

Chapter One

Romy meets

... *Claus, the Comedian Rat*



Locations:
Cork Operahouse, Everyman Palace
Crawford Gallery

Meow, my dears.

I am Romy and as I say, I have special talents.

Not only can I see the dead and talk to them and to people and animals if I want to, no, I can also beam myself out of my body. You have to imagine it's a bit like Star Trek. By the way, that's one of Anneke's favourite series, the really old ones with Shattner and Nimoy. William Sweetie is also hanging on the fridge. Man, he was so cute when he was young.

Well, at least when Anneke needs her beauty sleep, she really does go to bed with the chickens, but in the morning, she has to get up at the crack of dawn to wake the birdies, which is annoying, I tell you. Then I get out of my body and go wandering.

Spiritual wanderings, so to speak.

Sometimes there's not so much going on at night, but most of the time it's really hullabaloo. You wouldn't believe how many creatures are out there in the darkness.

Today I am once again in the mood for adventure, so I fly out of my body and head for Cork City.

Cork is situated on the River Lee. It is about 90 kilometers long and meanders through the whole of County Cork. From the source, which is in the Shehy Mountains/Gougane Barra, to us and then it's only a stone's throw to the sea.

A cat jump I would say.

You definitely have to go there, to Gougane Barra I mean. The little chapel on the peninsula in the lake is really romantic and many brides and grooms have their wedding photos taken here.

The spring is a good walk up a hill, but then you're there. It's hard to believe that it will become a river. At the end is Cork Harbour and then off into the Irish Sea.

To be fair, though, he does pick up other rivers along the way, so he's not doing it all by himself, the harbour thing.

The river offers many recreational opportunities such as kayaking and rowing, fish, preferably salmon, two reservoirs and over 40 bridges, 30 of which are in Cork City and the surrounding area. The Lee Valley is beautiful and of course has a great variety of resident wildlife.

You have no way of moving around the city, without running into the Lee again after a few minutes. Imagine it as a combination of Venice and Paris; only much smaller, more manageable.

The original City of Cork, the old city, was built on an island in the river just like the 'Ile de la Cite' in Paris. And Cork used to be known as the Venice of Ireland. You can see this in the crooked streets that follow the old river courses that have been filled in or built over. In some places you can still find the old polders where the boats were moored.

And on the South Mall, you can see the old boat entrances under the stairs to the houses. The residents could enter with their boats under the stairs to the courtyard.

Sometimes it's quicker to cross to the other side of the street through a shop than to walk around the outside. You have to see it to believe it, otherwise it's hard to imagine.

So tonight, I'm flying down Blarney Street, that's where we live and down across the river to the Cork Opera House.

Blarney Street is on the north side and is the longest street in Ireland. It's an old neighbourhood and has very nice little houses, old cottages and lots of old families who live here, and the grandparents' houses are passed on to the children and grandchildren.

And of course, Ireland is full of dogs.

Dogs walking without a master; yes, that really exists and comes across as completely normal here. But there are also plenty who walk their humans, don't worry.

There are also plenty of cats, but they tend to keep their heads down or lie on the windowsill and enjoy the pleasant life on the windowsill cushion.

So, where was I?

Oh yes, tonight I want to see what new events are at the opera house and then I'm gonna check out the Crawford Gallery. At the opera house they advertise Swan Lake with a Russian ensemble. I won't miss that, of course, and neither will Anneke anyway. It's her favourite ballet and she should be able to sing the music by heart if she could sing. Can't hit a note, but no matter, the rest is right.

The Cork Opera House is located in Emmet Square and had some construction phases. Once it was rebuilt after a fire that totally destroyed it in 1955.

I didn't like the rebuilding in 1962, because the outside of the building looked a bit strange, but the full renovation in 2003 was good. I like it and it has something airy and friendly about it.

Well, the original building was erected in 1852 in Anglesia Street for a national fair, but since the fair was only held once and it was no longer used the building was demolished stone by stone and rebuilt on the banks of the Lee at Emmet Place. That was around 1855.

It was quite a slog back then.

At least that's what the ghosts who haunt Lavitt's Quay and the surrounding area told me.

There's nothing like recycling. There are more buildings here in Cork that have been repurposed.

