

# THE SWALLOW

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A day of silence, that was the plan. To drive across England to a Cistercian monastery, arriving in time for early morning Mass. I'd booked a place in the guesthouse for a 'quiet day', and would immerse myself in the wordless peace of a Trappist community until after Vespers. I left soon after daybreak. It was a soft July morning, the hour of the small animals and birds. Once off the motorways I found myself in a pastoral landscape of rolling meadows and bleached cornfields, hedgerows and dark green forests under a windy sky.

I rang the bell. Nobody came. I hesitated, aware of a cctv camera watching me. I wondered what to do. Were the monks deep in prayer? But I could hear voices. I rang again. After a while a monk opened the heavy wooden door. He looked confused as I introduced myself, but shuffled me laconically into a small room near the front door. It had four 1950s armchairs and a wooden table and smelled musty. The carpet was dirty, the wastepaper basket full of used tissues. *I was a stranger, and you welcomed me...* The window looked out over a noisy gravel driveway where I'd parked my car alongside several others (evidently a retreat group was staying in the guesthouse). Before he hurried away I somehow remembered to ask how to find my way through the precincts to the church, and how to let myself in and out using the security keypad on the front door of the guesthouse. The toilet I would have to find for myself.

Mass was balm, the church a model of simplicity and austerity in cream stone, vaults soaring from plain pillars, no ornamentation, light pouring in through clear glass windows, a triple lancet at the east end. The monks sat in semi-circles to either side of a monolithic altar on which stood a simple wooden cross and two lit candles. The brethren were robed in hooded cowls, some all in white, others in white habits with black scapulars.

Breakfast with the roomful of retreatants resounded with inconsequential chatter. I had tea and toast in silence, smiled at the woman sitting next to me, and fled. In no time at all a clattering tea trolley was stacked up and wheeled around on the flagstone

floor until it found its resting place outside my door, a public phone across the hallway was in constant use, and the room next to mine gradually filled with folk drinking cups of tea and chattering about the weather and ailments of the ageing. I tried to read, and couldn't, tried to write, and couldn't, tried to rest, and couldn't, tried to meditate, and couldn't.

I went back to the church. In there, silence was tangible. In silence, I wondered, an element? I walked around the side altars: the one to the Guardian Angels had an inscription from St Bernard, founder of the monks' Order: *The angels offer to God our labours and our tears*. I sat for a while in the deep peace of the nave, inhaling the quiet, exhaling the discharge of my disappointment. A few people came and went. But it was cold and grew colder. I had to move.

I walked through the garden, past trim roses and mown grass, up a stony path past a sudden chapel with a *pietà* shocking in its super life-size, to the Calvary statue at the top of a rock overlooking the monastic buildings. An edge on the breeze made it too chilly to sit outside. As I returned down the path, the sound of chatter drifted up from the guesthouse and its garden. I closed my door but there was no escape. I struggled against the tide of sounds, tried to read, to write, to rest, but the smell of lunch being cooked reminded me horribly of school (days of mince and twice-cooked cabbage). It was quieter, much quieter (and more fragrant) at home.

I returned to the church for the noonday office of Nones. As the iron clang of the bell filled the church, the monks drifted in one by one and settled into the choir stalls. The chanting of three psalms, and a short reading, echoed around the nave. What a good idea I thought, to stop for ten minutes at midday to take time out to do this.

Walking back afterwards I was joined by a gentleman who, much to my dismay, wanted to chat. But he was more simpatico than I assumed and was on a 'quiet day' too, a regular, he told me. I mentioned my predicament and he responded kindly (he'd been given a much quieter room). I told him next time I came I would bring earplugs. He smiled.

I didn't stay for that lunch with the crowd of chattering non-Trappist retreatants. I climbed into my car and left. Halfway down the drive I stopped to turn on John Tavener's *Kyrie*, his holy, mystical setting of the 'Lord Have Mercy', this oldest of responses in the Christian liturgy. Driving down to the motorway through the beauty of England's countryside in high summer listening to the haunting voice of Björk singing – breathing – the *kyrie* went some way to giving me the tranquillity I'd been seeking that day. But I could have found it at home.

It was five hours since the guesthouse slice of toast. I needed sustenance. Over a bleak pot of tea and inedible pastry at a service station (forlorn and mysterious places where I cannot begin to fathom the mind of God) I thought, what can I do to compensate for the failure of my day of peace? I decided to stop at a medieval church I'd visited once before - without my camera: I would return while the afternoon light was good, and take pictures of this beautiful deserted building that dates back over a thousand years.

I entered into the ancient silence. St John's Duxford is a church stripped of ornament, hardly used today, inhabited by the spirits of those who built and loved it, serenely content to be left alone by the Babel of the world, a church mercifully ignored over the centuries by restorers or perpetrators of the baroque. Simplicity in stone from Saxon through Norman to Early English, with an exquisite Decorated chapel in the north aisle, flooring of clay pavers and pannets, plain glass in the windows, fragments of medieval wallpaintings.

The silence was broken within moments. A frantic swallow had somehow found its way in and was trapped. How long it had been there was anybody's guess. It was dive-bombing through the aisles and across the nave, zooming past within touching distance, aggressive and hostile in its misery. I knew there was nothing I could do to help, except leave all the doors wide open which I did. For twenty minutes it stormed through the church, darting hither and thither, hectic, zooming high and low, desperate to escape, unrelenting in abortive efforts to find a way out. The swallow is a much bigger bird than I'd imagined: I was taken by its muscularity, the beauty of its velocity, its streamlined speed, the stunning blue of its back - a colour that has no name. I thought of swallows sleeping in the wing, of the thousands of miles of their migration. And of this one, imprisoned in a confined space, uncomprehending, desperately seeking space.

I walked around taking pictures, then sat down to write some notes. After a while I realised there was complete silence. I sat in the stillness, absorbing it. The swallow had discovered its freedom at last through the open doors. Somewhere now high in the skies, it had left me with silence.