

The Crossing:

When I was a boy in New York under the benign and vaguely watchful tutelage of my brother we made a habit of reading the travel pages of the N.Y. Times. We weren't looking for bargain fares or descriptions of obscure and mysterious destinations. What we studied instead, were the scheduled sailings of the great ocean liners of the day. There, in a prominent box, would be the week's listings for each ship in port, where it was bound and the date and time of its departure. We did this so that we could go see them off, see them off to Le Havre or Southampton or Bremerhaven or Rome. These were the final years of the transatlantic crossings, the real deal, America to Europe in a week on ships of such size and dignity as to leave you breathless. Understand, we never sailed on one; they were far beyond our means. We went only to see them off.

In those days the west side of Manhattan was ribbed with giant piers stretching out into the Hudson River. The docks were numbered in the 50's and corresponded to the streets at the end of which they stood. The great Cunard Lines had pier 52 where HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Queen Mary would dock. It was a day when nations would show their pride by the ships they could put to sea. There were many players but the game was dominated by Britain, France, Italy and the U.S. I will give you a few names but only if you do yourself a favor and Google one or two of them. Find pictures of them and know that they were real.

There was the British ship Queen Elizabeth, the France from guess where, the DaVinci and Michelangelo from Italy and the United States from America. How can I tell you about them? How can I possibly do them justice? These were luxurious cities afloat. Every detail, every nuance, every refinement was taken into account. Their hundreds of brass rails were polished, the glass sparkled, their enormous hulls were freshly painted, anchor chains (with links the size of your truck) scrubbed of barnacles. There was nothing to distract the fortunate passengers from the idea that they were sailing aboard a perfect expression of engineering and design. These ships were astounding.

Why did we go down to the docks if we weren't sailing? We went to be a part of something that was so far beyond our everyday fare that we might as well have been snatched up and plunked down in the middle

of the Academy Awards. We took the subway to Times Square and walked the rest of the way to the river. We paid fifty cents to the Seamen's Fund at the gate and walked up the gangplank and into splendor. Fifty cents got you aboard and free to wander. Fifty cents let you pass through the myriad bon voyage parties in full swing on the several decks of each giant ship. Fifty cents let you mingle with swells in their tennis whites, sipping cocktails. Fifty cents let you get the feeling of why, exactly, people fought to get rich.

We and all the visitors had about an hour, an hour to pretend, an hour to soak it all in, an hour to think about which of these gorgeous ships was your new favorite. Then a whistle blew and the announcement was made by dozens of meticulously dressed porters that it was time to go ashore. Down the gangplank (twenty feet wide) and onto the pier, there to await the single most thrilling moment of the entire morning, the blast of a ship's horn as she tells the world to stand back, give way and wish us well. There is nothing at all like it. It hits you in the chest first, makes you step away. Then you move to cover your ears but the sound is too overwhelming. You take a breath and the Captain gives her two more blasts. By now your pulse is racing and you want to yell or cry, anything but take the subway home.

So you do what everyone else on the pavement is there to do. You wave to no one in particular and you shout "Bon Voyage!" and you realize that slowly, oh so slowly, the giant is pulling away from you. Picture yourself looking straight up at an eight storey building. Now picture a thousand feet of steel stretching away horizontally behind it. Now imagine that it begins to move in reverse all at once, hardly a ripple. It takes five minutes just to clear the pier, five minutes to move fifteen hundred feet. Imagine that!

It was the tug boats that took the ocean liners away from their berths. The same tugs that you saw rescuing the amazing flight that ditched into the Hudson. In those days, and maybe still, the tugs belonged to the Moran family. Every one of them was named for the clan, Katy Moran or Joseph Moran or Molly Moran. My brother and I were at the docks on a day when the France was sailing. The France was the largest of them all at twelve hundred and some feet, the finest example of the great ocean liners. The currents were strong that day on the Hudson River, really strong, and the normal contingent of four tugs couldn't handle the ship. She started to travel down the river towards the Verrazano Bridge, sideways! You have never seen so many boats appear so quickly from so many berths along the river.

In a New York minute there were twelve tugs alongside the France desperately trying to get her pointed down the channel. Thomas and Mary and Quinn and Moira and Johnny Moran were pushing against her port side with everything they had, huge rooster tails at their sterns. You already know the outcome. The Morans never fail. The France was turned ninety degrees in less than a mile, amazing work, and I'll bet that her passengers never knew anything was amiss.

Well, that was 1964 or '65 but more like an eon ago. The Atlantic Crossing is a thing of the past but those giant queens of the sea will always live in the still clear memories of the lucky souls who saw them go and waved them on their way.

So I thank you Joe, for showing me all that. It meant more to me than I ever told you. And so did you.