The Absent Elephant

This true short story introduces the reader to the little known African forest elephant. It then relates how, in London, a young elephant on its way by air to Nigeria, West Africa, changed for ever the lives of a British man and an American woman who had yet to meet. Please note that all references in the text to the present time = 2016.

by Bob Golding

One day in October 1976 I found myself high in the skies above the Sahara Desert in Africa. Nearly seven miles high in fact. Even from that height the particular patch of the earth's surface below me looked a little scary. It looked dry, remote and wild, with no sign - at least from where I sat - of human presence or activity. As I moved across it, the colours of the land varied, from rust-red to golden brown with quite a few shades in between. Every now and then I could make out what seemed to be areas with jagged shadows cast by jagged rocky outcrops that might have been hills or even mountain tops. I gazed down but recognised very little of what I could see, just an endless, distant, starkly beautiful landscape.

I was sitting in a very comfortable seat in a large, jet aeroplane, the sort of aeroplane that is normally used to carry countless numbers of passengers around the globe every year, perhaps on business or for a few weeks in the sun. It was flying roughly north - south, having started its journey in London, and was now heading down to Lagos in Nigeria, West Africa. This flight was quite different, though, from any I had experienced before. For example, there was a complete absence of sound from within the aircraft - no squeals or shouts from bored or hungry children, no clattering crockery from food trolleys, no sudden announcements over crackling loudspeakers, not a human voice to be heard. The aircraft's flight crew were up in the nose of the aircraft somewhere, but I could neither hear nor see them. There was just the steady, subdued, background roar of the four jet engines.

You may have guessed by now that I was sitting alone in a large cargo aircraft, for me a new and strange experience. With the exception of my own seat there were no passenger seats to be seen, and most of the

fittings and fixtures such as overhead luggage racks and clusters of toilets that take up room in a passenger aircraft were also missing. The result was a cavernous space, a flying warehouse, and it was stacked with machinery and equipment and crates containing every kind of cargo imaginable. I learned that there were bicycles, refrigerators, lawn mowers, television sets, cement mixers and Heaven knows what else on that plane.

My solitary seat was positioned on the left side of the aircraft, toward the front and next to a window. I had been told it was for my use only and, as this suggested, there was not another passenger in sight, not a soul to be seen. If, during a flight, you liked to talk to your fellow passengers sometimes, or chat up the stewardesses, or stewards for that matter, this was not the place to be.

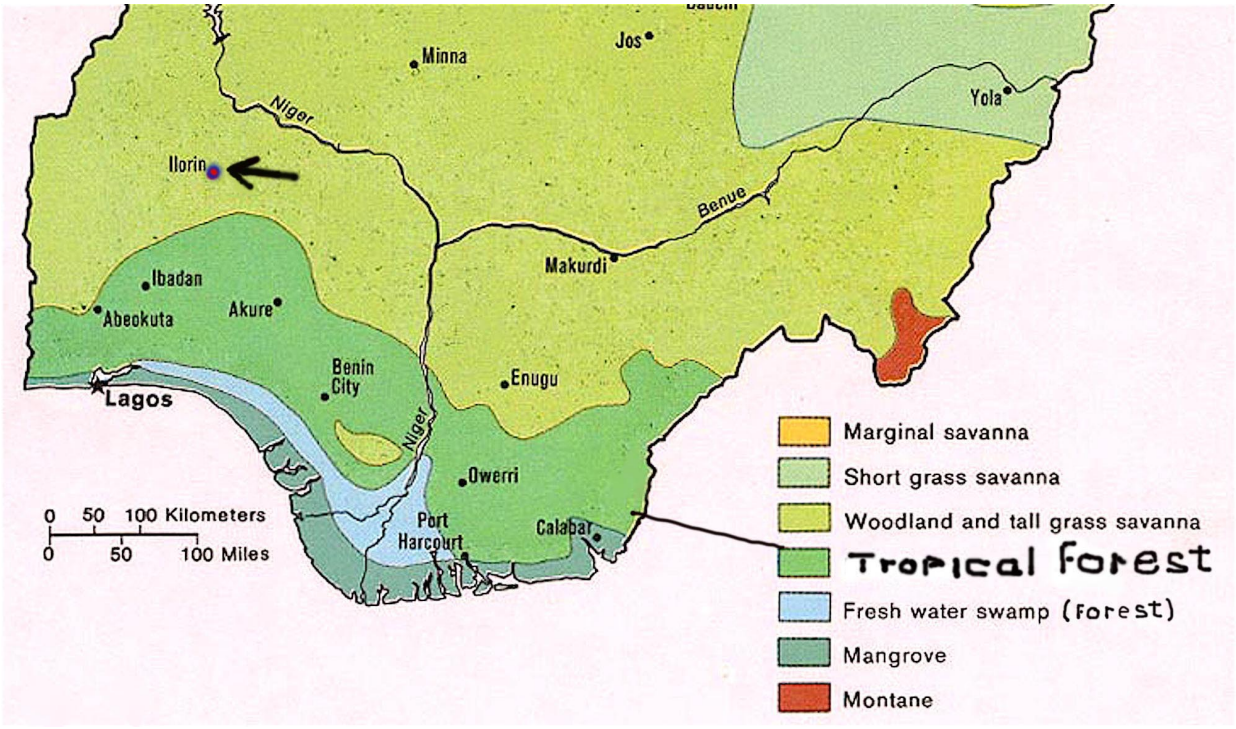
Sadly, I wasn't enjoying the flight. Something was missing from the stacks of crates and packages all around me, something I had gone especially to London to collect and take back with me to Nigeria, something I had decided, at the last minute and with a heavy heart, to leave on the tarmac at the airport.

