



“You’re a very brave girl.” There are only so many times you can hear this without thinking you might have made a monumental mistake. After all, stupidity and bravery are often no more than a hair’s breadth apart.

Unfortunately for me, there’s no getting out of it now. For I am being escorted around a Franciscan convent, the Poor Clares of Arundel, West Sussex, which will be my home for the next seven days. From what I can deduce from the sisters as they greet me, and tell me how brave I am, living as a nun requires a certain amount of courage. I’m not entirely sure why, but I’m about to find out.

How, you may ask, did this come to pass? (Believe me, I asked myself.) Well, if I’m truly honest, the idea began to ferment during a cold Sunday night watching *Call The Midwife*. “Aren’t nuns nice,” I thought to myself. “I quite like the idea of tea and cake and a bit of singing.” Then it started to churn into something more profound. The need to feel something I haven’t felt in years: still, content, at peace. Because all I ever seem to feel nowadays is stressed, overworked and tired (usually all three). I want to know if their life is as calm, pure and good as I imagine, and – I suppose – to ask if there’s a feasible argument, in this day and age, to live in a manner so removed from the rest of society. Is choosing not to engage with the hardships of the modern world and dedicating your life to God a sacrifice or a refusal to grow up?

So here I am, stood in the middle of an 1886 monastery, while Sister Pat (the convent’s second in command) explains that, as their guest, there are certain rules I must live by. This means waking up at 5am, being in the chapel at 5.45am, then again at 7.30am, then again at 8.30am for Mass, and then another four to five times during the day. I will be required to help in the kitchen, garden, laundry and on general cleaning duties. There is a strict ban on mobile phones. Talking during prayer, meal times and working hours is to be kept to an absolute minimum. Between church services there are

# SPOT THE NEW GIRL

Obedience, poverty, chastity. Can life as a nun really be a fulfilling existence? *Stylist’s* Lucy Foster packs a modest suitcase and heads off to find out

STYLISTS LUCY FOSTER  
HAS NEVER FELT MORE  
LIKE A NOVICE IN HER LIFE

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK HARRISON



periods for spiritual reading, scripture reading and dedicated times when the sisters can talk to each other, such as tea breaks and an hour twice a week called 'recreation'. Bedtime is after night prayer, at 8.45pm. Most of the women at this convent have followed this timetable for decades. Some have spent their entire adult lives here. I am faced with just seven days yet already the strictness feels exhausting and oppressive: no phone, no posh coffee, no wine, no fancy lunches, and no husband. Perhaps bravery is precisely what I need.

### SISTER ACT

The first two days pass with little thought on my part. I obediently go about my duties. I'm determined *not* to think about how long I've agreed to be here in case I start to feel trapped. But I'm far from miserable. The nuns seem lovely and they're keen to share their stories. Sister Clare, now 86, was a successful accountant's assistant in Fifties London who decided to become a nun when she was 30. She tells me how she cried every night the first week she joined the order, and heard her mother's voice calling her name. Sister Joseph, 85, a farmer's daughter from Co Limerick, recalls how, at just 15 she knew she'd be a nun. She joined an order two years later with no more life experience to

### "I KNOW WHAT I'VE GIVEN UP: THE CAREER, THE SEXUAL INTIMACY, THE CHILDREN"

her name than milking her father's cows.

But it's Sister Geraldine Marie's story that has the greatest impact. At 43, she's one of the youngest sisters here. She's French and very astute. She went to university in Paris, studied history and aged just 23, when life seems to be bursting with potential, became a nun. All the sisters say they were called by God. Sometimes a voice, sometimes just a feeling

that wouldn't go away. Or they knew, when they first stepped onto the convent porch, that they were home. "Peace of mind" was a phrase often used. "I would have had no peace of mind if I hadn't answered the call."

Sister Geraldine and I hang out the laundry together (I now know what nuns wear to bed: pyjamas) and she tells me about her life. I wonder whether she ever saw herself having a family.

life away. (He eventually came round and ended up paying for the chapel organ.) Sister Geraldine's father went a step further and said he would never see her again (he too softened). Mothers, interestingly, seem to have been far more understanding about their choices. Boyfriends were left behind. Touchingly, many came to visit their former girlfriends at the convent in the hope they'd change their minds. None did. These men

answers at all.

A few days later, Sister Aelred, the youngest 70-year-old I have ever met, tells me she spent her early 30s reaffirming the choices she'd made. "Those years are rough," she explains. "You question yourself and feel the pull of all the other things you could have done. Until then, you never had any doubts."

