

*Travel Light,
Move Fast*

*Alexandra
Fuller*



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Young and Old

*When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green;
And every goose a swan, lad,
And every lass a queen;
Then hey for boot and horse, lad,
And round the world away!
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day.*

—CHARLES KINGSLEY,
SONG FROM *THE WATER BABIES*

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PART ONE



A Very Good Death

Budapest, Hungary

A Long Lifetime

A long lifetime

Peoples and places

And the crisis of mankind—

What survives is the crystal—

Infinitely small—

Infinitely large—

—KENNETH REXROTH

CHAPTER ONE

In the Unlikely Event of Money, Buy Two Tickets to Paris

Oh, hello, Bobo,” Dad said, waking up from an induced coma to find me by his bedside. He looked around as best he could. “Bus station?” he asked.

“Budapest,” I said.

“Oh?” Dad said, fretting the lines and tubes that ran to his mouth and into his nose and into needles that disappeared under his skin where the Zambian sun had scalded an indelible brown line across his neck. The veins on his hands stood out, a worker’s hands, muscled and thick; there were needles slipped in there too.

“The poor man’s Paris,” I explained, cupping his hands in mine, the way you catch a large moth, gingerly.

“Ah,” Dad said, relaxing a bit.

Dad loved Paris in the spring; he loved Paris, the whole song. Something had happened to him there the year he left high school; love perhaps, or his first taste of freedom from the boiled-cabbage, gin-wrecked gloom of his British upbringing. After that, for the rest of his life, every time he came into extra money, which wasn’t often, he’d threaten to buy two tickets to Paris.

“Those Frogs know how it’s done. Start with champagne, end with absinthe; bring your dog to supper and no one gives a *merde* if you get off with the waiter,” he said.

Dad took my mother to Paris three times; he’d taken me once. He tried to get my sister to go for her fortieth birthday, but Vanessa had just delivered her sixth child and had endured a subsequently exhausting recovery in a noisy Lusaka clinic and she wasn’t in the mood to race our father to the top of the Eiffel Tower, or to savor new-in-season blackberries with a bottle of plonk on the Île de la Cité.

“If I show up with two tickets to Paris, will you come with me?” Dad had always asked the Scottish nurse with the cobalt-blue eyes who’d been our neighbor in southern Africa, back in the days my parents tried their hand at farming in a war zone. Auntie Rena, Vanessa and I had called her; in a war, you feel related to everyone, trauma bonded.

“Why yes, Tim,” Auntie Rena had always replied.

DAD HATED HOSPITALS. “They won’t let you smoke, you can’t get a drink when you really need one, and they always want to poke you in places not designed for poking.” He hated doctors too, on account of their propensity to attract dying or wounded people. “Then finish off the job.”

He’d only been in a hospital one other time, back in the seventies, after he’d run himself over while fixing the brakes on a car, also during our farming-in-a-war-zone phase. The workshop, built by the previous owner of the farm, a melancholy alcoholic, wasn’t level. “Should be good drainage, though,” Dad said, looking on the bright side of the noticeably tilted pounded-dirt floor. “If there’s a flood.”

But this was revolutionary-era Rhodesia—as it was back then,

unpredictable, upended, brilliant—and our farm was in a rain shadow, so although we had floods, mostly we had drought, and it was a heavy, mine-proofed station wagon that had slowly rolled over Dad while the workshop staff looked on in impotent horror.

“Poor Dad,” Mum had said. “Squashed flat as a cockroach and still he kept insisting there was nothing wrong with him that couldn’t be fixed with an aspirin and a couple of brandies.”

Everyone hit panic stations; rare in Rhodesia, it went against our professed national character. We were the *manliest* of people. “Your father was the first person to be medevaced to town from the valley,” Mum said, her nose twitching wistfully. “Until then, people just had to bite the bullet; and in very serious cases, we were rattled into the hospital in a mine-proof Land Rover. No shock absorbers to speak of.”

It was as if she were explaining to me a sepia-colored version of a life she’d known well, a life that included my father, but which I could barely grasp, as if I’d been nowhere near the actual bright, bloody intensity of it all myself.

“Absolute agony for the victim,” Mum said.

“I remember,” I said.

“But not,” Mum continued, “your father. Paul Dickenson, bless him, drove Dad in his *Mercedes-Benz*”—there was a pause, so I’d have the opportunity to appreciate the full extent of what Mum had just said—“to Brian Van Buren’s airstrip and Brian flew him straight to the airfield in Umtali over *enemy* lines.”

Things were beginning to blur a little in Mum’s narrative, I could tell, *Out of Africa* merging with one of those dashing Second World War movies she loves. But in our real life, in our little Rhodesian Bush War, there really were no enemy lines, no helpful German accents; God and restraint were long gone. There was only the country left; the soil, I mean, and blood.