That something was a wooden crate containing a live elephant.

Let me explain the background to this lonely journey across the African skies, a journey that had its roots back at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria where I was Director of the University's Zoological Garden. The University Zoo was a very popular and rapidly growing public attraction used by the University to educate the general public about Nigeria's and Africa's wildlife. When I took up my post there in 1963, a young female African elephant named Dora was already resident in the Zoo. She had been acquired two or three years earlier from a location somewhere north of Ilorin and the presumed northern boundary of the original tropical forest zone. Her mother had probably been killed by hunters for her meat rather than for her ivory. The young elephant was sent to the Zoo in Ibadan and was successfully hand raised there. A second female elephant, named Bodunrin, was brought to the Zoo in 1963 when she was around two weeks old. As far as it was possible to tell, her mother had also been killed by hunters, but in the Upper Ogun area of Nigeria, again to the north of Ilorin and the presumed boundary of the original tropical forest zone.

African elephant molar tooth

Lower jawbone with two molar teeth, one tooth each side



Showing the original tropical forest zone in southern Nigeria and its presumed northern limit. Most of the forest has now been felled. The two forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) at the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden were taken when very young from two separate areas north of Ilorin.

Bodunrin was kept initially in the garage and adjacent garden of the Head of the University's Zoology Department where she could receive the frequent attention she needed during those early weeks. In due course she was moved to the Zoo and introduced to Dora. Both young elephants had been handed over to the Zoo with the knowledge and agreement of the relevant Nigerian wildlife authorities.

I must tell you that there was something very special about those two young elephants: they were African forest elephants and they were the only forest elephants I have ever seen.

The African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) now appears to be quite widely acknowledged as a full and separate species of African elephant. Recent research claims to show that the forest elephant and the better known African savanna elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) have been separated for three million years. In the 1960s there was much difference of opinion, leading to confusion, concerning the classification of the African elephant. The distribution of the forest elephant, as stated in a number of publications, remains confused. This may be partly because of suggestions that there are further 'types' of African forest-dwelling elephant yet to be formally identified.

I was fascinated by having two forest elephants in the University Zoo, and by the fact that both had been taken from the wild in Nigeria. Young

Left *Loxodonta africana* and right *Loxodonta cyclotis*. Both are young animals. Note that the lower ear lobe of *L. africana* is more angular and extends further forward than that of *L. cyclotis* which has a generally smaller and more rounded ear (pinna); the distance between the eye and the ear is proportionately greater in *L. cyclotis* which also has a longer and narrower mandible, a tendency to hold the head lower and, conspicuously, the higher number of toe nails.

though they were, they did indeed look rather different from the African elephants usually seen, for example, in zoological gardens and safari parks in Europe or North America or indeed in the wild in many parts of Africa.

For some time a number of physical characteristics have been listed for the forest elephant that are said to be different from those of the savanna elephant. These include smaller size, longer and narrower mandible, head held at a lower angle, tusks straighter and point downward, side profile of head more rounded, ears more rounded and cover a smaller area of head, five toe nails on the front feet and four on back feet (*see the two images above*).

It seems that very few African forest elephants have been kept in zoos anywhere, although obtaining information on this is difficult. I have made further enquiries recently and my impression is that, while Abidjan Zoo in the Ivory Coast, West Africa, allegedly has a single forest elephant, this species is probably not to be found currently in many other zoos.

I had no doubt that the two elephants in our Zoological Garden were forest elephants. They had five clearly defined toe nails on the front feet and four on the back feet and in this regard were different from all other African elephants I inspected then, or have inspected since,

in zoos or elsewhere. I can only assume this is because most, if not all, of the African elephants exported to zoos and safari parks around the world originated from stocks of wild savanna elephants, mainly in countries in East and southern Africa. Although our forest elephants were young, I was able to confirm the presence of several of the other characteristics frequently described for *L. cyclotis.*

Bearing in mind that an elephant's toe nails are relatively easy to observe and count from a few metres away, I made a point of examining the feet of every African elephant I was able to get sufficiently close to when, in the 1960s and 70s, I visited zoos and safari parks in North America and Europe. I can say that every African elephant I viewed had four toe nails on each front foot and three on each back foot, and that the relative size and arrangement of the nails was very similar for each animal.

