

WANDERHEART

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**New Travel Stories from
My Travels to Every Country in the World**

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“Tell me, and tell me the truth. Where have you been, and through which countries have you traveled? Tell us about the peoples themselves, and about their cities—who were hostile, cruel and uncivilized, and who were hospitable and humane?”

– Homer, *Odyssey*

“Why must we listen to our hearts?” asked the boy.
“Because that’s where you’ll find your treasure.”

– Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

“Wherever you go, go with all your heart.”

– Confucius



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INTRODUCTION

At twenty-three, I quit a promising IT job. My colleagues asked about my new position and especially the accompanying salary. But my resignation stemmed from a deeper realization: the rigid pattern of office life would never truly make me happy. I yearned for freedom and wanted to explore the world.

I started traveling—always more and always farther—went to university, and then started working for an airline. Each journey and every adventure fueled my desire for more. Eventually, that insatiable hunger led me to visit every country in the world.

Along the way, I discovered what traveling is really about. It's about people who surprise and move you with their unexpected hospitality. About prejudices that disappear when you take the time to look deeper. About finding humanity, even—or perhaps especially—in places where you least expect it. About pushing your own boundaries. About learning to trust your intuition, especially when it leads you to places others would avoid.

Too often, I see people arranging their lives according to society's expectations, the presumed norms of their environment, or self-imposed limitations. We set aside our passions and dreams, make decisions out of fear or convenience, and thus hold ourselves back from much beauty

before we've really begun. We listen too little to our hearts. Why? Out of fear of failing to achieve what we truly desire? Out of fear of letting our dreams become reality?

After my decision to step away from my promising career, I learned to listen more keenly to my intuition. As a result, I naturally started taking more risks. Each time, my confidence that things would turn out well grew, and I dared to go one step further. My heart proved to be an excellent guide. Not just for traveling, but for life in general. It strengthened my determination, it urged me to see things in perspective, and it taught me not to be afraid. Travel is like life in miniature.

In *Wanderheart*, I invite you to live all kinds of adventures together with me. From my very first trip to Morocco as an impetuous youngster still trying to find my way, to a moving glimpse into the reality of the devastating war in Ukraine. Come with me as I knock on the door of a stranger in Japan who will immerse me in unexpected hospitality. Travel with me through impoverished Haiti, feel my wonder as I climb the Mountains of the Moon in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and experience with me one of the most precarious moments of my wanderings in Iraq, in addition to many other adventures. Interwoven throughout these episodes is the story of my search for a lost love to bring her my first book, *The Long Road to Cullaville*.

I hope *Wanderheart* inspires you to follow your own heart, even when the path is uncertain. Because life can be just as surprising as you dare to make it.

Leiden, May 2025

PROLOGUE

I should arrive in a few kilometers. The realization hits me with increasing intensity: this might be the most exciting of all my adventures. Waves of unbridled eagerness and gnawing doubt surge through my body like a wild cocktail. Yet deeper inside, I also feel a calming certainty. The conviction that I cannot do anything other than what I'm about to do, simply because it comes straight from my heart.

I'm on my way to bring Nana a copy of my book, *The Long Road to Cullaville*. She plays a defining role in the first chapter—without her, the book probably would never have existed. After the dramatic end of our turbulent relationship more than thirteen years ago, we never saw or spoke to each other again.

Nana doesn't know I'm coming—just as I don't know if she'll be home. I have no idea how she'll react when she sees me—that is, *if* I can even find her, because I only vaguely know where she lives.

1

THE SIRENS OF THE TRAVELER

Spain/Portugal/Morocco - 1985

Adventure was like invisible sirens, whose irresistible singing promised excitement and elicited from me a yearning for the unknown. They seduced me with a song that was both enchanting and deceptive. Odysseus had himself tied to the mast of his ship to resist the call of the demigoddesses, but I still had to learn to navigate between temptation and danger. For what is adventure if not a leap into the deep, without knowing what lies beneath the surface?

Captivating tales of intrepid heroes—Odysseus foremost, but also Marco Polo and Willem Barentsz, among others—who dared the unimaginable, set my young heart racing. My hunger for adventure was further fueled by the journeys I made with my parents and my sister. It was inevitable: as soon as I became an adult, I would wander too. When the time finally came, I decided to go to the southernmost point of the Interrail network. My very first solo journey. It was also the beginning of my long apprenticeship as a traveler: I was about to learn my first lessons.



As the wheels of the train begin their enchanting concert of steel on steel with the rails and steadily increase their rhythm, an intense battle unexpectedly ignites within me. Homesickness and doubt compete for priority with a fierce longing for the unknown. The overwhelming freedom I feel instills a paralyzing fear: I am completely by myself and hold my own fate in my hands. That suddenly seems terrifying: I feel a strong urge to retrace my steps. Yet I hold back my tears and press on, which will ultimately prove to be a defining moment of my life. How could I have known that the siren call of the uncertain would become the driving force behind my life and eventually lead me to every country in the world? Gradually, I would discover that following my heart isn't frightening but liberating.