It strikes me that perhaps the sisters battle these, and other doubts, every day. Their faith in God is something that requires constant effort. Sister Angela, 75, explains faith is "illuminous darkness"; and you reach out knowing you're in touch with God but not in a tangible, physical sense. For Sister Aelred, faith is "like standing outside a house, throwing gravel up at a window, and you would have given up ages ago if it wasn't for the occasional twitch of the curtains".

I've always admired people who have faith; I think it's courageous to choose to believe in something you can't possibly ever know. And from what I can see, all the major religious texts are just guidelines on how to live a good life. If people choose to follow those codes of behaviour (in a non-extreme manner, of course), I'm all for it.

Unsurprisingly, it's not long before I am asked about my own religious background. "I was brought up Church of England," I say. "Well, I was brought up Catholic but I *chose* to become one," is the lightning quick reply from Sister Pat. But even though I am a novice here, and know nothing of Catholicism, I'm never once made to feel like an outsider.

And that's something that's always bothered me about religion. Because if you are kind and good, but you're not religious per se, does that mean you're destined to eternal damnation? "No, no," says Sister Aelred. She's been my boss this week, giving me gardening tasks and making sure I don't humiliate myself more than necessary. She calls me "Lucy, love" and I think she's wonderful. She's so considered and so gentle in her manner. "Every person in the world ever born had God's light in them. Most people who do what they can to be kind and right will come to God."



A DAY IN THE LIFE AT POOR CLARES: BIBLE STUDY, CHOIR PRACTICE AND A SPOT OF ROTAVATING WITH SISTER PAT



"Yes, of course, but it wasn't something I really thought about until I was 32 and my younger sister came to visit me with her new baby. Babies have such a strong smell; even at evening prayers I could still smell the baby on my habit... and that's when you realise the sacrifice." She folds a tea towel and looks at me. "That there will never be a child who will call me 'mummy'. I know what I've given up: the career, the travelling, the sexual intimacy, the children..." she tails off. "I'm still in a conversation with God about children." It's so personal, so heartrending, I have to turn away so she doesn't see me cry.

Many of the nuns' choices to join an order are tinged with sacrifice. Families' reactions to their daughters' decisions were invariably negative. Sister Fidelis' father felt she was throwing her

came with trees as gifts to plant, tokens for their sweethearts to remember them by.

Many of the sisters spoke of "being in love" but each said that, in the end, the choice was clear as they couldn't imagine living their lives with the men they'd fallen for. I find it hard to understand how the pull of this life and God could be greater than the pull of romance, partnership, a family of your own. And besides, it could be argued that it's so much easier, so simplified, so immature in a way, to dedicate your life to a man who doesn't leave a trail of dirty clothes through the house and who doesn't answer back. But then, as the week passes, I begin to think how hard it must be to dedicate your life to a man who barely



As the week passes, I find the rhythms of life here to be far from oppressive. It's actually incredibly soothing. The 5am starts and strict timetable make the 8.45pm bedtime a godsend, pun *not* intended. Every night, I look with growing affection at my little simple room – or 'cell', as the nuns, slightly ominously, refer to them. There's a single bed with clean, mismatched linen and a sink in the corner with a small mirror over it. Lino on the floor, magnolia walls and a chest of drawers for clothes (I was told I only needed a decent outfit for church and an outfit for work). I also have an easy chair (a luxury for guests), a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall and a small vase of fresh flowers from the garden. The windows open up onto a copse of trees. The unlined curtains might not stop the light, but what does it matter when you're waking at dawn?

### HOME FROM HOME

I'm actually surprised at how at ease I am here. It all feels very familiar. It's similar to boarding school, where I spent four years, and the frugality is something I was brought up with. Nothing is thrown away and there's no better place to understand this than the refectory, where meals are served. I first discover this at breakfast. It's 6.30am and the scent of toast is wafting around. I whisper to Sister Pat: "Sorry to bother you but I can't seem to find the toaster?" She looks at me with a stern but not unkind expression. "You can only have toast on Sundays. Some of the older sisters are allowed it daily for their digestion."

Later I discover toast is seen as an indulgence. When I can finally have toast for breakfast on Sunday, rather than bread and butter, it's the best toast I've ever eaten.

