



HOME DISCOMFORT: When the TV packs in during a pandemic lockdown, you know you're in a fresh spot of trouble in the fight against loneliness

It's tough getting to know the difference between solitude and loneliness

I HAVE been patient. I have been compliant. I have scrupulously observed the Covid code of hygiene at home and abroad. (Abroad? Hah! Chance would be a fine thing!)

I have even been cheerful in a 'what can't be cured must be endured' sort of way. My world has shrunk to a daily trip to the paper shop 500 yards away and once weekly half-blind scurry round the supermarket, my glasses misted over above a mask, impulse-buying tasty things to boost my morale – to which my creaking waistband can attest.

I am fed up, literally and metaphorically. My telephone bill is astronomical via keeping in tenuous touch with friends and relations, though we have little to say to each other. In the initial days of lockdown I embarked upon ambitious schemes – deep cleaning, decluttering and throwing out. They're abandoned long ago.

The Good Spare Room hosts a Kilimanjaro of black bin bags full of bursting with stuff, before remembering that all the charity shops are shut and now they smell of abandonment. Early on, I sensibly closed the doors of rooms not in use. My sole pot plant, an ornamental ivy, has died of neglect, in the Good Bathroom.

Though I'm very fond of my own company, you can get too much of a good thing. As the Loving Spouse used to say, "sometimes you're very hard to stick".

How right he was. I'm currently suffering murderous envy of Scots, Welsh and English women getting haircuts, highlights and their eyebrows tinted, while I turn into a dandelion clock.

I feel like a frustrated toddler, skulking about, kicking chairs and muttering "S'not fair, so it isn't!" I thought I was managing so well – revelling in doing as I please (viz. as little as possible) luxuriating in idleness and long lie-ins; reading a lot and

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cooking favourite dinners.

Now I can't concentrate long enough to finish a novel and find myself eating 'cool' oil' salad on a freezing day sooner than have the lettuce walk out the front door of its own accord.

Also, my chocolate consumption has seriously increased while watching repeats of programmes already seen and there's a radio burbling in every room to mask the sound of silence.

"How are you spending your time?" friends ask. I've gained an honours degree in footering and mooning about.

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With ample leisure for reflection, I've worked out the difference between solitude and loneliness.

'Solitude' – the very word has an easeful serenity about it, a contemplative and relieving positivity after the hurly-burly of work or the exit of visitors, however welcome. Time to relax, to think and plan, to do your nails, pluck your eyebrows or forget to dust. Solitude is walking in the garden under my six white cherry trees in full bloom on a fine evening with a glass of wine.

Loneliness is when the corkscrew lodges immovably in the wine bottle and there's nobody there to get it out; or finding oneself marooned at midnight in a dress with a stuck back zipper (an intimate service one can hardly ask of a neighbour). Or there's a power-cut and you can't remember in the pitch dark where you put the torch or candles and anyway, you haven't any matches.

These are lived experiences I assure you. Seeking solitude is a conscious choice succinctly summed up by that well-worn phrase, "Give my head peace".

Loneliness is circumstantial, a precarious state of apprehensive 'what-iffery?' One of the bleakest words in the English language is 'alone'. We're gregarious by nature – pack animals but with souls. The necessary pandemic penance of isolation has done untold damage to the human psyche. Look how relaxation of Covid rules elsewhere has engendered a Gadarene rush of dangerous gladness to beaches, beauty spots and shopping malls.

We crave company and connection. As somebody famous once said, "loneliness wouldn't be so hard to fight if I didn't have to do it all by myself".

And now, the final straw. The living room television has snuffed it. "It's died of old age," is the verdict of Richard Overtheroad, who knows about these things.

What fresh hell is this?

ON THIS DAY

APRIL 13 1921

Monaghan Protestants Slain

DUBLIN Castle issues an account of the evidence given at a Court of Inquiry by two children, Sarah Fleming, aged eight, and Samuel Fleming, aged eleven, who described the murder of their father and brother and the destruction of their house. The inquiry concerned the death of William John Fleming, a farmer aged 65, and Robert Fleming, his son, aged 24, both of Castleblayney [Co Monaghan] on March 29.

Little Sarah said she remembered waking up on Easter Monday night. There was cheering outside the house. Her father opened the window and asked: 'What do you want?' Someone said they wanted him to surrender a gun and ammunition. She smelt petrol and heard a window broken at the back of the house. At the command of the men, who were carrying guns with bayonets and who had flash-lamps, she and her brother stood by a ditch at the side of the road. One of the men fired and she felt a burning pain in her left arm. After a while her father came, crippled. The house was burning and her brother, Bob was shot dead.

Samuel Fleming corroborated the evidence of his sister, adding that the men demanded that his father should surrender 'all arms and ammunition to the IRA'. His father said that he would never surrender. Before his brother and father were killed he heard two whistles and about twelve shots fired.

William John Fleming, who made a statement before he died, said he was told, unless he surrendered, he would be burnt out of his home. His son was shot dead and he was wounded at the same time.

The police said that when Fleming had finished speaking he cried out: 'Oh, Constable, I am done. It is a pity we surrendered and did not fight it out.'

County Armagh 'Reprisals'

AT AN early hour yesterday morning a number of armed raiders set fire to the house of James Mallon, thatcher, near Killylea. A number of shots were fired into the house and Mallon was wounded.

About the same time the house of Hugh Smyth of Tamlet was also set fire to. It is freely rumoured that these outrages were reprisals for the shooting of Special Constable Fluke and the wounding of other Specials in Sunday's Crossmaglen ambush.

(These reports bear out the brutal sectarian nature of much of the violence in rural Ulster. In Co. Monaghan the IRA targeted isolated Protestant farmers with UVF associations, murdering a number of them. In Armagh, south Down and Tyrone the Specials perpetrated reprisal burnings and sectarian murders such as those at Dromore.)

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