I was to discover, however, that the process of examining elephants' feet and counting their toe nails in a zoo was not always straightforward or enjoyable. I certainly wouldn't recommend it as a hobby. My wife was often embarrassed when she accompanied me on one of my Great Elephant Toe Nail Expeditions. She said, and she could have been right, that I looked pretty weird to other visitors in a zoo's elephant house as I squatted or semi-crawled between them trying to get as close to the elephants as the enclosure barriers would allow. The aim, of course, was to take photographs of the elephants' feet. On a couple of occasions zoo visitors reported me to the zoo staff for behaving strangely and I had to stand there, gesticulating wildly in Spanish or German, and try to explain what I had been doing.

The capture locations of our two forest elephants, as far as I could be reasonably sure of them, were perhaps surprising bearing in mind that much or most of southern Nigeria had, by the time of their capture, been cleared of forest; surprising also because of the increase in the human population in Nigeria. Most of southern Nigeria was once covered with tropical forest. According to a recent publication by the UN, Nigeria lost nearly 80 per cent of its old-growth forests between 1990 and 2005, the highest rate of natural forest loss anywhere on the planet. The remaining tropical forest in Nigeria continues to decline at world record rates due to high human population growth rates, conversion for subsistence and industrial agriculture, and logging. In the 1960s small areas of forest still remained in southern Nigeria, but felling continued at a fast rate. It is presumably still possible that small numbers of forest elephants remain in southern Nigeria, although it seems likely that this

species has succumbed, or soon will, to habitat alteration and increased human activity. Even the Cross River National Park in south eastern Nigeria is now under real threat from road construction.

Dora in the foreground. We were able to gather plenty of suitable woody branches, green leaves and grasses for the elephants throughout the year.

Bearing in mind the generally pessimistic outlook in the 1960s and 70s regarding the future of the forest elephant in Nigeria, it was obvious that the two females in our Zoo were valuable animals genetically and should be looked after carefully. It was suggested that our Zoological Garden should develop a long term plan aimed at establishing a captive, or semi-captive, breeding group of Nigerian forest elephants somewhere in southern Nigeria and within easy reach of Ibadan. The aim would be to establish, probably with others, a source of forest elephants with a genetically appropriate background with which to repopulate, in the future, any newly established and protected areas of tropical forest within Nigeria.

Such thinking probably sounds impossibly unrealistic now, but those of us who consider that Planet Earth is probably the only planet on which mankind can exist in the long term do sometimes have to grab a glass of something strong, sit back, exhale massively, think wild thoughts and ask for Divine Intervention.

In the case of the African forest elephant, the results of further research have been published recently that throw even more doubt on its future by concluding that not only does it take more than 20 years for female forest elephants to begin reproducing, but they also give birth only once every five to six years. This reproduction rate means that population growth is around three times slower than savanna elephants.

One day the spirit of one of the slogans painted on the front of many of Nigeria's mammy wagons descended upon us. That slogan was, and no doubt still is, 'No Condition is Permanent'.

It started in 1973 when Dora developed a health problem, apparently around the base of one her small tusks. The precise nature of the problem was unclear but the tusk was obviously painful to Dora

Forest elephants Bodunrin left, Dora right. The University of Ibadan's Zoological Garden grew rapidly as a public interface and visitor centre and a place where the public could observe wild animals in safety. By the time I left, there in 1979, the Zoo was attracting nearly a quarter of a million visitors each year, more than any other public amenity in Nigeria. Photo 1964.

who did her best to prevent it from coming into contact with anything hard or even with food when feeding. This situation continued for several days during which the situation showed no sign of improving. It became clear that action was necessary. Two British veterinarians from the University's Department of Veterinary Medicine who had already worked with some of our zoo animals came over to the Zoo to discuss the problem and suggest a way forward. After a couple of days of observation and discussion, the vets decided it was necessary to examine Dora's tusk more closely before deciding what further action to take; they pointed out that it would be necessary to give Dora a general anaesthetic before the examination.

On the morning of Operation Elephant a number of zoo keepers and interested colleagues gathered around the elephant enclosure and looked on with much interest and curiosity as Dora was injected with the anaesthetic. During the next few minutes Dora grew gradually less steady on her feet and two or three keepers and I followed her around, pushing hard against her, to prevent her suddenly falling over and possibly injuring herself. We also wanted her to go down with her suspect tusk on the upper side for ease of access by the vets during their examination. Finally, Dora's legs began to buckle, but we were able to ensure that she sank relatively gently to the ground. She rolled into a natural position on her side with the suspect tusk on the upper side. Pretty well perfect so far!