And the three warring factions: white settlers scattered fatly here, there, everywhere; the Mashona kraaled in the northern two-thirds of the country, the Matabele in the south.

To the death, we white settlers vowed. Naturally, the Mashona and Matabele had no choice but to make the same vow. Even a small child could tell it was going to be a long war, a rotten mess.

The black insurgents had the open support of North Korea, China, and Bono; they were tougher than it's possible to imagine, enduring and patient. They'd been here forever and a generation. Some of those musoja must have been poets, dancers, farmers; war must have been harder for them to wage. Still, the ancestors were with them.

The white Rhodesians had the support of the United States, Israel, South Africa, and the UK; they were well trained, well armed, and ruthless. Most of their army was made up of paid black locals bossed about by white conscripts. A whole country of soldiers, but some of those conscripts must also have been poets, dancers, monks; ruthlessness must have been harder for them to perform. They were ancestor-abandoned and -abandoning.

Dad was assigned to a local unit on the eastern front, which wasn't difficult to find, we were standing on it, but it wasn't easy once he got there. He fought six months of every year with a handful of other white men, neighboring farmers, brothers in arms. They were supposed to stop insurgents coming from Mozambique into Rhodesia. Dad didn't talk about it much; unless in his sleep.

Mum didn't need to be told; she volunteered. She pledged to dig in as if we were seven generations into the place, as if we had actual skin in the game. She gamely donned the uniform, a horrible boxy dress in heavy polyester that would have been better suited to the Bavarian Alps, say, than to the sweltering valleys of eastern Rhodesia.

“Well, obviously we didn’t think the war would go on for so long, or that we’d lose,” Mum said afterward. She glared at me. “It was a shock when Robert Mugabe got in; I knew exactly what that meant. Or perhaps you don’t remember.”

I do remember.

Also what happened next, I remembered that too, although it’s not just one story, it’s thousands of stories, millions maybe. And it’s not just our story, or we’re in the story, but it didn’t happen only to us; it happened to other people too, and we happened upon it in equal measure. In unequal measure, I should say. It’d be generations before the shock waves left the land.

Or it is generations; we’re still there.

“So, of course, we stuck it out,” Mum concluded.

OURS WAS A NATION in a state at war with itself, no doubt; bodies piled up. We all had family on the front, unless they’d already been taken out, as we said, scribbled, donnered. But the Scripture Union teacher at our junior school reassured us that the blacks had whatever they gave coming back to them. “The sins of the father will be visited onto their children, even unto their children’s children,” she said.

Meantime, there were army camps and minefields. There were suburbs behind razor wire, dogs patrolling clipped lawns. There were convoys, curfews, sanctions, and censorship. The whole country had been turned into one vast, confusing battlefield and there was no getting off it.

“Oh, Bobo,” Mum says. “You do exaggerate.”

Mum prefers not to remember the war, or anything about our lives, the way I do. All her stories have the clicking-celluloid and worn-velvet comfort of an old cinema. As a result, her stories are better than mine, more vividly imagined, less depressing.

“And from the airfield,” Mum continued brightly, “Dad was taken straight to Umtali General in an ambulance. Imagine! He yelled and yelled. He wanted to be taken to the Wise Owl, the Impala Arms, the Cecil Hotel, anywhere but the hospital. I had to hear all about it from the stretcher-bearers afterward.” Mum paused. “Not that it would have made any difference. The driver couldn’t hear Dad’s desperate entreaties above the wail of the sirens. Oh, those were the good old days, Bobo. There was always something exciting going on.”

LIKE LOVE, war’s a bloody mess when it’s happening, and a worse mess when it’s over; but with any distance, you can look back at either and see only the glory, or only the pain. The dusk-obscured truth—somewhere in the middle of all our human messiness—is very difficult to recognize. Honestly, it’s so faint through the dim pewter gloaming; it may not even be there at all, shapeless and formless.

Perhaps it’s God, or time, or all things; it’s grace in any case. Some soldiers claim to have seen it through gun smoke; women pushing life into the world might catch a glimpse of it; it’s in the start of everything and in everyone’s end, surely. But to have clarity in the routine of your ordinary life, not at the very end, or in extremis: That’s amazing grace; and you don’t just wake up there either.

There’s always a terrible waiting period, a purgatory of doubt, between the suffering and the grace. That’s the lonely alone work, weathering the places in between, and dismantling oneself piece by piece meantime, shredding all that can be shredded, returning to dust all that can be eroded. Amazing grace appears when all

faith has fled; when final exhaustion has set in; when there're no trails to follow and one carries on anyway.

