

Chasing the Heartland

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Paulina Vanderbilt

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My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I catch the sweet, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.
Thro' all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul –
How can I keep from singing?

From: *How can I Keep from Singing*
Pauline T (trad.)

Everything is swept away

The scent of freedom clung to Wendy like a mouldy wedding dress. The boardwalk was lying in the heat of the day and the buzz of seaside holiday makers complemented the roll of gentle breakers, a soothing foundation for the jingle-jangle flash of the makeshift fair rides a little further along. The fourth of July, in Asbury Park – half a lifetime later than planned, but here now. This then, was little Eden, the place she had dreamt of visiting ever since, well, forever. Tonight, the fireworks would be hailing, but first she was going to kick off her shoes and feel the sand between her toes.

The sand was hot; the day was hotter. Wendy left her shoes and jeans close to the firm dark sand and waded into the ocean up to her knees. The water was hungry for her and pulled at her calves but she stood calm and firm. She had forgotten to bring her bathing suit. Secretly, she smiled at herself. Her mother would have been so upset to know she had not made a careful list, checked it twice and remembered to always pack a swimsuit. The gentle sea breeze raised some hairs on her forearms. She jumped up as a larger wave threatened to wet her pants, but then, in the spur of the moment, Wendy undid the scrunchie that kept her black, unruly curls in check, whooped and fell backwards into the sea.

The sea was warm and carefree. Wendy relaxed her breathing. She was not the only one in the water but the only one with her clothes on. They would dry. She looked at the sky as she floated on her back, aware that at any moment a wave could break on top of her and leave her gasping for air. It didn't though, and after twenty minutes she waded out of the water and retrieved her jeans. She looked about her, briefly

hesitating. Then she pulled off her pants and stepped into her jeans commando.

‘Hey, there are children around here!’ an oversized sun-bright woman shouted. Wendy looked at the woman who was sporting an ill-fitting bikini that revealed much more than the few inches of flesh she had shown in the whole 10 seconds it took to wrench on her jeans. She put it down to cultural differences but decided to keep her wet top on after this. She sat down, pulled up her knees and hugged herself, still in disbelief she was finally here.

Wendy woke up with a jolt. Her first instinct was to check for her bag. It was still there, and her passport and purse were still safe too. She checked her watch and saw she had slept for more than an hour. It had gotten busier, but the atmosphere was still relaxed. Next to her a young couple was holding hands and murmuring into each other’s ears, brushing each other’s earlobe with their lips briefly after each exchange. It was clear that the blonde girl was absolutely smitten. Her caramel tan was a sharp contrast to the dark fudge of her lover’s skin; the disobedient sea-salt blonde curls the opposite of the other’s straight-jacketed cornbraids. Both wore a crop-top revealing tight tummies and pierced belly buttons.

‘Excuse me, sorry for bothering you, may I ask a question?’ Wendy took the smile as a yes and continued, ‘Are there fireworks on tonight?’

‘Sure, it is the fourth of July. You should probably move over to another section of the beach though, nearer the Casino.’ The cornbraided girl lazily waved her hands to a bit further up the beach nearer a ram-shackled looking building. ‘Not to worry, there’s plenty of time before anything happens.’

Wendy took out an A4 sized publication. She had not prepared this trip much, but she had found this thing online a few months back as she had looked up Asbury Park and Bruce Springsteen: A Rock & Roll Tour of the Jersey Shore. She had read most of it on the plane, but it had been too much to take in. Yet, she knew the first thing she wanted to do was find Madam Marie and have her fortune told. She strolled back up

to the boardwalk and walked towards the Convention Hall. Its copper green detailing gave it a real art nouveau feel; it looked grander than she had imagined it from the descriptions she had read.

The square stone booth was right there on her left, but like a lot on the shore, it was little more than a remnant of past glory. The third eye and white writing on the side of wall reminded Wendy of the fairgrounds of her youth: the thrill in those days was not rollercoasters loop-the-looping at break-neck speed but the willingness to go along with the seduction of imagination. That moment of suspended disbelief when the world was richer and more innocent, which both players implicitly agreed upon when a coin passed hands. Wendy sat down and took out a small notebook. She might as well do some journaling whilst she was here. It would be interesting, no doubt, to look back on these days in years to come. As no one was working the Temple of Knowledge, she entered the date and wrote her first entry in the voice of Madam Marie.