The two veterinarians started to examine Dora's problem tusk and for some time it seemed that everything was orderly and going well. A couple of the zoo staff helped the vets by holding instruments or other items they were using so, as the vets leaned over Dora, working away at her head end, there was usually a little relaxed activity around the prostrate elephant. A huge clump of tropical bamboo nearby provided valuable shade and brought a somewhat ethereal touch to the scene.

Then… Disaster! I cannot find words that adequately convey the impact of what happened next.

Dora died! Yes, died! Dora was dead! She had stopped breathing and was simply lying dead on the ground before us! As we all tried to absorb what had happened, many us us were shocked momentarily into a state of bulging eyed disbelief.

The vets decided to carry out an immediate post mortem examination to see if they could identify a cause of death; they set about examining the body where it lay. When they had finished a couple of hours or so later, Dora lay there with her internal organs and various body parts in piles for all to see.

As the vets finish their examination of the organs and tissues of the dead elephant Dora, the pieces are placed in piles ready to be carted away. This was a tragic day as Dora's death made it less likely that we would be able to establish a breeding group of African forest elephants in Nigeria. 1973.

As far as I remember, a cause of death was never clearly established. The vets assured me that everything had gone to plan as far as they were concerned and that all appropriate procedures had been followed. It was suggested that the elephant was perhaps allergic to to the anaesthetic or that there had been some other unexpected and unusual reaction to the materials used during the examination.

I had to decide quickly what to do with those piles of dead elephant pieces, including the enormous intestine. I certainly wanted the material removed from the Zoo before it started to decay, which wouldn't be long at those high tropical temperatures. Although we didn't have the facilities immediately available to part-prepare the skeleton as a possible future museum exhibit, I decided I would try to locate some remote part the University campus where the body parts could be buried for possible retrieval later.

Then someone had the brilliant idea of trying to contact some of the local professional butchers in town and employing them to cut into pieces everything that was no longer needed, while leaving the skeleton undamaged. My zoo driver and the head zoo keeper drove to the main meat market in Ibadan town and returned with four professional butchers, each carrying a selection of wicked-looking knives. They were astonished to see what awaited them - a dead elephant, or 'erin' in the Yoruba language; quite a change from the hundreds of cows they slaughtered and butchered every week. As the vets declared each mound of flesh finished with, the butchers hacked into it and cut it into smaller pieces which were then carried away on a trailer to a quickly-negotiated burial place. One of the butchers cut Dora's trunk into two separate pieces and sat quietly on the ground holding and gazing at them, apparently fascinated.

While this clearing up work was taking place, I became aware of the great sadness that had descended on the zoo staff and indeed everyone else there. It was difficult to absorb what had happened. I was deeply dismayed as I realised that Dora's death made the possibility of establishing a breeding group of forest elephants in Nigeria more remote.

The death of Dora brought about a fundamental change of emphasis in our need for one or more additional elephants. The thought of the now solitary Bodunrin living and developing in total isolation from other elephants was entirely unacceptable. Elephants are social animals and

During the UK school summer holidays, many children of the expatriate staff came to Nigeria to be with their parents. And with the elephants.

usually live in complex family groups where they interact with other elephants throughout their lives. It was important to provide Bodunrin with at least one companion elephant - and not necessarily a male forest elephant - as soon as possible as this would be likely to have a positive influence on her wellbeing and her breeding potential when adult.

In the short term, and despite making contact with likely sources of information, I heard of no further elephants becoming available within Nigeria (and this remained the situation up to September 1979 when I left my post there). For the record, this did not necessarily mean, of course, that there were no forest elephants remaining in Nigeria.

Despite my best efforts, it took well over two years to locate, and negotiate the purchase of, another suitable elephant through a respected international zoo animal broker. In 1976 this animal, a young female African savanna elephant, became available and was soon ready for its journey from southern Africa to London and then to Nigeria.

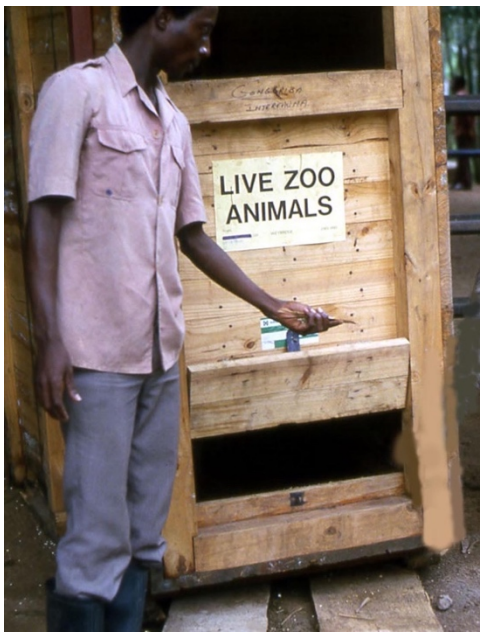
I have been asked occasionally if, in importing elephants from a different part of Africa, there was a danger of them escaping from our Zoological Garden and joining a group of wild elephants, thus possibly introducing unwanted genes or infectious diseases into Nigeria's wild elephant population. A comparison was made with the deliberate release into the south Florida countryside of many Burmese pythons, ex-pets that have now bred and increased in numbers and become a significant problem in wild Florida.

