

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed straw cowboy hat, a white long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans stands in profile, looking towards the right. She has a necklace with a large white bead and glasses hanging from her neck. Next to her is a dark brown horse with a brown leather saddle and a white sheepskin blanket draped over it. The background shows a wooded area with trees and a fence.

Leaving Before The Rains Come

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

DON'T LET'S GO TO THE DOGS TONIGHT

ALEXANDRA FULLER

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About the Book

'I believed that if I moored myself to Charlie, I would know tranquility interspersed with organized adventure. He would stay in Zambia because he loved the romance of it. I could remain here, safely. Our lives would be the "three rifles, supplies for a month and Mozart" of Out of Africa without the plane crashes, syphilis and Danish accent.'

In 1992 Alexandra Fuller embarked on a new journey, into a long, tempestuous marriage to Charlie Ross, the love of her life. In this frank, personal memoir, a sequel to *Don't Let's Go To The Dogs Tonight*, she charts their twenty years together, from the brutal beauty of the Zambezi to the mountains of Wyoming - the new adventures, the unexplored paths, the insurmountable obstacles ... and the many signals that they missed along the way.

About the Author

Alexandra Fuller was born in England in 1969. In 1972, she moved with her family to a farm in southern Africa. She lived in Africa until her mid-twenties. In 1994, she moved to Wyoming. She has three children.

ALSO BY ALEXANDRA FULLER

Cocktail Hour Under the Tree of Forgetfulness

The Legend of Colton H. Bryant

*Scribbling the Cat:
Travels with an African Soldier*

*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight:
An African Childhood*

FOR THE SIX:
JOAN, BRYAN, SHARON, SUSIE, MELODIE, AND TERRY.
With my gratitude and love.

Leaving Before the Rains Come

Alexandra Fuller



Harvill Secker
LONDON

I and the world happened to have a slight difference of opinion; the world said I was mad, and I said the world was mad. I was outvoted, and here I am.

—RICHARD BROTHERS

We carry with us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.

—SIR THOMAS BROWNE

AND AWAY WE FLY

"DAD SAYS HE'S going to die next week," Vanessa said. The phone line from Zambia was good for once. No echoing, no hopping, no static. Still, I felt the distancing power of the whole of the Atlantic Ocean between us.

"Say that again," I said.

"*Dad,*" repeated Vanessa loudly and slowly, as if she were an Englishwoman-on-vacation in the tropics. "He says he's not going to bat some other chap's innings. He says it's not cricket." I heard her light a cigarette: the scrape and hiss of a match; the singe of burning tobacco; the capacious inhale. I recognized we were in danger of doing things on Vanessa's indolent schedule. She would be there south of the equator cultivating nonchalance. I would be here north of it conscious of time-lapsing deadlines.

"Why?" I asked. "Of what?"

"The Bible," Vanessa said, calmly exhaling.

"Oh," I said. "Well, no one in their right mind takes the Bible literally."

"I do," Vanessa said.

"Exactly," I triumphed.

I pictured Vanessa at the picnic table on her veranda, a generous helping of South African white wine in front of her. Mosquitoes would be whining around her ankles poisonously. She'd be wiping sweat off her nose, pushing panting dogs away from her lap. I could also hear the rainy-season chorus of Southern Hemisphere woodland-living birds in the background. The tyranny of a Heuglin's robin, some chattering masked weavers, and a Sombre bulbul

shouting over and over, "*Willie! Come out and fight! Willie! Come out and fight! Scaaaared.*"

Meanwhile the austerity of winter was still hanging on here. Outside my office window, there were tiny beams of frozen mud showing through tall snowbanks. The only birds I could see were an industrious banditry of black-capped chickadees at the suet feeder. They seemed robustly ascetic little creatures, like tiny chattering monks. I'd read they are able to lower their body temperature by up to a dozen degrees on cold winter nights to conserve energy. *Torpor* was the word the bird books used. Hummingbirds supposedly did the same thing, but they also had to eat sixty times their body weight a day just to stay alive, at least according to a fragment of a poem by Charles Wright I kept above my computer. "Now that's a life on the edge," the fragment concludes.

"I have to go," I said.