Lunch is the big meal of the day and there's always a pudding with custard. And you have to eat every last morsel. Crusts of bread are kept in a bowl on the side so you can use them to soak up any sauce on your dish. When I go to wash my plate and cutlery (everyone washes their own crockery after a meal), the sisters



LUCY ON DRYING DUTY, BEFORE A TEA BREAK WITH SISTERS JOSEPH, GRAÇA AND ANNE

have already wiped their plates clean. The inherent goodness of this simple action, the making sure that nothing is wasted, makes me smile.

Sadly, this is a way of life that is diminishing as most of the sisters are very old and some are very poorly (the crackle of pill packets at mealtimes is the giveaway). Sister Leo, the abbess, tells me they'd love to have some younger nuns join, that 30 would be a good age, but 20 might be too big an age gap between the new recruit and the rest of the sisters. Many are over 70, yet they all look incredible and are full of life, cracking jokes about terrorising parrots and bantering with each other over who can't hit B-flat at singing practice. Clearly, decades of clean living



and the lack of worldly worries does wonders.

### GRAVE THOUGHTS

However, all the home grown cabbage in the world can't save you from the fate that awaits us all. While strolling around the huge walled garden with Sister Pat, we pass a small cemetery in the corner. "Oooh," I say, perhaps with a hint of distaste. "Do you all get buried here too?" "Well, yes," comes the matter-of-fact reply. "But if there are 23 of you now, and you've had many generations of nuns here for the last 130 years, do you just get buried on top of each other?" "Yes." "But..." I must look slightly appalled. Sister Pat is unmoved. "The undertaker comes with a metal rod and pushes it into the ground to see if the coffins have disintegrated enough to take another coffin."

I suppose when you spend

your life praying for eternal life, death really does lose its sting.

Before I leave, Sister Leo carves out an hour for me in her office, with parquet floors and high windows that let in the warm morning breeze. As we sit and chat over a cup of tea and a digestive biscuit, her estuary vowels remind me of my mum. And I put to Sister Leo the question I've tried, and failed, to ask everyone. Essentially, if there are so many ways to do good as a Christian, what purpose is there in shutting yourself away from society?

"What do you know of Jesus?" she replies. I look blank. "Well, you know he was a healer. You know he was a teacher. And you also know he went into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights to commune with God. Now, you can follow Jesus as a teacher, or a doctor, but we choose to concentrate on God, just as Jesus did in the wilderness. We are the powerhouses of the church; this is where the electricity comes from. People come here to get their battery charged."

And I understand. I really do. Because I'm genuinely so sad to leave. I'm struggling, as I have in church, in all these thoughtful interviews, to keep it together. It's so alien to me to feel this emotional all the time. I've loved it here, loved these people, the simplicity and purity of their life. Have I found God? Well, I never thought God was a man with a white beard in the clouds. But I have reconnected with a deeper, more meaningful understanding of life, I've remembered how it feels to be awestruck by nature (a world away from elbowing your way onto the Northern Line).

But there's a final question I need to ask, one I think everyone would like to ask those who have dedicated their life to God. "Has it," I begin falteringly, "ever crossed your mind that death could just be the end?" Sister Leo takes a sip of tea and is, as ever, unfazed. "Yes, it has. But I suppose if it is rubbish, it isn't a bad way to live."

I look around at the sunlight streaming through the trees and think about the peace and the joy I've felt in the seven privileged days I've spent here, and I couldn't agree more.



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## THE TIMETABLE

*A typical day with the Poor Clares*

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|---|--|
| ◆ 5AM: Wake up and shower                             | ◆ 11.50AM: Midday Prayer in the chapel |
| ◆ 5.45AM: Office of Readings in the chapel            | ◆ 12.30PM: Lunch                       |
| ◆ 6.30AM: Breakfast                                   | ◆ 2.30PM: Work in the garden           |
| ◆ 7AM: Return to room for spiritual reading           | ◆ 4PM: Tea                             |
| ◆ 7.30AM: Morning Prayer in the chapel                | ◆ 4.30PM: Gospel reading               |
| ◆ 8AM: Return to room for scripture reading           | ◆ 5.50PM: Evening Prayer               |
| ◆ 8.30AM: Mass  | ◆ 6.30PM: Supper                       |
| ◆ 9.30AM: Prepare lunch and have a coffee and biscuit | ◆ 8.15PM: Night Prayer                 |
| ◆ 10AM: Work in the garden                            | ◆ 8.45PM: Bed                          |

