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Lament for a journey's end

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PITTSFIELD

After witnessing the horrific death of her Irish fiancée in a dog attack in Malaysia, Polish-born Agnieszka Jablonska, to ease her suffering, set off with a donkey in June to travel around Ireland. This, sadly, is the final installment about her travels.

On a lovely Saturday morning in mid-September, Agnieszka arose early at the Sai Donkey Sanctuary in Castlebaldwin, County Sligo, to resume her journey around the coast of Ireland with her donkey Mucci. A week earlier, the courageous pair had just entered Donegal, their fourth county, 300 miles into their 2,000-mile sojourn, when Agnieszka noticed Mucci's listless and troubling gait. She immediately consulted a veterinarian, who diagnosed Mucci as having an infection on his "willie," from bites by the midges that had swarmed them unmercifully during the country's wettest summer in memory.

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Agnieszka hired a horsebox in Donegal and backtracked to Sligo, seeking treatment for Mucci at the renowned donkey refuge run by Sue Paling, an elderly woman who tirelessly cares for dozens of old, abused or unwanted donkeys, rescuing them from unhappy fates. Under Sue's meticulous care, Mucci was soon back in full form, shamelessly pogo-sticking through the fields among a drove of damsels.

"He might not be so eager to hit the road after stumbling into Paradise," remarked a neighboring farmer roguishly. Agnieszka answered back, "He'll soon forget about them, for he's far happier with me on the open road."

Then came Saturday, however, when Agnieszka, alerted by the strident brays of Mucci's pasture buddies, found her "handsome lad" straddled over a meter-high wrought-iron gate. For some baffling reason he had attempted to leap over it during the night.

"At first, I found his predicament comical," she confessed tearfully to me on the phone, "his forelegs in one field, his hind legs in the other. I even took a photo, not knowing how hurt he was. Something similar happened to me in Malaysia with Maurice (the boyfriend she was commemorating with this journey). I laughed when he first called out for help, thinking he was messing around, you know, up to old tricks, just waiting to jump from behind a tree and hug me. But then I saw the dogs..." she gasped, "taking him down by the legs."

It developed that Mucci's struggle to leap over the gate had damaged his underbelly and obstructed his bladder. A local vet was called, but attempts to catheterize Mucci proved unavailing. The unfathomable truth emerged from a fog: Mucci would have to be put down before his bladder burst.

Said Agnieszka: "I cradled Mucci's head as I had cradled Maurice's, searching his eyes. And like Maurice, I knew Mucci understood how much I loved him, and how much our adventure together had meant. I felt that both Maurice and Mucci had been their happiest with me, because I gave them all the love I had, and that's what it's all about, isn't it, love."

The death of her donkey made every Irish national newspaper. The Irish Times called Mucci, "Ireland's most beloved donkey," and their woeful tale became the talk of the country.

But at the moment, Agnieszka faced a new dilemma -- what to do with Mucci's remains. Unable to face her "long-eared darling" being hauled away to become fertilizer, she had no other option, until that neighboring farmer came traipsing across the field.

"Not to worry," he comforted the sobbing young woman. "I'll take Mucci to a place where he'll be cremated respectfully, and I'll send his remains on to you in a few day's time."

Mucci's casket arrived like a small treasure chest -- adorned with a lock of his mane, wildflowers, and his new donkey shoes, fitted just a week earlier for the rigors of the Donegal Highlands.

In Ballyconnelly, Co. Galway, on a rocky spit of land where she had gathered with family and friends, Agnieszka spread Mucci's ashes into a fresh Atlantic breeze, just as she had scattered Maurice's remains in January, praying the winds might carry them around the globe -- "a donkey's blessing" -- in a gesture of comfort to all those who've lost loved ones, with no answers as to why.

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Despite numerous offers of a replacement donkey, Agnieszka has no desire to resume her travels without her cherished Mucci. She's decided to spend the autumn in Poland's Bialowieski Forest -- her native country and the last intact primeval woodland in Central Europe -- picking mushrooms with an old friend.

"There must be a deeper reason why the universe continues to challenge me," Agnieszka consoles herself, "and perhaps I'll find the answer in that ancient forest, or back here in Ballyconnelly. Yes, I'll return to Ireland, for it's my home now and I feel closer to Maurice here. And Mucci, of course, the most lovable donkey in the world."

Kevin O'Hara is author of "Last of the Donkey Pilgrims."