And like so many other buildings in Cork, before it officially became the Cork Opera House in 1877, it had other names. Now, however, it hosts everything from opera, ballet, concerts and theatre. In order to all the national and international artists who perform and have performed here the book is not sufficient.

Oh dear, I'm on the edge of my seat tonight.

Well, I just remember the dates for Swan Lake and I fly over to the Crawford Gallery.

This used to be the Customs House from 1724 to 1979 and then became the Gallery. Besides Irish artists and temporary exhibitions, there is also a section with Roman-Greek

statues, or what is left of them. They were brought over from the Vatican Museum in Rome at some point and have been collecting dust here in Cork ever since.

I love the old building with the creaking wooden floorboards and carvings. The staircase that leads up from the ground floor is magnificent. You must go in there when you are there. Admission is free and in summer the gallery is even open on Sundays.

But the very, very, very best thing is the little café on the ground floor overlooking the garden.

God, the cakes and scones are delicious.

With homemade jam and cream.

Hmmm, my whiskers are trembling again and I have 500 grams more on my hips.

And the meringues, God I don't know where to put my lust.

Okay, I'm flying over the little strip of greenery between the Opera House and the Gallery, actually the small garden of the Gallery, I see a rat.

And what a magnificent specimen it is.

I'd like it with jam and cream too if I knew how to make it.

But all joking aside, I was bred to be a luxury house and sofa cat and taken from my mum too early, I don't know much about catching mice or catching rats.

I get my food from the can and therefore have no need for bloody orgies. As a cat spirit it doesn't matter anyway, the mouse doesn't bite off a thread.

So, I swoop down on the rat for fun and to scare it.

"Jesus," come the slightly angry reply. "Don't you have anything better to do? Why don't you go play with a mouse somewhere and leave me alone. I have to rehearse my programme for tomorrow night's show and I don't really need you."

"Oops," I say, "I'm sorry, no offence, but I've got a lot of excess energy and I need to cool down," I explain to the rat.

"I'm Romy," I introduce myself.

"Hmmm, Romy, I see," the rat mumbles. "There used to be a beautiful German actress called Romy, who unfortunately passed away far too early. She was great, especially in the French productions."

"Yes, I'm named after her," I enlighten the rat.

The rodent makes a slight bow and says, "I'm Claus. I'm an actor on the side, but I'm actually a comedian."

Claus really is a handsome and a very well-groomed rat from top to toe. A bit dandified, perhaps, and with a pipe in his mouth. He puffs away so obliviously, there's something about it.

"Tomorrow night I'm giving a solo performance in the basement of the Cork Opera House for the rodent community in Cork. The big stage at the house is the biggest in Ireland at 12 x 10 meters, the one in the basement can't quite keep up, but we have 100 times more audience per performance. House and travelling rats from all over Cork just to see me."

"Uiiii," I purr, "you must really be a celebrity then?"

"Yes, my dear," Claus throws himself into the chest, "I am the best! I enchant the ladies with my charm like Dave Allen did and the men with my black humour. Well," grins Claus. "The ladies love my black humour too. It's my special charm."

"Dave Allen? Dave Allen!" I murmur, "I think I know him. I mean, Anneke, my flatmate, once told me about him. He used to sit on a stool, smoking, with a whiskey glass and crack jokes about the clergy. Very ironic and sharp-tongued."

"Bravo," says Claus, "you know your stuff. Yes, that's him. Yes, he was very angry with those who were devoted to the church and made them look stupid with their double standards. Especially in Ireland, they did real damage."

"And you," I ask with interest, "you walk in his footsteps?"

"Yes, I have a similar sense of humour and go after the church more in the style of Dave Allen and politics in the style of Volker Pispers. Volker is a German cabaret artist who has a similar wicked tongue. Unfortunately, he no longer performs; has thrown in the towel. Enlightened

people for over 30 years, but no one listened or wanted to get it. Now the mess and the wailing are big."

Claus grins contentedly and only says: "Since I have many relatives in Germany and especially in Düsseldorf, the stronghold of the rats, I am of course bilingual and also offer my programme in the Düsseldorfer Kommödchen."

"Düsseldorf," I sigh, "that's where my human companion is from. Anneke is from Düsseldorf and certainly knows the places, you're talking about. You should come over to our place for dinner and a glass of wine sometime, if you like, and then you two can reminisce," I suggest enthusiastically. "Ahem, you think I'm welcome at your place?"