But Vanessa had begun to expand on her vision for Dad's funeral arrangements and she was in full voice now. Should there be an old Land Rover or a donkey cart for a hearse? And was that Polish priest from Old Mkushi still alive, the one who had been at my wedding? Because he had lived in the bush long enough not to blink if we asked him to have the service under a baobab tree instead of in a church, right? And perhaps we could get people from the villages to make a choir. "There are heaps of those Apostles all over the place," Vanessa pointed out. "But do they sing, or do they just sit around draped in white bedsheets, moaning?"

I said I didn't know, but I'd never forget the time Mum got in a dustup with the Apostle who had moved onto the edge of the farm with his several wives and his scores of children and whose vegetable plot had strayed onto her overflowing pet cemetery. Mum had yelled obscenities, planted her walking stick in the soil, and declared turf war. In return, the Apostle had thrown rocks at Mum's surviving dogs, brandished his staff, and recited bellicose passages from the

Old Testament. "An apoplectic apostolic," Mum had reported with relish, although her neck had been out for weeks after the Apostle shook her, "just like Jack Russell with a rat."

Vanessa took another considered drag off her cigarette. "Oh right," she said. "I'd forgotten about that. Maybe Catholics might be better after all. They'll know proper hymns. Plus Catholics have wine at intermission, don't they? And Mum doesn't have a history of battling them, does she?"

"Not yet," I said.

"And what about entertainment for afterwards?" Vanessa asked. "People will have driven for days. They'll be expecting a thrash. It'll have to be a huge party from beginning to end, with a calypso band, Harry Belafonte, and buckets of rum punch. Perhaps we could organize boat races on the Zambezi in dugout canoes. That would be groovy. And what about a greasy pole over one of Mum's fishponds for the especially inebriated mourners, because you know it's going to be Alcoholics Unanimous from beginning to end? And maybe we could have a maze like the one we had at Mum and Dad's fortieth anniversary," Vanessa said. "Remember?"

I would never forget that either. There had been shots of something fairly stiff at the entrance to the maze, and some guests got so drunk right off the bat they were stranded in dead ends until dawn. But I didn't bring this up, nor did I say that I thought Vanessa's suggestions were murderously bad. How many funerals did she want in one week? In the interests of time (mine, chiefly) I said I thought they were all ideas worth considering. "That is, when Dad is actually dead," I said. And then I added, in a way that I hoped suggested a signing off, "Okay, Van. I'm quite busy here."

But Vanessa wouldn't be deterred; she poured herself another glass of wine and rattled on. "No, no, no," she said. "We have to plan now, we'll be too distraught at the time." She reminded me she wouldn't be able to do any of the

readings because she was illiterate, as well we all knew. Mum certainly couldn't do a reading, or much of anything, because she would be an inconsolable wreck. And Richard shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a pulpit. "He'll just grunt and growl and terrify the congregation," Vanessa said. "No, Al, when Dad dies, you're going to have to do the urology."



A week later, March 8, 2010, Dad turned seventy. The day came and went, and in spite of Psalm 90:10 my father didn't die. To prove the miracle of his continued corporal existence among us, Vanessa e-mailed me a photograph of his funeral party turned birthday bash. There he was on her veranda in the Kafue hills, his arm around Mum's shoulders. My parents were wearing matching straw hats and expressions of matching lopsided hilarity. Between them, they were holding a bouquet of beaten-up-looking yellow flowers. Daffodils, I thought, but I wasn't sure. For one thing—due to the camera shaking, or the subjects swaying—the photograph was a little blurry. And for another thing, Vanessa steals most of her flowers from Lusaka hotel gardens, and daffodils seemed unlikely for all sorts of reasons.

I felt a pang of jealous nostalgia, although *pang* is the wrong word because that suggests something satiable, like hunger. And nostalgia isn't quite right either, because that suggests a sentimental view of the past, like Artie Shaw or Doris Day was the soundtrack for my youth, but it wasn't. That was my parents' soundtrack. Vanessa and I listened to the Swedish pop group ABBA. We had Clem Tholet, the Rhodesian folksinger, ever a popular star at the annual *Bless 'Em All* Troop Shows. We learned to dance to Ipi Ntombi's "The Warrior." My family's history—with its very real, inevitable consequences—defied romantic longing.

