



2013 INTERNATIONAL ROSE OF TRALEE EVENT



By JUDEENA CARPENTER

For me, Ireland has always been a place full of stories. As a girl, Ireland was the stories of my father's childhood- the long beaches of Annagassan and the looming Morne mountains of Down in the distance and the nights spent finding lambs in the deep of night carrying kerosene lanterns. A voracious reader, I quickly discovered (and came to love) the work of Irish poets and writers just as I loved my father's stories as a girl. John McGahern, Patrick Kavanagh, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney and Edna O'Brien, filled my head with images of a country alive with the magic of language, history and myth and legend. I couldn't wait to go there.

My opportunity to first see Ireland came in a most unusual fashion, one that I can without hesitation say was entirely unexpected- The Rose of Tralee. Arriving in Dublin on the 7th of August after a 36 hour journey from New Zealand, the time for me to create my own stories in Ireland had begun. A three day storm of activity ensued and I rushed between meeting family members I had never met before, travelling to the village where my father grew up, catching sleep when I could and stocking up on umbrellas, an apparently critical endeavor as my aunt explained "summer in Ireland means rain, dear". My last afternoon before the Rose came all too quickly and as I sat on my suit cases (trying to compress them so that they would actually zip close); I knew that things were only set to get busier.

On Sunday morning, my aunts and mother spent a great deal of time hand clutching and head patting and lots of kisses and best wishes were exchanges exchanged and after a quick breakfast, the time to leave had arrived. The particular high-pitched hub-bub my brother has noted can **only** be achieved by groups of women told me that I had arrived at the correct hotel. I turned the corner and found 31 other girls laden with hat boxes and suitcases and felt a little less ridiculous about the luggage that I had balked at that morning, noting that my luggage was modest in comparison to some others.

The twelve days of the Rose tour was underway and I could have never anticipated just what was ahead. Looking back now, it seems impossible that we did all the things on our schedule ...



Beginning in Dublin, the first night we were treated to a 3-course dinner at Newbridge and gifted gorgeous jewellery to wear on the tour. Dublin saw us visiting Croke Park and the Guinness factory. In Belfast we enjoyed lunch at the Hilton and were given a guided tour of the new Titanic Museum in Belfast. An open-top bus tour of Derry followed and a walking tour of the walls gave us a wonderful insight into the history of the European Union's City of Culture for 2013. The Fleadh Cheoil was a highlight and the Leitrim Rose was able to give us a taste of her Sean Nos steps for which she is renowned. It was down to Sligo to visit the grave of W.B Yeats and then onward to Galway where we spent a lovely night at Salthill. From Galway to Tralee we stopped at Adare Manor, got to open a new motorway and were given our very own police escort for our entry to Tralee.

The welcome into Tralee made us realise that the Rose tour had been merely a warm-up for what we were about to experience. The applause was deafening as we descended down the bus-steps and the onslaught of small children trying to get your autograph was a little over-whelming. There were parades through the town, interviews with the media, interviews with the judges, practices with RTE, visits to rest-homes and retirement villages, youth groups, community agencies, grand balls and cocktail parties to attend... the Roses were run off their feet. Our number of chaperones had increased from 2 on the tour, to 5 in Tralee- just to make sure we were all in the right places at the right times. What we lacked in free time was made up in food, lots of food- three courses at every meal created some nerves as the television nights drew closer.

The television nights were the culmination of the event and I know all of the girls were most excited to see the talents that we had heard so much about. Daithi O'Se was the consummate host and did a wonderful job of keeping us all calm on stage, and thoughtfully had a supply of Curly Wurly chocolate bars backstage if anyone needed a last-minute chocolate dose of courage. As quickly as it had come, it was over, and Haley O'Sullivan, the Texas Rose (and my roommate) was announced as the winner. The 'Midnight Madness' parade through the town was incredible and we were all so happy to see Haley crowned, setting off the fireworks that signaled the end of the festival.

And so the Rose was over. My stories of Ireland are not those of mountains or beaches or baby lambs in the middle of the night. My stories are of meeting family for the first time and feeling loved at once and being fed endless cups of tea and cake and brown bread specially baked for me. My stories are of seeing Ireland in a whirlwind, a small taster for what I hope will be many trips back- seeing the relics of the Vikings in dad's village of Annagassan, learning about the history of the walls in Derry and the shipbuilding in Belfast and the terror of Bloody Sunday at Croke Park. My stories are of the women and men who spoke to me about their children, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews who have come to New Zealand. My stories are about the women who have come from these emigrant families, with grandmothers and grandfathers and parents from all the provinces of Ireland, who as part of the global diaspora were able to return to Ireland and represent these newfound homes. An unexpected trip that created unexpected, but treasured memories- that was the Rose of Tralee 2013.