"Yes, yes!", I confirm with a vigorous nod of my head.

"Anneke used to have pretty much all the rodents you can keep as pets. From mice to gerbils, hamsters, rats, chinchillas, guinea pigs..... What do I know. Anyway, I'm her first cat, before that there were only rodents, my food, so to speak," I grin.

"Well then," says Claus happily, "I'll come by tomorrow evening before the performance for a snack and you can accompany me to the performance. Unfortunately, your Anneke doesn't fit under the cellar vault, it would be too cramped even for you if you don't appear as a cat spirit. You just have to take me down to the opera house afterwards otherwise I'll get blisters on my paws. I'll get there tomorrow on my own, I have a cousin who drives a taxi here."

"Great," I say happily, "that's settled then."

We exchange addresses and times, and then Claus has already disappears into the undergrowth.

Man, am I excited.

A real comedian!

The next morning when I wake up, I tell Anneke about my nightly adventure. Since I usually sleep in Anneke's bed, the two of us then cuddle for a short while before getting up. After my nightly tours, however, I only crawl in for a short while to warm up and so that my 'mother' doesn't notice that I've been out all night.

Although I think she notices that during the day I'm just yawning through the house.

And it's not completely unselfish, because I have to check whether the two crawl-massaging and petting hands are still there.

The woman is flabbergast when I tell her about Claus. Since she loves rodents, it isn't an issue and sometimes I have the feeling she misses them a bit. Anyway, she always looks a little melancholy when she tells me about her former flat mates.

But practical as she is, we put together the menu for the evening and also discussed the drinks.

Whether Claus wants to drink a whiskey before the show like Dave Allen or not, it doesn't matter, grape juice is definitely in the house. A beer would also be there and since Anneke loves cheese, Claus wouldn't miss out here either. I'm like crazy all day, so much I'm looking forward to the evening; especially as this would be my first official trip to the Cork Opera House. Until now, I've never been allowed to go, as there were always only performances for children and adults, so I prefer to go as a ghost.

So, I count the hours and minutes until evening, but then around six o'clock it's time.

Claus can't reach the heavy knocker on the front door; he sneaks under the garden gate into the backyard and whistles loudly at the kitchen door.

I didn't know rats could be so loud.

I then let Anneke know by loud meowing, that our guest has arrived.

I am really proud of my Anneke. Not only does she welcome Claus as a matter of course, but on our living room table, which is very low and easy for rats to reach, she has prepared a super cheese platter with different kinds of cheese and a sausage platter with salami, ham, and olives. There are also crackers and dried dates for dessert. To drink, there is grape juice, beer, or wine from a thimble for Claus and water for me. My food to celebrate the day, as is often the case, is tuna.

Claus is very excited and perhaps a little envious, because I have the impression that he doesn't get to enjoy something like this very often and would have liked to move in. But no way; friends visiting: anytime. But moving in, no thanks.

In any case, Claus seems to be in his element, flirting and chatting all evening and entertains us with the funniest stories. The two of them really get along and of course they talk a lot about Düsseldorf.

I can't join in and just prick up my ears and listen. But it's very interesting to hear Anneke talks about her old home and friends and, of course, about her experiences. Not everything from the past has been great. A little melancholy can be heard between the lines.

Around nine we slowly start to leave, because Claus' performance is scheduled for 10:30 p.m. and we don't want to be too late. Claus wants to show me around backstage and introduce me to his friends.

On the way I ask Claus where he was born and who his parents are.

He says his ma is a house rat who works here in Cork at the Everyman Palace and his father is a Norway rat, who met his mum on tour with his band at the Everyman.

"My dad Fred is a real go-getter and with his band. He's a musician and plays guitar, he travels all over the world. The rat ladies are at his feet and sometimes they even throw tufts of fur onto the stage in rapture.

Yes," Claus continues to dream, "he is a celebrity and very rarely at home. My mother Gretel is coming to the show tonight with my grandfather, as there is no show tonight. My grandfather George is a theatre critic and wherever there's a performance, he's there. His favourite thing to do is sit in a box at the Everyman Theatre and smoke his pipe. I love the vanilla flavour."

The Everyman Palace is not far from the Cork Opera House

on MacCurtain Street and is a Victorian building dating from 1887. It is relatively small and very cosy, with boxes on the sides facing the stage and plush red armchairs.