"Travel light," my father always said. "Move fast."

He followed that advice, practiced what he preached, like it was a key tenet of his personal religion. "When you're all the way down to the bone," he'd told me once, "tobacco, tea, and a mosquito net; that's all you need."

When you're all the way down to the bone.

Dad greatly admired a good sufferer; he remarked on it. Rural southern Africans came in for his highest praise. "Five hundred years of practice, poor bastards," Dad said. The Brits were useless, in his estimation, except the queen. "She can take it on the chin all right." The Italians were undignified. "They cry for their mothers," Dad said. And it was hard to tell with Americans, "because it's all a bit loud."

THE ANNEX OF THE MEN'S WARD of the Umtali General Hospital, where Dad was taken to recover from running himself over, was a new, low-slung barracks hastily erected to accommodate war casualties flooding in from the officially recognized eastern front. "Well, that was literally our kitchen door," Mum explained with studied humility. "It was us, Bobo, and beyond that, it was them."

Injured soldiers sat outside in the sun, or slowly walked about, the ones who could, mouths frozen in a perpetual "oh," as if the vehement amazement of whatever blast had brought them here was still working its way out of their bodies. "Stop gawking," Vanessa reminded me.

The sadness and waste and wrongness of war take decades to work their way out of a place and a people. My father shouted and

hurled things in his sleep until the very end. “There’re no handles on any of the wardrobes,” Mum complained. “And I can’t get any of the drawers to open, or close, properly. Dad’s shell shock has made toothpicks of the bedroom furniture.”

She didn’t begrudge the war though; neither did Dad, not really. For them it was what it was; their regrets quite different from mine, less painful probably, our guilt not at all similar. “I felt awkward as hell in that hospital bed. Not that my marksmanship ever caused any gook a sleepless night,” Dad said. “But you don’t want some other chap to have to bat your innings just because you were bloody fool enough to run yourself over.”

So even then, even with his right knee swollen like a watermelon, his right shoulder crushed to a wafer, his ribs cracked, organs bruised, my father had railed against his hospitalization. To ease the strain, Mum smuggled gallons of brandy into the ward, strapped to her body under a kaftan. “The midseventies kaftan. Not very flattering, but *very* practical,” Mum said.

Shortly thereafter, Dad organized an impromptu sports day for the shell-shocked amputees: three-legged races, wheelchair jockeying, one-armed cricket. There was a lot of hilarity, but also further accidents and injuries. The sack race was an unmitigated disaster for the hospital’s pillowcases.

“He was the worst patient in the history of the Umtali General Hospital,” Mum said, with no small degree of fake pride, the way she modestly celebrates when one of her dogs bites someone. “And that’s up against some pretty stiff competition, I should think. In the end, they were forced to release him early.”

I COULD TELL DAD HAD BEEN a rotten patient in Budapest too. There were saucer-sized bruises up and down his forearms from

the restraints they'd had to put on; I'd taken those off right away. He'd tried to escape more than once; and he'd threatened to punch the nurse attempting to give him an enema.

"My husband is very old-fashioned," my mother explained slowly and carefully to the offended nurse, a younger member of staff with regrettably proficient English.

"A beach," the young nurse protested; she had a lot of jewelry on her face, a stud in her tongue flashed. "He called me a beach, and also some other very bad words. Very, very bad."

"Yes, well," Mum said, staring pointedly at one of the nurse's nose piercings. "An Englishman's bottom is his castle."

The young nurse looked astonished, "He's an Englishman?"

I could understand her skepticism.

Dad didn't look like a typical, elderly, dying Englishman, pale and soft, untouched by an excess of ultraviolet light. Fifty years of sunburn, fifty years of tearing the ring out of it. He looked exactly what he was, a banana farmer from Zambia's Zambezi Valley. Any moment, it seemed inevitable he'd sit up, swing his legs over the side of the bed, and say, "Right, no more silly buggers!"

In fact, three weeks earlier, Dad had been on the farm in Zambia with his big, black, gentlemanly mutt, Harry, by his side, delivering a lecture to Comrade Connie, the banana plantation forewoman, on the importance of weeding the bananas and telling her, "Comrade Connie, weeding is next to godliness."

And that's how he should have died. Cracking a joke with Comrade Connie. Dead before he hit the ground, and Comrade Connie would've been there, so would have Harry, to comfort him in those final moments. They'd have called Mr. Chrissford and Mrs. Tembo; Mum would have been summoned.

They'd have had him in the ground by morning, in that heat.