I see a fork in the road into the future. If you allow your doubts and fears to direct you, you'll find yourself stuck with those demons somewhere in the swamps of Jersey. Lift the veil of doubt off your heart, and let go of the expectations of others. It is then that you'll find your true path, and return to the essence of you.

Wendy gnawed her pen, and gazed out over the crowd. The laughter and shrieks of excited children reminded her that this was a day of celebration. Eighteen years ago on this day, a muscled man with a voice of a rusty nail had changed her fortunes. He had blown her teenage world right open, and she had had a brief taste of freedom before she had blown it all. Tonight, she'd celebrate her independence anew, with the crack and flash of fireworks. Tomorrow she'd start her pilgrimage. She ditched the notebook in her jute duffle bag, snapped the clasp to, and walk to the section of beach she had been directed to, dizzy with the niggling dread that her version of Madam Marie's fortune telling was not better than they do.

All the fun has been had

I never thought it would happen: thirty. When I was fifteen, thirty was two times too old, thirty was over the hill, thirty was five years older than I'd given myself to live. Thirty had as much to do with me as Long Johns with the Chippendales. It came, and it went, and I didn't like it one bit. Springsteen was my age when he wrote Dancing in the Dark; it hit a nerve when I was fifteen. Life took over but it came back to me. Thirty is this limbo, a suffocating trap. Too old for chasing dreams, too young for giving up on them. I'm surprised I didn't see the moment coming. It wasn't an overnight thing I'm sure, but it knocked me like a wrecking ball last year at Wembley Arena.

Rosie looked up from the bit of paper. She sighed as she pushed a stray lock back behind her ear. This was so typical of her mother. Always talking too much, analysing everything. She read on.

I'm thirty-four now and I feel old. Not just old, ancient. You're at the academy, ready to fend for yourself. It's quite obvious from your behaviour you don't need me around. So now it is my turn. I'm lumbered with a forty-year old husband on the couch, zombified and slippered, for whom the footie is the highlight of the evening. It's like your father is ready to sit out his time.

Rosie rolled her eyes. Whom! Who said whom these days? Only her mother! She could just imagine her mother and her freedom: a denim skirt at least ten centimetres too short, a tight Lycra top in neon colours, showing off all of her carefully cultivated middle-age spread,

teetering heels like knitting needles, and a cowboy hat to finish it off. She never knew anyone who could get it so wrong.

Well, I'm not. I need to find out who I am. I am going back to my roots. Mum.

'What utter shite!' Rosie crumpled up the note and tossed it across the room. She was hungry and tired. Her period had started and the start of school was just weeks away. This was just about the last thing she needed: her mother in some sort of mid-life crisis, looking for her family history. She glanced at her watch. It didn't look like she'd be back tonight though. Great! She'd better look in the fridge and see what she could muster up.

Rosie got off the stool and moved over to the fridge. It was another hour before her dad would be home. For a moment she contemplated sending him a text to prepare him for an empty house but quickly dismissed the idea. Then she'd have to explain over the phone. Better not. Anyway, she wanted to meet up with Maria tonight. No time to be the broad shoulder her dad could cry on, the foundation he could build on, or any of that sentimental crap. Let them sort it out between themselves. This was no matter for a teenager. They should be old and wise enough.

She looked at the worktop: one red onion, a wrinkled potato with white shoots sprouting from it, half a green pepper, tomatoes, a courgette and a thingamabob. She held up the blob with the green leaves. Some sort of cabbage. It always seemed so easy on those cooking programmes. People plonk their shopping on the table and the chef goes: Ah, excellent! I will be making... and then rattle off some delicious sounding dish using exactly those ingredients. What would they make of this?