It used to be a theatre and was called 'The Cork Palace'. Silent movie stars like Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy performed there.

From 1933 to 1988 it was a cinema until 1990 when it was bought by the Everyman Company and has since as a theatre again. Hence the name changes to Everyman Palace.

"In one of the boxes, my grandfather has an old armchair where he sits during the day and watches the rehearsals and the events in the theatre. All very discreet, of course," Claus explains to me.

"Can you imagine how loud the screaming would be if people knew there was a parallel world with us rat people everywhere?"

"Nah," I admit, "that would be a racket."

Now the two of us wander through the corridors of the Cork Opera House and Claus introduces me to the stage technicians, the dressers, the biscuit, popcorn, and drinks sellers. It's all very interesting and I'm overwhelmed by all the rodents scurrying around and doing their job professionally.

At the entrance we meet Claus' mother and grandfather, who have dressed up for the appearance of their son and grandson.

Georg wrinkles his nose: "I didn't know that cat spirits were among your fans, Claus?"

I am introduced to the two of them with the words that I am a special cat and that he met me yesterday in the garden of the Crawford Gallery.

"Oh, how wonderful," Gretel gushes delightedly.

"I think it's so swell that you're having success with other animals now, son, and that your art is appreciated. Even if you have inherited your hallo-drama from your father," his mother smiles.

"We have theatre in our blood, my dear daughter," his grandfather says, visibly proud.

His face really shines with joy when he sees all the rats, big and small, and even a few mice, ferrets, and spiders among the spectators.

The cheering is huge even before the performance.

A little bell sounds two or three times and the light dims. Everyone flocks to their seats, with much giggling and loaded with sweets, popcorn, and drinks, the last of them rushing from the toilets to the rows of seats, which fill up very quickly.

The house is packed, some even have to stand along the walls because there aren't enough chairs.

In the animal kingdom we can dispense with superfluous safety rules, as we are not so stupid as to go into mass panic if the worst should happen.

Rats always have several escape routes anyway; all other animals can also take good care of themselves as long as they are not confined or leashed by humans.

It slowly gets dark and then very quiet in the hall. Okay, a few always have to rustle with something or cough around as if they couldn't live without attention.

The opening jingle sounds, the curtain rises, and Claus jumps onto the stage.

Very briskly. Very elegant. Very professional greeting.

"My very dear friends of comedy, dear family. Welcome to my show in Cork," Claus opens his programme.

He doesn't have a bar stool like Dave Allen on stage, but an old, cosy 'wing back' armchair with a matching table. The whiskey glass and the pipe are not to be missed either, of course.

But no matter how cosy and opaque the arrangement looks Claus's pointed tongue glides razor-sharp through words, time, and space. He leaves out neither politics, current world events nor the church. Everything and everyone get his fat and that in a very precise and ironic way.

The audience goes wild, bravos echo through the hall. The audience rages, boils, stands on its chairs, and can hardly be contained. Almost like at a rock concert of his old man.

I'm already worried that we're disturbing the concert evening above us on the main stage.

Georg, Claus' grandfather, who is sitting next to me, whispers to me: "Don't worry fur ball, they can't hear us. The rat technicians have soundproofed the vaults of the theatres. We know what we owe our artists and what we can expect to the people upstairs. We live incognito as far as possible. Or do you really believe that we could operate so carelessly, if people knew what we were up to?"

Grandfather looks at me over his reading glasses and grins mischievously.

I grin back and we both know the secret lives of animals and our freedom depends on what we do in public and what we do in our private lives.

Not that we are criminals or evil, but even I don't tell Anneke everything that happens to me as a ghost in Cork at night.

Claus gives his all on stage for over 2 hours and afterwards they don't let him go without several encores.

And only with gentle force.

It is well after midnight when we finally stand outside on the forecourt of the theatre after several curtain calls.

Claus is still handing out kisses and autographs extensively before he finally joins us.

Claus, his mother Gretel, and grandfather George want to go for a drink in a nearby pub to celebrate the day, but I dutifully say goodbye and head home.

I don't want to disturb the family reunion and being discreet never hurt.

Besides, I can't wait to tell everything to my Anneke.

Since she gets up before the peeps, I wouldn't have to wait long; and before that, I'd crawl under the covers to warm up.

Meow and good night.

See you soon for the next story.