Although Dad believes the only side you can reliably count on is your own, and Vanessa sometimes dispenses irrevocable threats to never talk to any of us again, and my mother carries an impressive grudge—"I sometimes forget, but I will never ever forgive"—my family mostly gets over it, whatever it is, and they move on. They have to be in the ever-replenishing present, partly because it is filled with ever-replenishing uncertainty; there are always fresh crises coming hot on the heels of the old ones.

"No rest for the beautiful," Dad says.

"Wicked," I correct him.

"Them too probably."

Over the years, there have been other phone calls. It is usually Vanessa: "Oh Al, nightmare! There was a black mamba in the kids' room," that was once. Another time, she reported that Mum had returned from her morning walk around the farm to find a rabid dog sitting weirdly placid under the Tree of Forgetfulness. "You know what Mum's like. Luckily she realized it wasn't acting normally and she didn't try to stroke it or invite it to sleep on the sofa or anything." Then there were the few surreal months when crocodiles flooded out of the Zambezi in unusual numbers and plagued my parents' farm. They were not only in Mum's fishponds as usual, but also in Dad's banana plantation; sunbathing outside Mr. Zulu's house in the morning; casually scraping their way past the watchman's hut toward the sheep pen at night.

I seldom told Charlie about the phone calls and I rarely shared with him the freshest dramas from Zambia in part because I had learned over time that the events we Fullers found hilarious or entertaining did not always amuse my American husband. Charlie was a gallant one-man intervention wanting to save us from our recklessness, quietly stepping in whenever he thought we were drinking excessively, ruining our health with cigarettes, or courting intestinal disaster with undercooked chicken. This made the

Fullers howl with laughter and did nothing to make them behave differently. One year, in a fit of common sense, I sent a case of Off! insect repellent to the farm in the hope it would reduce the incidence of familial malaria. “Bobo sent us gallons of Bugger Off for Christmas,” Dad told anyone who showed up under the Tree of Forgetfulness that year. “Go ahead, squirt yourself with as much as you like. Shower in it. Have a bath.”

I still felt a little torn. For a long time, I had tried to be profoundly grateful to Charlie for his impulse of wanting to rescue us from our chaos, and I had even tried to believe in his systems of control and protection the way I had once tried to believe in God. But deep down I always knew there is no way to order chaos. It’s the fundamental theory at the beginning and end of everything; it’s the ultimate law of nature. There’s no way to win against unpredictability, to suit up completely against accidents. Which isn’t to say I didn’t embrace the Western idea that it was possible —“Good God, you look as if you’re about to shoot yourselves out of a cannon,” Dad said when he saw Charlie and me dressed for a bicycle ride in Lycra, elbow pads, and crash helmets—but I understood that as much as it is craziness to court danger, disaster, and mishap, it is also craziness to believe that everything can be charted, ordered, and prevented. It’s also more boring.

When I phoned home on Sunday mornings, Mum and Dad were usually at the pub below the banana plantation, overlooking the Zambezi River. It’s evening for them, and they’re taking a couple hours to put their feet up at the bar. Generally, a few drinks have imbued them with extra rations of optimism. Most often, Dad answers first, shouting even if the line is clear. “Fit as a flea,” he usually says, or “Not bad for an old goat.” He rarely elaborates, because in spite of an influx of competitively cheap talk time into Zambia (available for purchase at every intersection in Lusaka and in numerous kiosks all over Chirundu), Dad maintains the

telegram-abrupt phone manners of someone for whom long-distance calls are a prohibitively expensive luxury. "I'll hand you over to Mum," he says as soon as the absolute preliminaries have been completed.

Then it's her turn to shout contagious enthusiasm at me from their noisy world to my habitually hushed one. She holds the receiver up so I can listen to the birds, the cicadas, and the frogs, and I can hear Dad objecting to this folly: "Bloody expensive conversation Bobo is having with a bunch of fresh air." But Mum shushes him and says, "Did you hear that?" And if the dogs begin barking she says, "Oh, the adorable little terrorists, can you hear them. Say hello to Bobo, Sprocket. Harry, say woof!" Sometimes she says, "And oh listen! The hippos are scolding us." And then she holds the phone up to the river, but all I can hear is Dad complaining: "Good Lord, Tub, we're not the bloody Rockefellers." But Mum ignores him and rattles on anyway.