The answer is that the two situations are quite dissimilar. In the case of the exotic pythons released into the wild by their irresponsible owners, these snakes are able to disappear into the tall grasses, scrub and waterways of south Florida almost immediately they are released. They live subsequently as wild snakes and are difficult to find, capture and remove from the ecosystem as well as having a very much faster reproduction rate than elephants. In the case of one or more imported elephants in our Zoological Garden, there was simply no possibility whatever of such large and conspicuous animals escaping, or of them

finding their way through trading estates, across busy roads, through areas of dense housing, etc, without being surrounded by zoo and veterinary staff within a very short time. In any case, the nearest wild elephants were a hundred plus miles from Ibadan.

We began to make the rather complicated arrangements to fly our newly purchased elephant from southern Africa to Nigeria. For a number of quite unavoidable reasons we first had to fly it to London and it was arranged that it would then spend a few days with an experienced and helpful zoo near London, simply to break the animal's journey and to check its health. I was then to fly to London from Nigeria, collect the elephant, fly back to Lagos with it and accompany it by road to Ibadan.

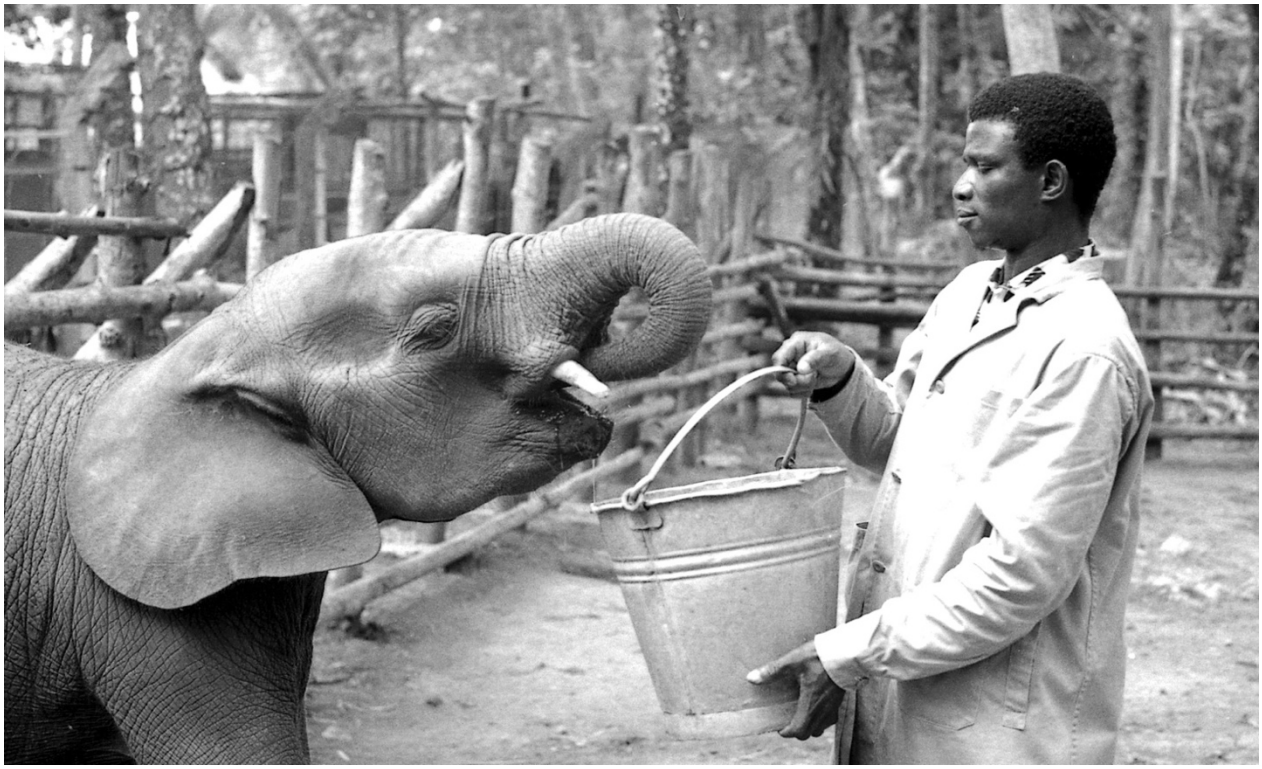
Thus one morning I found myself, as arranged, waiting at Luton Airport near London. The vehicle containing the elephant arrived from the cooperating zoo on time, an hour or so before the aircraft was due to take off for Lagos, Nigeria. The crate was offloaded onto the tarmac, very near the waiting aircraft. The young elephant seemed relaxed in its crate and took food and water. I was assured that, during its short stay at the zoo, it had been allowed out of the crate and into a temporary enclosure for exercise.