She turned to rummage in the cupboard. It was full of baked beans. She had stopped eating them for the past three years but her mum still bought a regular supply, oblivious to her change of diet. Like it had only taken a good five months before her mum finally realised,

for good, for real, that she was no longer eating meat. Then there were the following three weeks in which she tried to coax Rosie back onto it, then the two weeks of sulk and anger, all your bones will collapse and you'll end up like the hunchback of the Notre Dame, with his crooked back and bowlegs and then there was the day the moaning finally stopped and the beans started to pile up.

Rosie found a jar of plum sauce hidden behind the Baked Beans. The green blob looked somewhat like Chinese cabbage, so perhaps she could do an oriental stir-fry. She'd do a Jamie Oliver: everything in one wok, in neat little pieces. At least it would look ... green. Sure, Jamie would do a sauce from scratch but then, he had nothing better to do. She had a social life.

Rosie took a small knife from the drawer and started chopping up the onion. The juice stained her fingers. Gad, how she hated red onions for that. A double whammy: stink and stain. She switched on the radio with her elbow. Some geezer with a voice like an auctioneer on speed was raving on about a local band, that, according to him, was going to be the next big thing to come from Aberdeen. Like there had been that many great things from Aberdeen. Rosie thought about it. She thought about it hard. And drew a blank. Of course, there was the deep-fried Mars-bar but even that wasn't quite from Aberdeen. She took the courgette and began to chop it up.

She went over the letter in her head. It was a bit weird, to say the least. Her mum had never gone away on her own. Never that she could remember anyway. She'd shrink at the idea of having to drive more than an hour by herself. Got nervous even catching the bus into town. Going on holiday was a theatre production in itself. The preparations started at least three months before. She'd book some sort of Gîte or mountain hut or German Castle and then spend weeks emailing back and forth, seeking confirmation of every single detail, over and over again. But all that stress was nothing compared to what happened when her mother had to get onto a plane. Passports held in sweaty palms, arriving two hours early for even the earliest check-in time. Reading over bits of

paper again, and again, and again, flapping them about like a demented flamingo. Hyperventilating in the sick bag during take-off and landing.

Where would this woman go? A friend maybe. A friend in Aberdeen, who could keep a secret. That pretty much ruled out all of her friends then. A B&B or hotel even, waiting for the phone call begging her to come home. It wouldn't come from her. She shifted the courgette along the cutting board. Her eyes fell on her mother's mobile phone. Ah well, she would not be calling then. She shrugged. She quite fancied a few days without mum. Dad never got onto her about anything, so it would be pretty chilled. She could do chilled. No problem.

Rosie finished the courgette and put the wok on the stove. She poured in the extra-virgin olive oil and stirred the spatula to keep the vegetables from burning. As she reached for the pepper grinder she heard the front door. It had taken exactly half a day for her mother to stay missing. What a record. When she turned around, she saw it was her dad. He was very early today. He wore a grey trilby hat and a tartan scarf tied loosely around his neck. He dropped his bag and sat on one of the stools.

'What are you cooking?' Not even a hint of surprise. It must have been the fourth time ever in her life that she was cooking (and two of them were pancakes on Shrove Tuesday), yet dad failed to notice the significance. She grunted and tipped the pan over so he could see.

'A stir-fry? He looked a little worried. Rosie nodded curtly.

'Okay that'll do. Where's your mother?'

Rosie shrugged her shoulders and continued stirring the shrivelled vegetables. Her dad tried again.

'Where's your mother?'

Rosie looked up, sighed, and walked over to the crumpled-up bit of paper. She unfolded it and planted it on the breakfast bar. Then she went back to her wok. Her dad read the note. She watched his face. She couldn't read anything off it. Blank as a corpse. She took the jar with plum sauce and tried to open it. The lid was stiff. She twisted with all

her might, trying hard not to show her dad she was struggling. She tapped the side on the edge of the worktop, turning it in her hands so as to not miss one bit. She ran it under a hot tap. Still she could not open the jar. She glanced at her dad. He was just sitting there, with the note in his hands, with that same vacant stare. He coughed.

