

Sister Elizabeth's rose

We were new to all this, knowing
nothing about religious retreats –
or Cistercian nuns, come to that,
so we hadn't a clue about
what to expect.

Open to the elements, the abbey
was perched on the top of a hill.
A note on the main door told us
to ring and enter. The bare hall
smelled of polish.

A stark notice about prayers.
Five times a day, every day,
beginning at the bleak hour
of 3.30am when the spirit
is at its peak.

From the shadows, a tall nun
emerged, her long grey skirts
whispering as she walked. We
asked to see Sister Elizabeth –
'If that's possible?'

'Who shall I say is calling?'
Now this posed a problem.
'It's a present,' we said. 'From
a friend in France,' showing her
the rose in its pot.

Sister Elizabeth, plump as
a dumpling, cradled the rose
stroking its crumpled pink petals.
She looked bewildered, saying,
'I never get visitors.'

They served us coffee in the
gloom of their Spartan parlour,
wooden table, upright chairs,
an intimidating cross hanging
high on the wall.

They showed us photographs,
talked about coming to terms
with email. Ordinary women,
ordinary conversation, bizarre
circumstances.

Following in Sister Elizabeth's
wake, we trailed across beaded
grass to the garden she had dug
out of the hillside. 'Sometimes
I have to get out.'

But she'll never get out. A
neat graveyard waits at the back.
She was almost late for prayers.
'Look at the time,' she gasped, lifting
her skirts and running.

Moira Andrew