth day. I was face-down on my yoga mat in *balasana*, child's pose, with tears tumbling down my cheeks. The yoga-mat was soaked. I'd been there already about forty minutes, totally ignoring the pretty young yoga-instructor who was giving gentle encouragements to the rest of the group. I thought: Screw this. I'm going home. I bundled up my yoga-mat, went to my room, and threw my stuff together. I was on my way out the door when I heard a voice in my head. It stopped me, of course it did: it was a voice in my head. But not the kind of voice

that makes you question your sanity, there was nothing forceful about it, it was more like some part of me had offered up an idea for consideration. The idea was this: to have a cup of tea before I left. So, I did. And it was okay. And while I sat there drinking, sceptically, I waited to see if the voice had anything else to offer. It suggested I go back into the meditation hall and do nothing. Just sit there, relax, and observe. And so I did that too (by that stage I'd given up trying to understand what was going on) and it was okay too. When the thoughts came I let them go, and when the emotions arose I let them pass. After a while I noticed that the surfaces of things were sparkling. I was beyond caring. It looked nice, that was enough. The trees outside were waving their branches, only now they seemed cheerful. When I looked down I saw that the little brown carpet-stain was still staring up at me, only now its expression had transformed into one of genuine warmth. I got a good feeling looking at that stain. Like me, it knew how it felt to disappoint.

It was not all smooth sailing after that, not by a long shot, but there were moments of beauty, and insight, lots of them. I watched ice-crystals form on the underside of holly branches. On the walking path I realised I'd been clenching my stomach for years and when I finally decided to let go, and allow my belly flop over my trousers, there was such an enormous release I thought I was going to float into the trees. I saw - I mean really *saw*, like it was written in the air - my tendency to rationalise instances of high emotion. During one talk our teacher, Nick Scott - a man resembling Santa Clause - said that in order to understand emotion one must simply stand under it. This struck me as utterly true. I realised then I didn't have *figure out* what was going on all the time or - as a matter of fact - *any* of the time, that if I stayed long enough in one moment, and simply observed whatever suffering was happening, the suffering would resolve.

It was that simple.

People are like gardens, born free and empty but are quickly conditioned to their environments. This environment, plus your native soil, gives rise in each to a flower: the people-pleasing flower, the joking flower, the shy flower, the confident flower, the bully, the gossip, the drug-user, binge-drinker, over-eater, rationaliser. These flowers serve a function - they keep the garden going - but sometimes, even long after the environment has changed, these flowers still clamour to be fed. Ripping them out only disperses the seeds, causing new flowers to grow, so you've got to take them at the root. But how? By doing the hardest thing of all: nothing. Simply sit, and watch, and wait. Over time your flowers will fold themselves away. It's hard. Each one feels like a little death. But eventually this feeling fades, the despair fades, and some new thing takes its place: a flower, perhaps, but in the right garden.