On the way to Paris, my desire to discover gradually returns. Beneath the homesickness, beneath the loneliness, and beneath the uncertainty burns a deep yearning and endless curiosity. Curiosity about new places. About the sound of unknown languages. About exotic people. About food I've never tasted. About vistas I've never seen. Curiosity about cities where I've never left footprints.

So from Gare du Nord, I take the famous subway that brings me to Montparnasse station with plenty of time to board the train to Bordeaux. Once there, I transfer to the train to Irún, just across the border, in northern Spain. Two years ago, I had cycled a small stretch through that country from Andorra, but otherwise I have never really been to Spain. When I leave France, I will definitively leave the familiar behind. Then the real adventure will begin. In Spain I want to let myself be surprised by a country of which I really have no idea, other than the clichés of beach holidays, flamenco, and paella.

That evening I sleep as best I can in a train seat. When I stumble sleepily out of Irún station the next morning, I head to the beach with my

backpack. I lay down far from the surf, rest my head on my luggage, and fall into a deep sleep. The cold sea wakes me up a few hours later when it tickles my feet. I had never realized that the difference between low and high tide is enormous here. So I trudge through the small town, still drowsy, and make sure to be at the station in time for the train that will take me even farther south.

I share the compartment with Paulo and his girlfriend, two Portuguese people my age. We naturally start chatting. That's how it goes when you travel. You see each other, understand that you both want company, and start talking. There's always enough to talk about. *What do you study? Where do you live? Do you have brothers or sisters? What do you want to do in the future?* When the light in the compartment goes out, it doesn't take long before I fall asleep. Meanwhile, the train carries me through the darkness to a country where I've never been before and that I barely know how to imagine.

The next morning we arrive in Lisbon. Paulo has invited me to visit him. We continue talking and I stay overnight before saying goodbye. I want to explore the city.

I walk, crisscrossing through the streets and alleys inlaid with black and white mosaics. Up and down hills, to the Castelo São Jorge, where I look over the entire city. I ride an old tram that works its way up the steep streets with squeaks and creaks, drop by the cathedral and several squares with fountains. I rest, sitting at the quay to watch the Tagus flow by on its final stretch toward the Atlantic Ocean. I have a realization: Portugal is not a Mediterranean country—it faces west, toward that endless ocean that reaches far beyond the horizon. No wonder this country produced so many explorers.

I take the little train to Cascais and wander through the town on Portugal's west coast. On the way back towards the capital, I get off a few stops early and walk to the Monument of the Discoveries. It's built

from stone in the shape of a caravel, the style of ship with which the famous Portuguese seafarers conquered the world. High on the prow stands a statue of Henry the Navigator, and behind him, other famous explorers, artists, cartographers, and other prominent figures from the Age of Discovery, such as Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, and Bartolomeu Dias.

I try with all my might to imagine how they could leave the familiar coast behind to embark on journeys that would lead them to unknown places. They must have wondered what those distant lands would look like and whether they would ever return. Their world maps, however beautiful, still contained large blank spaces. How could they know beforehand whom they could trust in those unknown harbors? Who warned them of the dangers along the way? I quickly realize that I will never have their innocence and never be able to depart with the blank slate they had. But perhaps I share something else with them: that mixture of suspicion and trust with which you approach the unknown. For they too must have had to learn when to follow their intuition and when to let go of their misgivings.

On the square in front of the enormous monument lies a street mosaic with a compass rose and world map showing the Portuguese voyages of discovery. Now my wandering heart beats harder, and my imagination runs wild. I, too, want to conquer this world, which I can walk across here with such ease. But there's no way I can foresee that this will be the first of many, many journeys that will eventually lead me to all corners of the world.

As much as Lisbon enchants me, the urge to travel farther and continue discovering is stronger. The next morning I take a ferry to the other side of the Tagus and the train to Vila Real de Santo António, a border town far in the south of Portugal, where I arrive in the evening. After crossing the Guadiana River, I arrive in Ayamonte, and I'm back in Spain.

There are many young people from various countries, and outside one of the many bars, I start talking with Steve, from Canada. Even though it's already past ten-thirty, we see restaurants and bars everywhere full of life. We enjoy the tapas, then we go out and soon meet two Spanish girls, who invite us to a disco. Carmen seems to like me, but eventually Steve and I sensibly return to the station, where we've decided to sleep because we find the hotels too expensive. We're not the only ones: we join an army of youngsters and sleep on the platform of the small border town station.