‘Urgh, what time were you home? When did you find this note?’ His voice was stale and pinched. He sounded like a young boy who’s been sent to the headmaster’s office and who’s trying to make conversation before accepting the belt. Rosie shrugged.

‘What time did you find this letter, ROSIE! Speak to me. For once!’

Rosie was taken aback by the sudden anger in his voice. Where did that come from? She faltered, ‘Uh, dunno. About half an hour ago, I guess.’ She knew her night at Maria’s was slip-sliding away. A darkish smoke started to come from the wok. She turned the gas low. One stir-fry, well-done, please. She held her jar out to her dad.

Her dad stared at the jar with bewilderment. Rosie turned the gas off to save the last few slices of courgette and green pepper. Her dad took the jar, read the label and turned it over in his hand. He looked at her, then at the note, and turned his head away. Then he let out one almighty roar and threw the jar across the breakfast bar, past the fridge, against the kitchen door. It splattered into a million little pieces. Black sauce slimed down like a slow lava stream, the bits of glass the debris of the explosion.

‘SHIT, SHIT, SHIT!’ he cursed. Then he paced out of the kitchen into the living room, slamming the door, and switched on the TV. He’d taken it well then.

Rosie ripped some kitchen towel and cleaned up the biggest mess. He could do the rest. Then she took out her mobile phone and texted Maria. Not eaten yet. C u in 10. She left through the backdoor without glancing back.

The wind bit her cheeks and she wished now that she’d put a coat on. It had been warmer for a few weeks but there was no sign of summer in the air today. Rosie tucked her head as far as she could in the collar

of her black hoodie. She walked her walk, her bad-ass attitude barely disguised by her nonchalant sway. She felt on edge and sharp.

Maria's house was another two blocks away. It used to be a cool place to hang out. There was always something happening. Maria's two older brothers played in a band and showed off all the time. According to Marco, all a bloke ever needed was a guitar. A guitar, Marco bragged, was synonymous with sex. It brings in the chicks, the chicks bring in the booze. Once the booze is in the chicks, the dick's in the chicks. Marco was a sleaze-bag. But Toni, now he was a different story all together. He flashed his guitar about too, but on him it looked like a gun. There was no promise of lust when he played, just a real sense of danger. That intrigued Rosie. Toni had a mean streak. First time she spoke to him he wanted to know about her dark eyeliner. The next time she saw him he had died his hair black, and circled his eyes so they sank with the bleakness of a dying junkie. He also had black lips and nails. Nineteen he was.

One night when Maria's parents were out, the boys had organised a garage-gig. Toni had slung his arms around Rosie and pulled her in tight and hard. He claimed her that night, period. She loved the jealous looks from the other girls — pretty blonde girls with blue eyes and dainty noses, who nibbled their way through at least three lettuces a week and not much else; brunettes with doe-eyes and gullible written on their foreheads. The school's prefects, the head-girl, they all wanted to be with Toni but instead, he claimed her. They smoked her first joint together that evening. She had her first ever kiss with him too. It had been urgent and rough. She had not liked it.

Maria had been furious with her. Rosie had ignored her.

Next day, Marco and Toni were gone. Toni didn't bother to tell her or anything. From Maria she knew he was squatting in a flat in North London. She got one text a week later saying she was a cool chick but that he had to move on. She hadn't heard from him since.

Then, about a month later, Mr Dante told his wife he no longer loved her, moved out soon after, and settled with a young employee of

his firm in a council flat across town. Mrs Dante had shrivelled up and just about died. So too had the place. It was no longer cool, it was downright freezing without the family. Maria didn't seem to mind too much. She and her mum just about tolerated each other in best of times, so now there was no reason for forced jollity, so at least she could get on with her own life. Or so she said.

Rosie turned the last corner. Her mobile vibrated. It was Maria. *Be cool, all right? C u soon.*

Rosie frowned. What kind of message was that? She looked about her. The trees were full of promise, the air felt of change. She took another deep breath: definitely change. With a whiff of danger. Maria switched off whenever Rosie described the smell in the air. But often she was right. Rain, snow, they were easy to sniff, but she was right about other things too: change, sadness, loneliness. It was right there. You just needed to be open to it. In the window on her right, an old couple were snuggled up together. He was asleep, his body heavy against her shoulder. A trickle of spit sat on his lower lip. She was knitting. The electric fire gave off an orange glow.

