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History repeats for Agnieszka

Posted Friday, August 24, 2012 10:19 am

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PITTSFIELD

July was a "bloody tough" month for Agnieszka Joblonska and her donkey, Mucci. Smothered by midges and sopped silly by relentless rain, the pair barely persevered through Galway, Ireland, but crossed the River Erriff into Mayo, and succeeded in reaching Ballina on the Feast of The Assumption, August 15.

Despite the road's hardships, Agnieszka remains steadfast in her quest to travel 2,000 miles around the country, and return to her deceased lover's homestead in Conne mara by January to commemorate the second anniversary of his death, hoping to renew her spirits along the way.

In a recent phone call, Agnieszka animatedly recapped the highs and lows of her first 300 miles.

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"Remember, Kevin, when I was on the Ryan Tubridy radio show? Well, once I was able to check my email, I'd received 60 invitations from all over the country -- North and South -- to stay the night. Sixty! And did you ever take your Missie to the beach? I took Mucci to Kilkieran Strand and he loved it, rolling about in the sand like a child.

"And the most wonderful thing happened there! A lovely local man, Joseph Connelly, collected holy water from St. Ciaran's Well and presented it to me in a small bottle. My, what devotion he has! Others gave me a new pair of trousers, a blanket, and a meal of salmon and buttered eggs."

Following her TV appearance on RTE's "Nationwide," she found herself an unwilling celebrity. "I was stopped 52 times by well-wishers in one day! Fifty-two times, and it took Mucci and I nine hours to travel four miles," she said in exasperation. "The people were all very kind, but they asked me the same questions: 'What does Mucci eat?' 'Where are you spending the night?' I'll never find peace if this continues?"

Fortunately, she was to find a week's respite on the "Great Western Greenway," a 26-mile bicycle path from Westport to Achill Island that meanders along the picturesque coastline of Clew Bay. When the young lady and equine arrived at its entrance, they were halted by a sign in bold print, "No Horses Allowed." However, in true jobber fashion, she skirted the ruling and proceeded down the pathway, saying, "Not to worry, Mucci, you're a donkey."

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Though she calls Mucci "my handsome lad," and "best mate," this unlikely couple have had their spats and quarrels. "On the road to Belmullet, Mucci tried to bite me twice in the leg. He's originally from Belmullet, you know, so he might have thought I was taking him back to his previous owner, who might not have been very nice to him. Do you think that can be so? So we had ourselves a face-to-face, and I promised to use my hazel stick on him if he continues to misbehave. Since then, things have been grand."

One event Agnieszka was bubbling to tell me occurred shortly after the pair had crossed the Glennagevlagh Bridge into Mayo. Plagued by midges while traveling the winding road from Delphi to Louisburg via Doo Lough, beneath the somber eminence of Ben Gorm, they spotted a lone farmhouse tucked away in a wooded dell.

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"The house looked rundown and vacant, but I gave the door a knock, and to my surprise out peeks this little old man who tells me to put Mucci in the back garden and 'be in with yourself.' So, I'm sitting by the fire with John Martin Herarty, and he's drinking whiskey, and offering me whiskey, and telling me he's 91, and that both his siblings, Patrick and Margaret, have passed away. And then he says, 'Strange, now, but 30-odd years ago, an American spent the night here with his donkey.'

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"Was it Kevin O'Hara?"

'That'd be him, all right.'

'I've talked to him, but we've never met. What was he like?'

'What was he like, you say? He was one cracked boyo. A proper jack befitting his mare.'

'So, then, what must you think of me?'

"He winked at me, and laughed, 'Why, you're cracked as well, but far prettier!'"

So history repeats, and the journey continues.

Kevin O'Hara of Pittsfield is author of "Last of the Donkey Pilgrims." After witnessing the horrific death of her Irish fiancée by a dog attack in Malaysia, Polish-born Agnieszka Jablonska, to ease her suffering, set off with a donkey in June around Ireland. This is the second installment of her travels.