

Anya von Gosseln

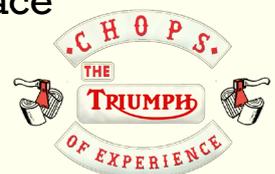
They left and I arrived



artillerybrand.com

I will never forget the three small, slightly anxious faces looking up at me as the boat slowly pulled out from the piers in Bremerhaven on a faintly sunny November afternoon in 1956. They were not children's faces, as one might have assumed, but those of my grandfather, in his British-style knickerbockers and tweedy cap (he dressed like George Bernard Shaw) and my grandmother and mother, both dressed up for the occasion with hats and beige glacé gloves. As we waved, I could make out a little tear rolling down my mother's cheek. I had excellent eyesight then. A tinny band played the classic going-away song for emigrants leaving Germany, "Muss i' denn muss I' denn, Zum Städtele hinaus" (made famous by Elvis Presley who was stationed during his army stint in Germany) which prompted a tear or two to run down my own cheeks. I waved back one last time and mouthed "Bis bald, Mama" ("See you soon"). We both knew that wasn't going to happen, but we mouthed it anyway. Saying goodbye always hurts and we knew our next meeting would not be for a long time.

As the last passengers boarded the SS New York, a creaky old thing that seemed more or less on its last legs, matters got serious. I was on my way into an unknown future. Our destination was also New York. The City, the place I had dreamed of ever since I saw images of it in the Saturday Evening Post at the local America House while playing hookey from school.



There was, at that time, an America House in every German city occupied by the US, a clever way to spread the message of the good life promised by the Americans. My sources of desire were based on beautifully drawn cover images by one Norman Rockwell, a man who imagined and visualized America as it maybe never was, or as the people who commissioned him would have liked it to be or wanted to portray it to the rest of the world. A fantasy that was very pleasing and got me going in my own vivid imagination. As did James Dean and the jeans he wore and, naturally, Jazz, Blues, juke boxes, the lot... After seeing Jimmy Dean's last film I wore nothing but Levi's 101, just like he did. He was my idol. I wanted to please him, although I knew that he had died by then. That could not please anyone. Never mind, he was alive for me. The things you believe when young enough. Oh, I would do most of that again.

In any case, I was a wild child whom several generations in my family had attempted to tame, just a little. No dice, I had my own ideas. So, one day my grandfather Carl (the raving fan of George Bernard Shaw), had the brilliant idea to send me to America, to Massachusetts, so that I could immerse myself in its culture and supposedly improve my school English beyond the very 'Oxfordy' English taught in German schools at the time. Oh, what joy to always have my grandfather Carl on my side.



He charmed my mother into letting them send me to his cousin twice removed who had long ago been what they call in German his “Gespusi” (Sweetheart). Needless to say that even after 45 years my lovely and extraordinary and otherwise enlightened grandmother was jealous of this apparently short-lived interlude. This only by-the-by. So, I set about getting a temporary visa for the US, spanking new passport stamps and injections against almost everything. After packing two little cases of clothes, my collection of used movie tickets and fan letters I wrote to stars but never sent, plus a screamingly red *Max Factor* lipstick (*No. 163*, I seem to remember), en vogue at the time as were waist cinches which almost killed you because you could hardly breathe but which were supposed to please men immensely...Aha... I was ready to hit the wider world. Well-cinched at that. I soon enough found myself on the pier and on my boat of all dreams.

The master plan was to land in NYC and then take the train or bus to Boston, to be collected by this cousin whom I never met then and I never met even later. How is that ????

Well, bear with me. Something happened that was maybe directed by some of those eerie unseen forces we encounter once in a while, but are too shy or awkward to admit we have seen or heard. People might think one is mad. When we are older though, we know no one would have cared.



“Let her be mad”, they may have thought, at the most.

My cabin in this wobbly edifice tilting from side to side was rather cosy. Being an only child I was used to solitude, but this time I could order hotel food. That was different indeed. That first creaking night was rather alarming; after all, I had never learned to swim. Next morning, we were gently gliding along the southern coast of England, to dock in Southampton where many passenger were to disembark. As we left, waving to the departing passengers, I was thinking “Oh boy, next stop NY. Hurrah.” Seems I missed something. In any case it was the 22nd of November and late-ish afternoon but still light enough, when a foggy coastline appeared. I ran up to the deck and then I saw something that, I think, determined my fate.

Through a veil-like fog peeked a palm tree. WHAT? In November in the Northern hemisphere?? While I looked at this mirage in disbelief, the boat started to shake the way they do when organizing a landing and throwing an anchor. Only this boat could not go quite into the harbour because it was (and still is) too shallow. And here was another deciding moment. Out of the fog a small boat steered towards us, manned by at least six men who all looked like no-one I had ever seen before. “Modern pirates?” I asked the purser.

“Where exactly are we now?”

“Cobh”, he said, “Madam”.

Madam? I was barely 20 years old.

“And where is that?”

“Well, we are now in Ireland”.



Now, Ireland I knew about from geography and history classes in school, but mainly because of my grandfather's obsession with G.B. Shaw, Oscar Wilde and the famous Birr Castle telescope. I decided right then and there to get off the boat. Be myself. Be free. Not be told where to go. To explore and learn. To make decisions like a grown-up. Pay an electricity bill, buy my own food, you get the message. Ha! I asked the purser to give me my two bags, which at first he refused to do.

"Your ticket says New York, Madam" he said.

"Yes", I answered, "but I am getting off here, Sir".

He smiled when I said that.

It took another 15 or 20 minutes while I severely tested his patience and then he suddenly let me go, but not without warning me that I did not have a visa to enter Ireland.