She thought about her mother. She always believed her parents were destined for long-term familiarity like the couple on her right. Seventeen years is a long time to get to know the other inside out, and read them like the back of your hand. She couldn't get her head round the note she found this afternoon. It was so unbelievably unlike her mum. The only thing she seemed to fuss about was her family. Why would she suddenly leave it all behind? Surely she was too young for a mid-life crisis! She'd have half expected her dad to drive off on a motorbike, all in black leathers, hair razored to the skin, like Mr Dante. But her mum didn't just drop everything and disappear.

Rosie stopped. In front of Maria's house was a car she didn't recognise. It was a battered old Volkswagen van. Flowered curtains had been drawn across the small windows at the back. Someone had doodled very bad graffiti all along the sides. Rosie spotted a guitar weeping blood, a Harley Davidson driven by a skeleton. There was a

huge dent above the back wheel. She thought about the text Maria sent her a few minutes ago. Puzzled but intrigued she walked along the house. She rapped the backdoor and walked straight in.

At the kitchen table sat Toni. Or what was left of him. He still wore the black eyeliner, but now it no longer gave off a hint of gutter-chic. His drawn face with its hollow cheeks now matched the persona he'd painted on two years ago. He'd shrivelled away to the image he'd wanted to imitate then. His arms were brittle sticks, and Rosie spotted sores and bruises on the inside of his elbow. He was dragging hard on his Marlboro as if he couldn't be bothered inhaling just the smoke but needed to suck the actual tobacco straight inside him. He looked up at her.

'Hey buttercup.' Then he looked down at the table and muttered something.

'What was that Toni?' Rosie tried to sound nonchalant. She tried not show how shocked she was to find Toni here in such a state. She was surprised at the anger that rose to her cheeks. She should feel relief, really.

'Nothing.' He took a deep drag. It brought on a fit of coughing. He sounded like a 75-year-old with cancerous lungs.

'No need to be shy, you're amongst family,' Rosie joked lightly. She slapped his shoulder but made sure she let the back of her hand rest very briefly on his cheek before she pulled back. Toni shivered slightly.

'Just saying how you are still a bonnie flower in this fucked up place.' There was a chill in his voice.

Rosie caught Maria's look. She shrugged sheepishly and pretended she didn't notice the dark warning in Maria's set mouth. Mrs Dante was flustering about with tea and biscuits. Toni ignored her.

'Come on Rosie, let's go up to my room.' Maria dragged Rosie by the arm, snatching up some biscuits and slices of toast. She dragged Rosie past the family portrait in the hall, taken four years ago and now gathering dust, and up the worn steps. She slammed the door after them and flopped onto the bed.

Neither spoke. They often laid on the bed, staring at the ceiling and being quiet. Such silence between them had never been awkward but tonight it was tinged with speculation. Maria broke the silence.

‘He’s fucked up, you hear. Just ignore him. He’s just after some food and heat. He’s not looking to stay. He’s not sticking around for love.’ She paused and looked straight at Rosie. ‘As soon as he’s got my mum to give him some money he’ll be off.’

‘Don’t worry, I got that the last time round.’ Rosie sighed. ‘It looks like my mum has left too.’

‘What?’ Maria bolted upright. ‘Your mum? You’re joking, right?’

Rosie shook her head. ‘I still think she’ll be back tomorrow, maybe even tonight actually, but it’s still weird. She left this note about finding out who she is. Like, what’s that all about?’

Maria looked at Rosie in disbelief. ‘Your mother? You’re talking about your mother? The woman who gets heart palpitations trying to find a parking space at Asda’s? The woman who sits waiting every day after school, with a cup of tea and a biscuit? The woman who sighs when you come home late and then makes you a cup of hot cocoa? That woman? That’s the woman you are saying has just up and left?’