The crate that contained our 'new' savanna elephant, sent by air and received without mishap on the second attempt.

As those of us involved in this operation stood around the crate talking and waiting for a fork lift truck to lift the crate up to the aircraft's loading bay, the elephant suddenly dropped down inside the crate onto her underside with her legs folded awkwardly beneath her on the straw bedding. She lay there for some minutes without moving. She then tried to get up onto her feet but was unable to do so - she seemed unable to move her legs into a position to support her.

I considered the situation. Elephants mostly stand while sleeping although they may have different sleep patterns when very young. They do also sleep while lying on their side, but usually for relatively short periods. In a prone position an adult elephant's body weight may crush and damage its internal organs if in that position for too long. It was quite impossible to be sure



Dora being given a drink by the zoo's head keeper Daniel Osula. In the background can be seen a strong but temporary fence and enclosure that was used to keep our two elephants separate during the period when we were persuading them to like each other. Photo 1964.

that, in dropping to the floor of the crate, the elephant was seeking to sleep or rest or was actually sick. No veterinarians were available within the time we had before take off and in any case the zoo's vets had earlier declared the animal fit to travel. I remained concerned that the elephant still seemed quite unable to get back on its feet. And importantly, after the still memorable death of Dora I wanted to be absolutely sure of returning to Ibadan with a healthy elephant.

I calculated that the flight from London to Lagos, time spent loading the elephant in its crate onto a lorry at Lagos Airport, then driving it up to the Zoo in Ibadan would total at least ten hours and quite possibly more. After much thought, I came to the firm conclusion that to consign the elephant, in its existing questionable state, to another ten hours in its crate was a risk I was not prepared to take. I thus decided to fly back to Nigeria without the elephant!

Senior zoo keeper Michael Iyoha gives Dora (left) and Bodunrin freshly gathered woody vegetation and large quantities of green leaves and grasses.

I quickly agreed with our helpful zoo friends that they would take the elephant back to their zoo and do whatever was necessary for it to recover. I had to get back to Nigeria as soon as possible and as my cargo jet was by now ready for take off I had just enough time to climb up into the aircraft and find my solitary seat. I had an uneventful, somewhat lonely flight back to Lagos – not even my elephant was there to talk to.

This is, of course, where we came in, back on page one of this story when I was already on the plane and on the way back to Nigeria without the elephant. As I said then, I didn't enjoy that flight. I thought about the zoo staff and indeed many others in the University of Ibadan who would be so disappointed not to have the new elephant. However, I was absolutely sure I had made the right decision in leaving the elephant in London.

The plane landed at Lagos airport around the middle of the afternoon and, after going through the Immigration and Customs procedures, I found some of my zoo staff waiting for me outside the airport building as expected. They had driven down the one hundred or so difficult miles from Ibadan and had with them a truck with which to transport the crated elephant back to Ibadan as well as food and water to sustain it during this final stage of its journey. I spent a few unhappy minutes explaining to them what had happened. They were, understandably, very disappointed. As I said to them, however, provided that the health of the elephant we left behind improved, it might well be possible to try to fly the animal down to Nigeria again soon.

(Soon after this I was informed that the elephant was driven back quickly to the zoo we were working with near London and removed from the crate, still weak and unable to stand. However, it recovered its strength within a day or so and soon returned to normal health. No clear reason was found for its condition and behavior in the crate at Luton Airport but who knows what would have happened if I had taken it on board the plane with me? The happy ending was that the zoo animal broker who had arranged the purchase of the animal was able to fly out with it herself some months later, when It travelled well, remained on its feet in its crate and arrived in Ibadan in good health. The air cargo company insisted that the owners of an animal such as an elephant must provide a responsible person to be with the animal at all times).

My car and driver were also there waiting at Lagos Airport. Had I arrived back with the elephant as planned, we would all have stayed together in convoy during our slow drive back to the Zoo in Ibadan.

However, without the elephant with us to worry about and slow us down, I told my driver to drive me straight back to Ibadan without delay and arrived home much earlier than originally planned. I lived on the University of Ibadan campus and, as soon as I reached home, I had a shower, changed my clothes and decided to walk the short distance to the Senior Staff Club for a much needed beer.