There was as yet no European Union as we know it today. so I would be considered an Alien (well, my family thought that already). "I don't care" I said. Before I knew it, my bags and me were lowered down into the small boat crewed by the wild-looking men, all dressed in the same type of coat, mostly held together by safety pins, and with sweat-lined hats. As they rowed me to the pier I realized I did not understand a word they said. Now I know they spoke 'Corkonian'. I turned around and took one last look at the SS New York and mustered a little wave to the nice Canadian photographer I had met on board. I have a photograph of that. Must look for it.



I was the only one disembarking. I did notice however, that another boat or even two passed us on the way to the big creaking one, boats jammed with people and boxes and children with runny noses or being fed with bottles. A lovely but somehow sad sight, since I instinctively knew that they were leaving because they had to but maybe not because they wanted to. Refugees like me in a way? They were leaving, I was arriving.

Once on the pier, I thanked the six men in my type of English, which made them smile, and walked straight across the pier in search of the nearest hotel. I did not have to look for long. I went to the first one that looked interesting and safe, right off the landing area. My grandmother had generously supplied me with US Dollars in case the distant cousin "did not feed me". Do not know where she got this idea. So, I had money to spend. The Commodore Hotel it was. It's there to this day. I was slightly intimidated to use my basic English on the very kind receptionist who then gave me a huge room all to myself. While settling down and making my home there, I discovered some sort of electric device in the corner of the room. I had no idea what it was. Turned out you had to throw money into it and then you had hot water. Never heard of anything like this before but got used to it later when living in a bedsit in Ranelagh after my stint as an au pair. In any case this wonderful room was my introduction to Anglo-Irish interior style. Only I did not know what that was at the time.



The house I live in right now in County Wexford has such a wonderful bedroom upstairs, which could be the twin of that room in the Commodore. I often look around it to rekindle some memories.

Now that I was established this first night, what to do for the evening? First things first: I called my parents and announced that I was in Ireland. The phone itself was one where you had to sort of turn something and then someone would get on after you put money into it and connect you. I suspected that the operator was also listening as a hobby. Fascinating. I was smitten. There was a long silence and then a voice asking,

“And what exactly brought you there, to Ireland, if I may ask?”

“Well a boat, of course”, trying to be funny. ’

“But you were going to New York. Did something happen to the boat?”

“No. Me happened. I want to be and stay here. I love it”.

There was nothing they could do. My father said he would call someone in the morning to see whether I could get a job of sorts, maybe as an au pair? And he did just that. Ireland did not yet have an Embassy in Germany so he called the British Consulate in Hamburg, and before I knew it he had arranged something in Dublin. What clinched the deal for him was that the Irish family he was connected to loved rhododendrons, one of his own obsessions. Little did he know that in Ireland rhododendrons are almost considered a weed. I never told him.



Meanwhile, on the night of my arrival, I had a bite to eat in that great, old-fashioned hotel, and then went a few doors over to the cinema, where a colourful poster announced a film called *Port of New York* starring Scott Brady. I had no idea who the actor was but the name sounded good to me. My first film entirely in English. After getting my ticket with Pound notes I had gotten in exchange for Dollars from the receptionist, I went in and sat down in excited expectation. What happened next I was not prepared for. There was a not-so-gentle tap on my shoulder and the girl who sold sweets in the aisles said to me,

“You need to move”.

I said “Why?”

And she answered, “Well, you are sitting in the men’s section. Women are over there.”

I was a little flabbergasted if it is possible to be just a little. Two days later, by which time I had fallen in love with the view of Cobh harbour from my bedroom, a messenger arrived and handed me an envelope containing a train ticket to Dublin, cash and a handwritten note from one Mrs Whitcroft welcoming me to her home, where I would teach German to their two daughters, Gemma and Rosemary. Next morning I left Cobh in a taxi and was soon delighted to be speeding via train from Cork towards Dublin, where I was awaited by Mr Whitcroft, who drove me to their house. A house on the corner of Stillorgan and Leopardstown Road called White’s Cross, it became my home for over a year, until I took the next step.



I often pass the house now via bus from Enniscorthy and always peek at it, the road is now so wide and other houses are not inhabited by the same families any longer, but I still love the memory that the house holds for me. It was an exotic place to me, with palm trees and horses in the next garden which was a riding school.

I stayed in Ireland until finally moving to New Jersey and New York, but many years later Ireland became my lovely permanent home, that has treated me so well from the beginning when I spotted that palm tree. I am fully returning the love I get.

PS No matter what they do to Dublin, I love it.



.....
***Anya von Gosseln** was raised in Breslau (now Wrocław), Bremen and Wuppertal, Germany. After graduating in Textile Engineering, she worked in the fashion industry in New York until moving to Canada and eventually back to Europe. A renowned and influential gallerist, curator, art dealer and artists' representative, she has made her mark in the international art world. Anya is the founder of the Eileen Gray Society and lives in County Wexford, where she is a dynamic member of the arts community.*
.....

© **Anya von Gosseln 2020**

Chops was conceived by Eoghan Nolan.

Designed and typeset by Gerry McCloskey

© **Eoghan Nolan & Gerry McCloskey 2020**

© **Artillery Brand 2020**

© **Brand Artillery 2020**

© **Chops 2020**

No part of this PDF may be reproduced without the written permission of both the author and Chops, the publisher.

If you know someone who would like a copy, please encourage them to download their own, free of charge, from artillerybrand.com

NB: There is no connection between Chops and Triumph motorcycles and use of a form of the Triumph logo is a homage only, our salute to a great brand. Respect.