Rosie nodded. ‘Uh huh.’ Rosie remained quiet. She gnawed the sides of her thumb. Maria said it was a disgusting habit but Rosie didn’t realise she was even doing it, most of the time. Now she stopped herself. She started to pluck Maria’s Sherpa bedspread instead.

‘Shit, what is it about all of them? It’s like, they’re the adults, aren’t they? Like, they should know better. So why do they end up fucking everything up?’ Maria used her pillow as a punch bag. Oh, I feel that there’s so much more to life than this. Punch. I didn’t know really what I got myself into when I married your mother. I was young and foolish. Punch. I have a right to a life too! Punch, punch. She stopped and glanced at Rosie. ‘Sorry, Rose. It’s not about me. Do you think your mum is serious? Like my dad? You think this is for real?’

‘I don’t know, and I don’t care. All she ever does is nag, nag, nag. And if she’s not nagging, she’s fussing. Good riddance, I’d say.’ Rosie

pulled back her shoulders and sat up straight. C'mon. I've brought some henna for my hair.' Rosie took out a random CD from the large pile on the floor next to the bed. Christina. Ah well, better than Britney at least. Maria's taste still needed some education.

Seeing Toni had rattled Rosie. Not because of what she felt for him, but because of what she didn't feel. The anger rising on her cheeks when she saw him at that kitchen table was not of a broken heart but of wounded pride. The girls at school had been vicious, slut-shaming her at every opportunity possible. She hadn't even slept with Toni. That whole night had been nothing but awkward fumbling, with both of them being too high to pay attention to the other. It had left her cold. In fact, she had been relieved he hadn't pushed her head down into his crotch or attempted to get his hand inside her knickers. Not that she would ever admit that to any of those girls.

She was angry at Toni for bugging off, and letting her deal with the fall-out on her own. School was a dog-eat-dog institution at the best of times. Put a jealous gaggle of teen queens in there and it became positively toxic. And then she was confused too. Should she not have felt tingling all over when he first kissed her? Should she not have pined for him, fantasized about what could have been? Smelt the lingering breath of him on her clothes, and ached for more? Should she not have felt a bolt of excitement for seeing him tonight?

Rosie stuck her key in the front door and noticed the lights in the living room were still on. She checked to see if her dad had forgotten, but as she put her head around the door she saw him staring at the wall.

'Hey Dad, you're still up?'

He shrugged. There was no sign of dinner, just two empty bottles of wine and a random sales channel harping on about a pair of garden sheers that were truly revolutionary.

‘You want something to eat? I’m making a marmite toastie.’ He shrugged. She left him to it, and returned a few minutes later with her toast.

‘She won’t stay away for long. I mean, where would she go? I’m sure whatever friend she’s gone to will have enough of her after a few days.’

‘I phoned all of them. Nobody’s heard from her. And I don’t think they are lying either.’

‘Did you know she was unhappy?’ She had not seen much change in her mum, but she had observed her mum would not join her and her dad on the settee when they watched *The Weakest Link*. She had taken up running too. Every morning at seven she’d be out for an hour. But wanting to be fit surely isn’t a sign of misery? ‘Dad? Had Mum said she was unhappy?’

‘Restless, maybe.’

‘Restless about what? What do you mean? Since when?’

‘You know how last year she went to Wembley Arena to see Bruce Springsteen?’ Her dad looked up from the TV screen. ‘Did you not notice she started playing his music in the house all the time? After work, when I’d come in, she’d be dancing in the kitchen with a glass of wine in her hand, record player on high.’

Rosie had not been aware. She had not really paid much attention to her mum lately. There was too much in her own life to get on with.

‘She’s been going on and on about the first time she saw Springsteen. When we met.’

Rosie choked on her toast. ‘You met at a Springsteen concert? Mum, I mean MY mum, went to rock concerts? How come you guys never told me?’

‘You never asked.’ Her dad opened another bottle of red. ‘I first met your mother on the fourth of July 1985, Wembley Stadium. She had hiked her way down, despite your grandma and grandda trying to stop her.’

‘My mother? Hitchhiked all the way from Aberdeen to Wembley?’