"Big excitement this week," she was telling me now. "We got invited to a party in Lusaka. You know, those people with all the consonants in their names. Tiny blobs of caviar, well, trout eggs really, not sturgeon obviously, and scary amounts of vodka."

"Scary?"

"Yes, so by the time we were ready to leave the party, your father had already had far too much excitement. He climbed onto the roof of the pickup and refused to come down," Mum says.

"What?" I hold the receiver out from my ear and stare at it in delight. These are my late-middle-aged parents! They are grandparents nine times over. I put the phone back to my ear. "Then what?" I ask.

"I had to drive off with him like that," Mum says. "And you know what a terrible driver I am. Heaven only knows how we made it home. I was halfway to Makeni before it dawned on me that I might be driving on the wrong side of the road."

“Dawned on you?”

“Well, Bobo, you know what drivers are these days. I thought they were hooting at me because they wanted me to go faster.”

“So?”

“I drove faster, of course,” Mum says. “Dad was thumping on the roof but I assumed he was just singing the ‘Hallelujah’ chorus or Tchaikovsky’s bells and cannons. How was I to know he wanted to come down? Oh, it was such a performance.”

I shut my eyes and pictured the soft, hot world at the bottom of the farm, with the river lazily curling its way east to Mozambique, and my parents contributing to a general sense of easygoing mayhem in their inimitable way. By contrast, my days were amorphously mapped out with the repeating tasks of laundry and meals and deadlines. And I was more and more drained by an increasingly fraught effort to shore myself up against the belief system I had borrowed. “Well, situation normal here,” I say. “Nothing new to report.”

My parents pitied me the fact that—at least as far as they could tell—all my dramas had to be self-inflicted. They considered the acceptance of the certainty of pandemonium an essential ingredient to the enjoyment of life. “Don’t yell so loudly or everyone will want them,” Dad said when, on a visit home, a plague of insects and a couple of geckos rained out of the thatch roof of the spare bedroom onto my mosquito net. Nothing surprised him, not the rabid dogs, or the snakes, not the hippos and elephants. “Although the novelty’s beginning to wear off a bit,” he admitted.

It takes a kind of outrageous courage—recklessness even, I might have said once—to revel in the pattern of that much definite chaos. I had been raised in this way, and I had loved much of my early life, and of course I loved my family, but at some point I had lost the mettle and the imagination to surrender to the promise of perpetual insecurity. Instead I

chose to believe in the possibility of a predictable, chartable future, and I had picked a life that I imagined would have certainties, safety nets, and assurances.

What I did not know then is that the assurances I needed couldn't be had. I did not know that for the things that unhorse you, for the things that wreck you, for the things that toy with your internal tide—against those things, there is no conventional guard. “The problem with most people,” Dad said once, not necessarily implying that I counted as most people, but not discounting the possibility either, “is that they want to be alive for as long as possible without having any idea whatsoever how to live.”

MADNESS IN PRESCRIBED DOSES

BUT WHEN I first met Charlie at the Marco Polo Club in Lusaka, Zambia, in June 1991, he seemed to me to have perfected the art of knowing how to live. He was nearly thirty-three, an American in Zambia, running rafting and canoe operations on the Zambezi and Luangwa rivers. We nominal foreigners—those who had lived in Africa for a few generations—usually gave actual foreigners a wide berth, especially Americans. They tended to wear socks with sandals and outsized safari hats, and they stood with legs akimbo, as if they needed a little more real estate than the rest of us just to stay upright. Also, we envied and disparaged them for their habit of bringing their own supplies with them; loo roll, candy bars, little bottles of hand sanitizer and sunscreen as if our rough lavatory paper, boiled sweets, germs, and ingrained sunburn were offensive to them, brands of an inferior way of being.

Charlie didn't look like the run-of-the-mill American-in-Africa, though. He seemed seasoned in the unruly, bearded way of an outdoorsman. Attracted to the country by our rivers, he had been living in Zambia on and off for years, camping out in a sweltering warehouse near Victoria Falls, subjected to the major inconveniences of malaria, crocodiles, and dysentery. I guessed he had long ago recovered from the minor inconveniences of our socialist-era toiletries, our dearth of Snickers bars, our cavalier attitude toward diarrhea and melanoma. And although he wore sandals, his were the sort worn to paddle a raft through whitewater, not the orthotic-support kind used by

Bible-wielding Baptists to tramp through supposedly heathen villages.