That had been his plan. "A heart attack on the job, or a decent

dose of malaria,” he’d once told an inquisitive financial adviser when she’d asked about his strategies for retirement; he was in his late sixties at the time. “And until then,” he’d added, “I intend to misspend what’s left of my youth.”

But with bushy-top disease sweeping banana plantations worldwide, yields hadn’t quite been up to two tickets to Paris. Two tickets to the poor man’s Paris then, and Mum had been having so much fun—swanking about on a riverboat up the Danube, taking in the medieval castles, showing off her very good legs in the famous aquamarine public thermal baths—that he hadn’t wanted to mention he didn’t feel very well.

“Typical. He didn’t complain at all,” Mum said. “Then all of a sudden, he said, ‘Watch out for that waiter, he’s a spy,’ and collapsed.”

“The waiter’s a spy?” I asked.

“Well, he probably was a spy. That’s not the point. The point is, Dad suddenly crumpled like a soufflé and I had to call a Hungarian ambulance. Or the spy had to call a Hungarian ambulance.”

“You mean the waiter,” I said.

“Oh, Bobo,” Mum said; disappointed reproach isn’t an easy note to strike when the basic emotion is justified irritation. “It’s not as simple as it looks, trying to have an emergency in a foreign language.”

IN THE END, it took Dad twelve days to die in Budapest.

“Technically, just Pest,” Mum said. “Buda’s across the river, the hilly pretty part. You never saw it.”

Twelve days seems no time, to have it back. But to do it once, alone in a strange city, it was real time and no time, as if it were just he and I suspended in another realm, a holding dock or a leav-

ing station; nowhere we'd ever been before and nowhere from which we'd ever be returning.

Mum was fond of quoting Leslie Poles Hartley, "The past is a foreign country," but I was finding out, so was dying. Or dying was a baffling amalgamation of all countries; the suddenly brief past meeting an endless future in which every breath was now, exactly as they instruct you, the only thing that counted.

I phoned my sister in Zambia as soon I was back in my own room. Mum and I had become such a cause célèbre—we inadvertent longtime guests—the hotel had generously given me a room down the hall from Mum's at no extra cost. The whole staff knew us by name—Madam Fuller and Daughter Fuller—and by tragedy, like we were folklore come to life. They bestowed us sympathetic looks when they passed us in the corridors; we'd receive extra sachets of tea, little cartons of milk. "Such a humane people," Mum had said, her eyes moistening. "It's not how you imagine the Hungarians, is it?"

It wasn't, although truthfully until now I hadn't really taken the time to imagine the Hungarians at all.

"Van?" I was shouting into the phone now. I always shout when I call Zambia, as if the world is what it was, jerky old phone lines under the sea.

Vanessa lives a couple of hours from our parents' farm; they're close neighbors by our standards. I get all my news from home via Vanessa, unless she isn't talking to me, or to Mum and Dad, in which case I get no news, or I get the news as edited by Mum, which requires much insider knowledge, and the ability to listen between the lines.

Predictably, Vanessa and I had reacted very differently to the news of Dad's collapse. I'm fight and flight; I'd immediately set about getting myself from the United States to Budapest. Vanessa's

freeze; she'd taken to her bed in the hills above the Kafue River, turned the air-conditioning to North England in winter, and piled a heap of cats on her knees for warmth.

"Oh, huzzit, Al-Bo," Vanessa said. I heard her scuffling about, organizing cats. "I'll just take the phone outside so I don't bug Rich." Rich was Van's husband; we were all scared of bugging him. I pictured Van stuffing one of the Persians under her arm, grabbing her cigarettes, her lighter, looking around for her phone before realizing she was holding it. "Oh, Al, how do we do this? Thank goodness you're there. I don't have what it takes. I'm drained. Bindi says I'm drained."

Bindi was Vanessa's therapist.

Mum drags the word out, the-rapist.

Mum has a powerful dislike for Bindi, especially after Bindi had strongly encouraged Vanessa to complete a twenty-eight-day stint at a clinic in KwaZulu-Natal. Vanessa had done so, and had come back to Zambia with a diagnosis.

"A what?" Mum had asked, but it was too late by then. Vanessa was already in recovery. "She's where?" Mum couldn't bring herself to say the phrase. Bindi had also been recommending for some time now that Vanessa take a break from us, her family. "A mental-health sabbatical?" Mum had repeated, offended, you could tell, by each and every word of the therapist's suggestion. "From us? I've never heard such rot."

In the end, it had been more restful for Vanessa to pretend Bindi hadn't said anything; it had been more peaceful to stay in the eye of the storm than battle through a cyclone to calm. In any case, Vanessa and I were accustomed to drama, acclimated to it, adapted to thrive in its peculiar conditions; drama had always been our family's independent weather system.