Soon I hear rats scurrying nearby. But I finally fall asleep, only to wake up again an hour later. Something woke me—a feeling? an instinct? Then I see a shadow shuffling along the sleeping backpackers. Without making a sound, my eyes follow the figure. But when he bends down and his arms reach out toward Steve's luggage, I can't hold back any longer. I shout, 'What are you doing there?' just like that, in Dutch. In a flash, the shadow shoots away and dissolves into the darkness.

We wake up early. When I tell Steve about the thief, he immediately checks his luggage. His belongings are all still there. As agreed, the Spanish young ladies from the previous night come to us. Carmen takes me to the beach and introduces me to her parents. She talks to her father in that beautiful Spanish that I instantly fall in love with. He looks at me with a cold gaze that seems to go right through me. For the first time this trip, I feel how important it is to be able to read other people's signals. Later Carmen explains to me in her broken English that she asked him if she could go with me to a hotel. He had said no, but I had already sensed that. Even before I say goodbye to Carmen and travel on, I promise myself to cherish my love for Spanish and learn the language.

It's time to travel farther, and I journey through the night again, changing trains in Seville and Córdoba on the way to Algeciras. I want to buy a ticket for the ship to Morocco, but it turns out I need a visa. Fortunately, I

secure it immediately at the consulate: a large stamp with five seals over it. A few hours later I'm already on the ferry for a three-hour journey to the other side. Farther south, past the Rock of Gibraltar. To Africa.

On the way, I start talking with young travelers from the United States, Germany, and Denmark. We're all excited: we're about to leave Europe behind and enter another continent. As the only one in this group who has been to Africa before, I tell them about my travels to Libya, Zambia, and Egypt. With each look of admiration, I feel myself grow. With each story I gladly assume the role of expert, the one who has seen and experienced it all. The one who can warn the others about swindlers and deceivers. But is this youngster really well-secured to his mast, or will the call of the sirens become too powerful for him?

Immediately after we descend the gangway and walk into Tangier, we are besieged by a horde of Moroccans who I believe are my own age. They say they want to practice their English. Yeah, right. Nice story. 'Just ignore them and keep walking,' I advise. Soon I see the others willingly walking along with one of the boys. Well, I had warned them: don't let yourself be sweet-talked when you're approached. Instead, thank them kindly and walk on.

I'm certainly not falling for this and march at a brisk pace toward the boulevard, toward the city. Behind me trails a string of guys who won't give up and don't want to return home empty-handed. No matter how fast I walk with my modest luggage, they easily keep up with me. They keep pulling at me, making pleas that they need me to improve their English, that I surely can't abandon them, that I can't deny them conversation lessons in another language, that this was the last boat of the day, and that I am their last chance.

Meanwhile, the sun burns mercilessly on my head. Although I'm now walking briskly, with my gaze fixed on Tangier and in complete denial of the boys' existence, it starts to gnaw at me. Where am I actually heading?

I have no guidebook, no map, no idea what the city looks like, or where the center is, or where I'll spend the night. (Yes, dear young readers, this story takes place in times long before mobile phones and Internet and all the other tools that make traveling so easy these days.)

Little remains of that cool, all-knowing and seasoned traveler from an hour ago. The unrelenting stream of pleading words, the tugging at my shirt—no matter how hard I try to ignore them, the boys won't leave. They are determined not to let go of this last prey.

And then I give up my resistance. Of course, we're all young people curious about each other's lives. Of course, they can show me the city. Of course, they'll help me find a cheap hotel, and they are the ideal gateway to a taste of local life. I just need to talk to them. Surely, I can do that much for my Moroccan brothers? A small voice inside still resists. *Why do they want to help me so badly? Is there something behind this?* But the sun burns relentlessly, and I simply crave rest. So I ignore those questions, turn to one of the boys, and say that I'll go along with him.

He introduces himself as Moses, and the corners of his mouth curve upward, but I can't quite tell what that curve is telling me. His eyes narrow as he offers to carry my backpack. I decline the offer with a smile and a wave of my hand. I must say, he speaks English quite well. He must practice often with foreigners. Proudly, I tell him that I also speak French. He laughs briefly and continues in English. He tells me that he studies medicine and that he hopes to have a better chance of working abroad later when his English is good enough. The other boys see that they've missed out this time and drift away. Tomorrow other ships will dock with new opportunities aboard.

We walk into the old city. My new friend settles me in a simple room in a guesthouse with peeling walls and a broken mirror. I have a tiny balcony, from which I can see the winding alley below disappear around a bend.

That afternoon we sit at a terrace somewhere and drink mint tea. We watch the passers-by and chat about all sorts of things. Within ten minutes another boy comes to sit with us. Moses introduces him as his best friend, Ahmed. With a broad grin he tells him that I'm from the Netherlands, while giving a quick wink.