I was barely twenty-two, in my last year at a Canadian college, majoring in English for a bachelor of arts. “BA stands for Bugger-All if you ask me,” Dad said, before reconfirming his suspicion that education was wasted on women. “So is giving females the vote, while we’re on the subject.” But Charlie appeared to believe higher education wasn’t wasted on women any more than it was on men. He seemed to take the cause of universal adult suffrage for granted. He declared himself genuinely impressed by my English major. “Have you read *The Vampire Chronicles*?” he asked, which I thought showed refreshingly eclectic taste. And, most endearingly of all, he genuinely believed—or pretended to believe—I could actually play polo, which I considered a gentlemanly disregard for my obvious shortcomings.

Charlie told me he had taken up polo for the adrenaline. I was fascinated and a little in awe. Most people I knew, myself included, had been saturated with enough of that hormone by early childhood to last a lifetime. Like whitewater rafting, it seemed noble and romantic to take up a sport for the sheer, pointless thrill of it. I thought it was, in a minor key, like Robert Falcon Scott slogging off to the South Pole, or Laurie Lee striking out for Spain on foot from England one midsummer morning. Although unlike Scott or Lee, Charlie’s gestures toward adventure were grand without being necessarily death-defying, and they came with the understanding of built-in conclusions. Twenty-eight minutes of polo; a day, a week, a month of boating; a few weeks on a mountain, and then—“Cut!”—an end to the action and a helicopter or a Land Rover arrived, cold beers were served, wounds were salved. We Zambians, on the other hand, lurched from one unplanned, uncelebrated escapade to the next; misadventure without end.

Which was why we didn't need polo for the thrill of it, but for the contrary sense of normalcy we gained from the game. Under President Kaunda's nationalist-socialist ideology, polo was as close to robustly bourgeois as we could get without alerting the unwanted attentions of petty government spies and accountants. Most of us weren't very good at the game, or even at riding horses. Charlie was good at both. He was instantly put on a team with the few real players and his handicap went up. I was put on a lucky packet team with a combined handicap of an almost impossibly low minus eight. Besides myself, my team included an enthusiastically bumbling Zambian, a mad Irishman, and a wild Indian who terrified everyone, including himself, with his unpredictable and untrained mounts. "Make way! Coming through! Oh, God protect!"

When I told people in the States that Charlie and I met playing polo in Zambia, it took me a while to understand why they reacted the way they did. Then I went to a polo match in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and saw the Texan patrons with their five-goal-apiece Argentinean professionals, riding their matching strings of ponies with their color-coordinated bandages and custom saddle blankets. After that, I would always add, "Which sounds more glamorous than it really was."

Because in those days—nearly three decades after the end of British rule—the polo grounds in Lusaka were little more than a dusty expanse in front of the Italian Club. The club itself had none of the aggrieved nostalgia of, say, Nairobi's Muthaiga Club, and none of the pioneering grandeur of the old Bulawayo Club in Zimbabwe. It was just a rather ordinary-looking socialist-era brick building with a large bar, a decent-sized veranda, and a dining room that local Italians had converted into a restaurant with a decidedly un-Mediterranean menu: slabs of tough salty meat, peanut oil, cabbage, and whatever else was in season.

During the week our polo ponies were exercised on the abandoned racetrack adjacent to the polo grounds. Aside from the narrow path the horses followed, the track was now mostly overgrown and used as an open-air latrine by pedestrians cutting through the agricultural grounds to and from the Great East Road. The whole place was still beautiful in a wounded sort of way, a Garden of Eden gone to seed; it wasn't uncommon to spot the odd snake in there, or a surprisingly fruit-laden tree, or an incongruous pair of discarded lacy knickers flung into the shrubbery. But it wasn't by anyone's definition glamorous.

