

# Mrs. Ugly-Flowers

The Ring of Dingle, Ireland

August 17, 1976

When I travel, one thing I often seek out is a good garden. I am a gardener myself, and I appreciate not only the beauty of a well-tended garden, but also the sense of peace it brings to the soul. The Keukenhof Gardens outside Amsterdam where Dutch tulips sway in the spring breezes in such colours and numbers as to take your very breath away. The stately formality of Mirabellgarten in Salzburg, Austria that includes the steps made famous by Maria and the von Trapp children singing do-re-me in the movie *The Sound of Music*. Or the delicate delight of Shinjuku Park in Toyko in the fullness of "cherry blossom" season.

I love them all.



Tulips at Keukenhof



Mirabellgarten



Shinjuku Park, Tokyo

You will not find it surprising, then, when I tell you how enthralled I was when my friend David and I drove up a laneway offering bed and breakfast in Ireland to discover a house nestled amidst a beautiful and abundantly colourful garden. As soon as I saw it, I knew we had to stay there.

Now, when you are young as we were at the time, it is sometimes necessary to travel on a strict budget. It's not that you want to, it's just that you honestly can't afford more. Thus, when David and I were travelling through Ireland, we had a strict spending allowance of £10 for each day, and the upper limit we set for ourselves for bed and breakfast was £2.50 each. I know this sounds ridiculously inexpensive today, but in 1976 you could find bed and breakfast accommodation in most Irish towns for as low as £2.00 a night.

Except in the Ring of Dingle that evening.

We got out of our rented mini car, and perhaps too boldly approached the door. The woman who answered could probably most charitably be described as sturdy. We

were polite anyway. We were tired, and we just wanted to put our feet up.

But when she announced her price of £3.00 each, we shuddered. This was 50p over our budget, and without exchanging a word or even a look, we knew we had to reject it. We said thanks, and were on our way, grumbling at the audacity and greed of her. In spite, we named her Mrs. Ugly Flowers. Imagine! Charging £3.00 each for a night's sleep and breakfast. No way!

We searched the town. We found a few bed and breakfast offerings, but they were the same price. Or more. It was getting dark. We were getting hungry. We were feeling discouraged.

Reluctantly, we admitted that £3.00 each was the best we were going to get, so back we went to Mrs. Ugly Flowers and perhaps rather too boldly said we would take the rooms. She looked ever so pleased and, if my guess was correct, she had a look on her face that was a little more smug than a good Christian landlady really ought to have been sporting under such circumstances.

So, we got our rooms, had a good night's sleep, and were served breakfast in the morning. The dining room faced the back of the house and featured floor-to-ceiling windows that looked directly out onto even more splendid flower beds than were growing around the house's front door.

Mrs. Ugly Flowers set our juice and tea down on the table, a little crisply should you ask my opinion, then marched off to the kitchen, heels a-clicking, to retrieve a rack of cold toast, as they like to do in that part of the world.

I sensed some minor lack of cordiality in our relationship, so in that ever-so-Canadian conciliatory way, I ventured to make amends. When Mrs. Ugly Flowers reappeared in the dining room to serve the English tourists at the next table their eggs and sausages with abundant smiles, I complimented her on her flower beds. "What a *beautiful* back yard you have!" I enthused.

She turned to stare at me, then marched off once again to the kitchen without a word. We sat dumbfounded, but the English couple at the next table were laughing. "I think you would call this a garden," they explained. "A back yard is the spot behind the house where you store the trash bin."

And so, unknowingly, I had insulted Mrs. Ugly Flowers by suggesting that her lovely garden was a place for her trash bin. But I figured we were even anyway. She got her extra 50p from each of David and me.

But then again, when at length she returned with our plates of hot breakfast, there was only one egg on each of our plates, while the English couple got two.



# Miracle in St. Mark's

Venice, Italy

October 26, 2010

Venice is, without a doubt, one of the most remarkable cities in the world. For protection against enemies, it was built entirely in the shallow waters of the Adriatic Sea.



You travel around Venice by "waterbus," a unique way to get around a city, and very appropriate to Venice, where the streets seem to be the victims of - to quote a

character in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers* - "an unusually wet season".

One of the sites that is a "must" to see in Venice is Piazza San Marco or, as we say in English, St. Mark's



Square. I arrived there in the late afternoon, thinking to avoid the throngs of tourists who tend to hang out in the square. It was the last place on my list of places to visit in Venice before catching my train back to Florence.

By the time I reached the square, and its famous St. Mark's Basilica, I had been walking endlessly around the fascinating streets of Venice all day long, and my legs were aching like mad. I felt that I really, really had to sit down to rest but the few benches that were in the square were filled. However, inspiration struck: I thought to go into the basilica and rest a bit in one of the pews.

As I entered the basilica, I was disappointed to see that there were no pews in the place at all - only a big open space for people to walk around! Not to be deterred, I searched about and noticed a little roped-off area at the side that had a few pews. A sign at the entrance to this area read, "For Prayers Only." I said to myself, "Well, I have to rest so I will just go boldly in." When a slight pang of guilt entered my heart, I said further to myself, "And besides, I need to pray that my legs stop aching." So in I hobbled and took my seat in a pew.

I looked around. Everyone else was diligently and piously praying.

Hmmm.

I thought I should bow my head, too, in keeping with my excuse for taking up a pew that would otherwise be occupied by someone sincerely repenting for real



sins, or praying for their relatives who were needy and sick, or earnestly beseeching God to grant us all world peace. But as I closed my eyes to begin mentioning my poor aching legs to our Heavenly Father, my eyes accidentally stayed shut.

For quite some time, I expect.

When, at length, my eyes jerked open again, yes! you guessed it. A miracle had occurred!! My legs had stopped aching.



I walked, limp-free and most thankfully, back to the waterbus station, and ultimately on to my train back to Florence.