Ahmed is also quite talkative and asks me endless questions. In English, because he too wants to practice that language. Oh, why did I have so much suspicion earlier that afternoon on the pier of Tangier's harbor? They're just good guys. Ambitious too, and clever to practice their English with foreign peers for a better future. Dumb to have been so distrustful when they approached me in the harbor.

When Moses sees my Walkman, he asks what music I have with me. In a flash I see something new in his face, a keenness that makes me hesitate for a moment. A little voice inside tries to say something, but it's too soft. Of the ten cassettes I brought, I show him five. He asks if he can borrow a few. Ahmed moves a bit closer and exchanges a quick glance with Moses. 'Yes, then we can listen to them when we're home later,' Moses says in a tone that sounds just a bit too casual. Finally, he chooses tapes with Roxy Music, Dire Straits, OMD, and Police. He carefully puts them in his bag.

The next day they show me the souk. An endless succession of small shops where you can buy pretty much anything you can think of, from copper coffee pots to colored glass lamps, from spices to carpets. It reminds me of souks I have seen in Cairo and Damascus, an apparently haphazard mess with an undeniable exotic allure. Especially because you get the feeling that the marketplace couldn't have looked much different a few hundred years ago. I can't take in all of the colors and objects, smells and sounds. I feel far removed from Europe now.

We drink tea again from small glasses filled with large pieces of mint. They tell about their lives, about their plans for the future. Even

though they're peers, I realize that our lives and prospects are very different. But isn't that exactly one of the things that makes traveling so beautiful—seeing how other people live, hearing what occupies them, how they fill their days, and what dreams they have?

Moses pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and takes a bag of hashish from a fold in his clothing. He opens two cigarettes, mixes the stuff with the tobacco and seals the cigarettes again. I decline his offer of a cigarette and tell him that I've never smoked. They find that very strange. I hadn't paid much attention to it, but now realize that almost everyone here smokes. Even though I had understood it was forbidden, I smell the scent of pot everywhere.

That evening Moses returns with what he calls a surprise. Something triumphant dances in his eyes as he tells about a religious festival in his parents' village. He says he's been in contact with the family and they've invited me to attend. Ahmed nods enthusiastically. 'You'll never experience anything like this again,' he says, while his eyes never leave my face.

It sounds like a unique chance to experience a traditional celebration closed to outsiders. *But why would they invite a stranger for such an intimate moment?* The uncomfortable voice in my head awakens. I push it away. I count myself lucky and am now even happier than before that I eventually trusted Moses. This is the adventure I was looking for. Within a week of leaving home, I'm already going to experience something exclusive.

'But,' Moses hastily adds, 'it's better if you leave your luggage with us first. Then we won't have to go to your hotel tomorrow morning.' He exchanges a quick glance with Ahmed. 'It's a long journey. We have to leave early.'

We pick up my luggage from my hotel and get into a taxi. It turns out that Moses lives in a distant suburb of Tangier. After we've left my backpack in his apartment, we immediately return to the center to

continue strolling through the city. We end up at a terrace, where we drink tea again.

Then Moses looks straight into my face. I barely recognize him. His eyes are now unfathomably black. Cold. The jovial guide of the past few days disappears like snow in the sun.

‘Say, how many kilos do you actually want?’ His voice sounds hard.

I don’t know what he means, but an icy feeling creeps up my spine. In a flash, all the small signals I’ve ignored come together. The wink when they heard I was from the Netherlands. The eagerness with which they “borrowed” my cassettes. The enthusiastic story about the family festival. With an apprehensive voice I ask, ‘Kilos? Of what?’

Ahmed leans back and draws a smile that now seems predatory. Moses’s voice sounds flat as he says, ‘Well, drugs of course. Hashish. How many kilos do you want to buy from us?’

The mask has fallen. Only now do I see how blind I’ve been to what was happening right in front of me all this time. The friendly student who wanted to practice English has been replaced by a hardened dealer who knows exactly what he’s doing.

‘Uh, no, I don’t want to buy any drugs.’ I try to speak with conviction.

‘Wait a minute, you’re from the Netherlands. Surely you want to take hash back with you? You’re all major consumers; you’ll get rid of those few kilos in no time, and with the proceeds you can easily pay for your entire trip!’

‘No. Absolutely not.’

As I utter these last words, I see their eyes narrow. Their eyebrows transform into deep frowns. Then Moses starts talking again.

‘Listen, we’ve invested two days of our time in you. When we heard you were from the Netherlands, we were sure you’d be a good customer for us. If you really refuse to do what we ask . . . well, then it becomes a very different story. Then you’ll have to compensate us for the time we’ve spent showing you around.’