It was Charlie who gave us cachet. While we lounged on rusty buckled bleachers between chukkas he told stories about whitewater rafting in Siberia, discussing Cold War politics with officers from the old Red Army, helicopter skiing in the Rockies. He had walked with gorillas in Rwanda, he had guided clients up Kilimanjaro, he had climbed in Yosemite. There had been a documentary made about his descent of the Bashkaus River for the Discovery Channel, *Bashkaus: Hard Labor in Siberia*, and an American magazine had featured him as its cover story: "Charlie Ross: Mr. Adventure."

By contrast, although we had all lived inarguably interesting lives, few of us could afford exotic travel, and, surrounded by enough unbidden chaos on a daily basis, we didn't go in search of it in our free time. No one had written much about us or made movies about our adventures, in part because there was no beginning or end to our undertakings, no way of knowing the arc of our narratives. We were less the authors of deliberate derring-do than victims of cosmic accidents, political mishaps, mistaken identities. "Must've thought they were someone else," Dad said by way of explaining the murder of an elderly farming couple found shot to death in their house on the Great North Road. What Dad really seemed to be saying was that none of us seemed important enough to kill on purpose.



Within hours of meeting him, I already imagined it might be safe to invite Charlie back to our farm; he seemed to have the experience to manage my family. So far, neither Vanessa nor I had had a potential boyfriend survive the ordeal. For a start, we lived hours of rough road from the nearest city, or even the nearest safari camp where eligible men might be found. Because of this, a trial cup of coffee or a test drive over dinner was out of the question. Anyone who showed any interest in us had to be prepared from their very first date to meet our parents and spend at least one night in our temperamental farmhouse with its rats in the ceiling and ill-behaved plumbing. Most men wisely balked and sought closer, easier, more conventional dates.

But even if we could lure men back to the farm—Peace Corps volunteers, Save the Children employees, and aid workers from Continental Europe—they would encounter first my unimpressed father, or sometimes our crazy, armed-to-the-teeth Yugoslav neighbor—“You take our women, we kill you!”—then they would be treated to Adamson’s hit-or-miss cooking, and finally they would be subjected to my mother’s military-tribunal-grade interrogation over a bottle or two of brandy. “When you say *old* American family, do you mean your people came over on the *Mayflower*, or do you mean you’re a Red Indian?” Or she would pretend not to understand their perfectly intelligible Dutch or Danish or Norwegian accents and begin speaking to them like a Nazi prison officer out of the old war movies she had enjoyed as a child in Kenya. “Let me try that again. Sprechen Sie Englisch?”

My family was an undertaking, an endurance test, for which no person could be expected to train. Most of the men would flee a day after arriving, sunburned, alcohol-poisoned, savaged by the dogs, and crippled with stomach

cramps. “Nerves,” Mum said. “Weak constitutions. No wonder they lost the war.”

“What war?”

Mum rolled her eyes. “Oh, you know what I mean.”

The one man who had seemed a likely tough enough candidate—the Englishman with a proper accent, reasonable pedigree, and unwavering stiff upper lip who drove from Malawi to Zambia in a 1962 Land Rover—and who seemed able to endure any amount of undercooked chicken, flea bites, and cheap South African wine, ended up falling for my mother instead of for either of us. “Well, what do you expect, if you and Vanessa *will* sit around picking your spots and saying nothing interesting?” Mum said. Our father only shrugged unsympathetically and lit his pipe. “Your mother’s boyfriends are no business of mine,” he said. “Anyway, the chap has very good taste if you ask me.”

I planned for a life of spinsterhood. Vanessa at least was working in England when she wasn’t home on holiday, and she was magnetically beautiful. “The face of the eighties,” a modeling consultant at her London finishing school had called her in her twentieth year. Plus, she had made an early decision to cultivate a demeanor of dumb acquiescence that had a devastating effect on men, although I knew her expression to be complete fakery. She was really just temporarily dormant, ready to blow up and smother everyone around her with ash and molten lava anytime the need arose. But London traffic screeched to a standstill if she floated into a busy street; men fell over themselves to carry her bags; if she put an unlit cigarette anywhere near her lips, a pyre of matches appeared; one of Dad’s posh English relatives reported seeing her drifting aimlessly and barefoot up Elizabeth Street. “Smoking a cigarette and kicking up the leaves,” Auntie Pammy said, and we could almost see the Vaseline on the lens of that image. We assumed she would marry early and well.