The Senior Staff Club was the social centre for the University's internationally sourced academic, technical and administrative staff. It had a restaurant, bar, swimming pool, tennis courts and inside and outside seating areas where the senior staff, Nigerian and from all over the world, spent a lot of their leisure time – some more than others. Some really excellent live bands from Lagos sometimes played there and we held the most amazing gatherings when everybody danced, danced, danced into the following morning. Nigerians can make fantastic music. And Nigerians can DANCE!! I miss it so much…

It so happened that at that time I was the Social Secretary of the Club and knew personally or by sight most of the people who used it regularly. As I walked into the Club my eye caught a glimpse of a young woman sitting and talking with others near one end of the bar. I took another glance. She was a complete stranger. I noticed her big smile as she talked to the people with her. Hmm. She was strikingly pretty but looked very skinny to me, as though she could do with a few good meals. Although she wore a brightly coloured Nigerian wrapper, a kind of long native skirt, and was black, I knew she wasn't Nigerian. I had lived in Nigeria long enough by then to be able to recognise some of the subtle differences in dress, appearance and physiognomy of a lot of Nigerians, and this young woman's face was quite unlike anything I had seen so far. Hmm. I wanted to know more.

I bought a beer at the other end of the bar. Instead of sitting down, though, I remained standing for a while and then gently sidled along the bar until I was close to where Miss Prettyness sat smiling and chatting away. As I grew closer she suddenly laughed and spoke to her companions so that I was able to hear her voice for the first time; it was loud and she had an American accent! Hmm. Didn't expect that. Curiouser and curiouser. A friend of mine was one of the people in her little gathering and I looked around and greeted him. We exchanged pleasantries and then, to my delight, he introduced me to Miss Prettyness. Her name was actually Peaches something ('Did you say Peaches?'), she was from North Carolina, had been visiting a friend in Northern Nigeria and was trying to decide whether or not to try to obtain

a temporary teaching job in Ibadan or return home immediately to North Carolina. She had arrived in Ibadan that very day. And she had brought her cat with her from North Carolina! Hmm!

Peaches at the University of Ibadan Zoo in 1979 with a young female savanna elephant.
(She eats much better now).

After some small talk I asked her if she would like to go with me that evening to one of the restaurants in town that served food for expatriates ('What's an expaytriate?'). Yes, she would like. I picked her up later that evening from my friend's house where she was staying. She had by then scrubbed up, put on a long white dress and brushed her hair into one of the most massive, in your face Afros I had ever seen. She looked stupendous! And she was delightful! We drove into town to a Lebanese restaurant.

Now, let me stop for just a moment. There is something I should probably mention, something I need to spell out. On these few remaining pages of this story I have decided to deviate from forest elephants, from savanna elephants, indeed from all known elephants, not even mention toe nails, and tell you what was lying in wait for me that evening in the Lebanese restaurant; also, what was to follow. I have never before set out on paper this very personal story of Bob and Peaches and am not quite sure how to do so honestly without making those who read it cringe occasionally. But there are also parts of it that are definitely cringe-free so I am going to give it a try.

The fact is that what happened that evening really did change my life. It emerged that Peaches liked and had kept snakes, one of my own consuming interests and something that no other woman I had ever met had expressed the slightest interest in. Then, half way through the main course, we discovered we had the same Birthday ('What?' 'I don't believe it!' 'First time ever.'). We talked and talked and eventually left the restaurant to return to the University campus.

As Peaches and I walked out into the hot, busy street and back to my car, I already felt as though I was stepping into a fresh new world, with all the right boxes suddenly ticked, all the right doors open and everything

ready to go. Some strange force seemed to have tweaked my personal chemistry and I felt as though my world had been reprogrammed. I hadn't felt like this for a very long time.

I can look back now and say, without hesitation, that Peaches and I were soul mates from that very first evening and we have been together ever since and in every sense. And all because that elephant at Luton Airport went down in its crate and had to be left behind, thus ensuring my early return to Ibadan and the unexpected meeting that changed our lives.

Three years later, in 1979, I resigned my post and left Nigeria, with Peaches, to return to the UK. For a number of reasons I had decided that, after 16 very fulfilling years in Nigeria, it was time to leave. Fortunately, I had been able to secure another post in the UK. However, neither of us had any clear idea about how Peaches would get on living and working in the UK. She was very American, and a black American at that, perhaps with a background and instincts that would make it difficult for her to interact with, and become close to, my friends, my family, my country, my world.

We didn't have to wonder about those things for very long. From the day that we touched down at London Heathrow Airport and drove along the M4 motorway to our new home in Bristol, I have observed, and shared, the quite remarkable emergence of a young Black American woman who communicated successfully, often brilliantly, with virtually every person she met, of whatever nationality, sex or race.

Peaches moved almost seamlessly into my world and into the culture of the UK. She worked tirelessly and as a force for good in our very own human adventure. We married in 1981.

A short but illuminating conversation was reported to us by Peaches' mother. It took place in Peaches' family home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, when news of our sudden marriage in Kingston-upon-Thames, UK, reached the family in America.

I met Peaches in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1976. Her Afro was unavoidable.

