

self-portrait of **a nomad**

# rearview mirror



1. Clodagh at MoMA, on her first visit to New York.



I travel through life with an inner video made up of vivid experiences. A combination of sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, and spirit reside somewhere so close to the memory part of my brain that it will pop up when I am trying very hard to concentrate on something else. It could be a word, a line of poetry, a color, the timbre of a voice, or a waft of incense.

I was the youngest child of very old parents. My first house in Ireland, originally Oscar Wilde's, looked out over Lough Corrib. My father bred gun dogs and as soon as I could count, I counted sixty (of course some were litters of puppies).

Among my early memories were picnics, starting on a creaking rowboat with the family—fishing rods and a basket of warm bread and home-churned butter, flasks of tea all ready for freshly fried trout, and as many as fifteen dogs swimming behind with their noses making v's in the water. When we all safely landed on an island with joyful dogs shaking water all over us (no friendlier animal than a wet dog) my father would row out, safe in the knowledge that he could cast a line without catching a dog instead of a fish. The larder was always packed with

jams, jellies, and game in season, and the garden overflowed with vegetables and fruit. I spent every minute of the day that I could out of the house. I was homeschooled until I was seven and became an expert escape artist, as well as the sponge I am today, soaking up colors, sound, and light.

Once a year my mother gave a *ceilidh*—a social gathering—for the village people after harvest, and up they would come to dance in the barn, consume heroic quantities of Guinness and poteen, and to tell stories full of laughter and outrageous sound by the fire.

Afternoon tea and lunch were big moments. I loved to hear the sound of horses' hooves or a familiar car on the gravel drive because I knew that hot buttered scones and tea in china cups would soon be on the table.

We lived in five different places before I was seventeen. We were downwardly mobile, so our houses became smaller and smaller. Life became a mood board of hunting parties with snorting horses and baying hounds outside stately homes (very *Downton Abbey*), intertwined with the grim reality of boarding school and constant packing and unpacking. I still hate stuff and clutter; the life of a nomad seems a good one. Minimalism was an

early good idea for me.

My father had decided a career for each of us. I was to be a professor of classics and mathematics and the idea filled me with dread. That preemptive career decision was averted one Easter when a large black horse tossed me and my saddle down a ravine and I spent the rest of the year immobile, suffering three cracked vertebrae. As I couldn't sit up during convalescence, I had to hold reading matter above my head. One day I read an ad that said 'why not be a dress designer?' My motto straight away became 'why not?' and as soon as I could safely walk about, I left school, attended a short course at the Grafton Academy of Dress Design, borrowed four hundred pounds from my mother, and opened a 'couture house' in central Dublin. I was seventeen. (My father refused to speak to me because people 'like us' do not go into 'trade.' He only allowed me back home when his bible, *The Irish Times*, wrote a glowing article about my work.)

There is no courage like the courage of supreme ignorance, but at least being aware of the ignorance, I hired experienced tailors and pattern cutters, thus beginning my ethic of hiring people who are better than myself. After my



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2. Clodagh and son Tim, working on a fashion collection.

3. Models on the steps of Clodagh's couture house in Dublin.

first fashion show, publicity poured in. Soon I was exporting all over the world with a private clientele of glamorous people. I licensed my design to several manufacturers and promoted Irish tweeds, knits, and linens. I lived in a Georgian farmhouse with a stone walled garden and worked in a Georgian townhouse. I married an Irishman and had three boys. I loved cooking and entertaining and driving my fast sports car, having a morning ride on the way to the studio after the children were dropped off at school.

But some things in my life were not working out, and in the seventies I gave my last fashion show (I was not happy: all black, even the bride's dress; it was a precursor of the attire I would adopt in New York). I changed husbands, countries, and careers, and went to Almeria in Spain.

At the foot of the Sierra Alhámilla range we had a farmhouse without electricity or water; orange and palm tree terraces stepped down to a dirt road. We bought two Arabian horses and two Irish setters, an ancient Land Rover and a younger Citroën. Barren ochre and red earth; the cadence of Federico Garcia Lorca and *cante hondo*; the swirl and color

of flamenco; the scent of orange blossom and jasmine and viscous green olive oil—it was such a joy.

Living by the Mediterranean was a radical change after the soft mists, lilting voices, and verdant fields of the Irish landscape. Three hundred sixty days a year of sun; solar power and energy from the prevailing winds. I started wrestling with a townhouse we had bought in an eighteenth-century square. It was a rabbit warren of cubicles and bad partitions. I fought with the architect and somehow got my way. On the day of demolition the sun streamed in and caught the dust motes and the fourteen-foot shutters opened to sparrows and plane trees and the laughter of children in the square. REVELATION! I opened a design studio and hired an architect who worked with solar and wind energy and launched my new career.

A man showed up on my doorstep the day I hung out my shingle and asked if I would design his English pub. I told him 'I am Irish!' He thought it was close enough, and invited me to start work the next day. With dictionary in hand and fear in my heart, I did just that. He was cute, and I was watching him rather than where I was walking, so I fell over the rubble,

broke my leg, and completed my first project on crutches. (How can it be that my careers started with broken bones?)

I was off! I worked on hospitality, corporate vacation homes, and even opened a very unsuccessful store to sell the arts and crafts I collected from the gypsies and found in the pueblos. For seven years I roamed Spain and Morocco in the Land Rover we named Dulcinea.

We needed to expand our horizons, so we moved to New York, which is still in my view the balsamic reduction of the world: a necklace of villages, a Babel of languages, a buffet of art, music, and food, with that giant emerald, Central Park, stuck in the middle.

A few days after we arrived, I was walking down Madison Avenue and ran into a photographer-cum-adman who had photographed my townhouse for a poster called the Doors of Dublin. 'What are you doing here?' he asked. When I told him, he said, 'Design my apartment for me—and my office.'

'But you haven't seen my work.'

'I have been in your house in Dublin. That's enough for me.'

Without breaking a bone, I had launched my New York design career. **hd**

## Clodagh

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