We still live in this house in Bristol, but the palm trees came with us (as seeds) from Nigeria in 1979.

Peaches' great aunt was heard to say to Peaches' grandmother, whom I had met, 'Has Peaches <u>really</u> married a <u>white</u> man?' A brief silence, then 'No, she's married an <u>English</u>man'! Grandmother's face was apparently dead straight.

Peaches was granted UK citizenship and still holds dual US/UK citizenship. Between 1979 and now she has moved from one achievement to another. She has become involved in a galaxy of activities to do with improving the lives of one group or another, of someone or other, and in improving business practice. The skinny, unformed young woman I met at that bar in West Africa has emerged into the brightest light, like a tropical butterfly emerging into the sunshine.

When we met, in 1976, Peaches had recently graduated in Zoology from the University of North Carolina but had had little opportunity to start a structured career until she settled with me in the UK. Soon after our arrival here from Nigeria I was appointed Park Director of the Cotswold Wildlife Park at Burford, in Oxfordshire. We lived on the upper floor of a lovely old Manor House in the centre of the Park from where we could look out of our windows across green enclosures with rhinos, zebras, ostriches and many other exotic species. I very soon asked Peaches to try her hand at some marketing work for the Park. Although such work was entirely new to her it seemed to me that it suited her personality. It turned out that she was indeed brilliant at it. During the following year the Park's visitor attendance figures shot up to a record high and, for this and other reasons, the Thames and Chilterns Tourist Board awarded me, as Director, the Hedley Lawrence prize for services to tourism in that area.

Peaches in her High Sheriff attire showing Prince Charles around at an event in Bristol in 2010. Peaches had to be present when members of the Royal family were in Bristol and was Regional Director of Prince Charles' charity Business in the Community (BITC).

A year or so after this a friend of mine advised Peaches to apply for the post of Co-Presenter of a new, eight week, BBC TV wildlife series, 'Wild Britain', being planned by the BBC's Natural History Unit. Peaches was used by then to handling quite a few different wild animal species, including snakes, which were to be included in the new TV programme. After discussions and an interview at BBC Bristol, she was appointed to the post!

Peaches worked for, and was was later appointed Regional Director of, Prince Charles' charity Business in the Community (BITC) in Bristol. On one memorable occasion, during a live television programme, Peaches gently and amusingly interrupted a speech by Prince Charles to point out that the flower in her hair was not an orchid as he had just said but a hibiscus. Looking pained as only he can, the Prince said 'Oh I'm so sorry!' Everybody laughed, including Prince Charles.

In 2009 Peaches was appointed OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) for services to ethnic minorities in the South West; the medal was duly pinned to her lapel by HM the Queen at Windsor Castle. In 2010 she was awarded an MBA (Master of Business Administration) by the University of the West of England, Bristol.

The quite remarkable pinnacle in her career was to be made the High Sheriff of the County of Bristol for the year 2010- 2011, the first black woman ever to hold this appointment in over one thousand years. The function of the High Sheriff is to represent the Queen at a whole host of public occasions, events and ceremonies held throughout the year within the City and County of Bristol. As spouse and Consort of the High Sheriff for that year, I was expected to follow Peaches around, looking intelligent and attentive, at the myriad formal and informal occasions and events of every kind that Peaches had to attend. I wasn't particularly good at this, partly because I was recovering from a health problem at that time and partly because I wasn't particularly good at it. However, one event that gave me huge pleasure was helping to organise the High Sheriff's Annual Concert in the beautiful Bristol Cathedral. We selected the orchestra and the music for the evening and eventually persuaded the internationally renowned base-baritone singer, Sir Willard White, to be the main soloist. The evening was a delight and Bristol Cathedral was packed with a highly appreciative audience.

I have said that Peaches and I left Nigeria for the UK in 1979. Two or three years after this, when I was still greatly missing aspects of my life in Nigeria, we decided to have a special, larger-than-usual joint Birthday Party. We hired suitable premises and invited a whole horde of very nice people. We enjoyed seeing friends we hadn't seen for years, many from or ex Nigeria. I was eventually asked to speak about how Peaches and I met and I gave the gathering a much abbreviated version of the story I have set out here. As I spoke about my life in Nigeria, a thousand images started tumbling around in my memory and, as ever, began to prod my emotions.

Suddenly the image of that elephant, prostrate on the bottom of its crate on the tarmac at London Luton Airport, flashed up and hung there. Yes, of course, that little elephant had caused the whole thing - bless it! I continued 'So, dear friends, I would like to end by proposing a toast to The Absent Elephant, the elephant whose absence from the plane that day in 1976 really did change my life, and Peaches' life too!'

Guests smiled and giggled a little as they raised their glasses, but the fact is that I still sometimes repeat that toast to myself – very quietly, when I am sure nobody is listening.

The End *Story completed December 2016*