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Preface

Perhaps, finding the humor in the experiences I had as the wife of a diplomat was my way of maintaining (or giving the appearance of maintaining) some semblance of sanity in a world I was definitely not born to participate in.

Getting ready for some formal event where my husband is going to host high-level officials, I am still amazed at how calmly and quickly he dons his tux and looks great, doesn't worry about the speech he will give (usually not even bothering to write it out), checks over the seating arrangements, gives instructions to the embassy staff who are required to arrive early, and is standing at his spot in the reception line ahead of schedule. There is no doubt in my mind that he was born to be an ambassador. Even his name, Princeton, seems to imply comfortably mixing with world leaders.

Although I have learned to leave domestic duties that normally would be mine to the professional house staff, and although I will have nothing to do at that event but smile and eat, I am a nervous wreck. I have never gotten over being shy, learned to make conversation with people I don't know (this is even harder for me if they are famous), or to remember names. At a reception, I cannot walk up to a group of people and somehow join the group. I often feel that I missed the boat with how I dressed for the event. I was not born to be an ambassador's wife. As I said: his name is Princeton; my name is Helen.

Nigeria 1986-1989

Bonding

When Princeton was notified of the opportunity to become ambassador to Nigeria, our youngest daughter Lori was about to enter her senior year in high school. We decided not to pull her away from that special year. So I stayed behind with her to let her graduate with her class and continue in all the activities with which she was engaged.

It was a particularly harsh winter that year in Washington. After a bad storm our power went out for several days. Each night, Lori and I would make a fire, and huddle close to it wrapped in sweaters and blankets to keep us warm. We were proud of ourselves for taking care of all the things that we usually left to Princeton. And on those cold nights together, we became closer than ever before.

Later, while in college, Lori would visit us in Nigeria each summer. Once after spending a weekend at one of Nigeria's newest Hilton hotels with friends, the group of them found their bills all confused and incorrect. Lori took charge. Only four foot nine, Lori, standing on a suitcase in front of the desk, went through each and every bill with the clerk and negotiated until all the charges were correct. When Princeton heard the story, he suggested Lori become a lawyer. She hadn't thought of it before. She would go on to law school and a highly successful career in government. But I think the spark of leadership in her may have developed that year when she and I held our world together all by ourselves. I know it bonded us in a way we had not before.

Ten Black Sedans

With sirens blaring, the line of black bulletproof Lincolns and Cadillacs forced its way through the crowded streets of Lagos. In some of the cars, earnest U.S. Secret Service agents with weapons and walkie-talkies eyed everyone in sight. Other security people on motorcycles zoomed back and forth among the cars, causing great antagonism from pedestrians and drivers who had been stopped to let the Americans through. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz was visiting for one day.

I was in the sixth car watching the process with great anxiety. Several days earlier I had been given a 45-page book stating, to the minute, where I was to be and when. I had had to memorize which car I would ride in and where I would sit for the ten various rides we were scheduled to take. I had a list of times that I had to be in my seat for each trip. For example: En route to the Embassy, I would be in Car Six with my husband. Later, I would be in Car Two, after the lead car of the Secret Service, with Mrs. Shultz on the way to a clinic she was to visit. Then, it was back to Car Eight for another event. If I were late, even by a minute, the motorcade would go on without me.

In advance of the visit, I had been instructed to walk and count the steps that Mrs. Shultz would take at the clinic, which, as a former nurse, she was interested in visiting. Some of the program had to be eliminated because there were more steps than someone in Washington thought Mrs. Shultz could manage. She was disappointed when told of the cuts.

So this is how it went. Following the hospital visit, Car Two took us to a school where we met our husbands, and Secretary Shultz said a few words. Then it was a dash to Car Eight, where I rode with the embassy's political officer, while Mrs. Shultz rode with her husband. My husband rode with a senior person on Secretary Shultz's staff.

Our motorcade then proceeded to the Embassy, where Mrs. Shultz stood by the secretary's side, as she always did when he addressed American Foreign Service officers. (The Shultzes seemed determined to set an example of how spouses should support their husbands and how husbands should respond to their wives.)

As all Foreign Service families know, as exciting as such visits are, there is a sigh of relief at the end, as we watch the visitors' plane depart for their next stop.

Durbar

We Americans pride ourselves on our celebrations: New Year's Eve, the Fourth of July, weddings, birthdays, bar mitzvahs, and any other occasion we can turn into an excuse to party. We love music, fireworks, dancing, special foods, being together, and, in some cases, just showing off what we can afford (or want people to think we can afford).

But, in my opinion, there is nothing we do in the United States to compare to the vitality, color, and lavishness of a Nigerian Durbar. These ceremonies are held all over northern Nigeria, but by far the most spectacular ones are held in cities like Kano and Katsina. Watching it in Katsina was the experience of a lifetime.

The Emir of Katsina sat on his horse in front of the grandstand, dressed from turban to toes in sparkling white. Only his hands and eyes were visible. Several other similarly attired leaders of the region surrounded him. The crowds in the grandstand behind him were all male Muslims, plus several male diplomats and a few diplomatic wives who were willing to be at an all-male event in order not to miss the thrill of extravaganza.

At the far end of the huge arena, probably the size of five or six football fields, was a group of ten to twenty horsemen in brilliant colors and flowing robes—their horses even more lavishly outfitted than they, with blankets and decorated saddles, as well as jewels and feathers in their manes and tails. On the long dusty path leading up to the arena were similar groups waiting for their turn to be the center of attention.

When it was time for the program to begin, the emir lifted up his staff and the horses came at him at a full gallop. They were not allowed to stop until he lowered his staff, which, for those of us sitting in the honored seats right behind him, wasn't soon enough. After stopping up short and paying their respects to the emir, this group galloped away while the next group started toward us. For me, watching the retreating group was the most delightful part as their costumes billowed behind them in a most dramatic fashion.

This display lasted for several hours as group after group of handsome men had their turn to demonstrate their horsemanship skills and show off their wealth by the number of riders in the group and the grandeur with which they and their horses were dressed.

When the show was over, I was all set to pay the price, as I was seated for the 3 o'clock lunch between two of the gentlemen dressed from head to toe in white. I knew that these Muslims were not allowed to shake hands with women, and I felt that they must be most uncomfortable and unhappy to be seated next to the only woman at the table. I felt for sure they would both ignore me and spend the long meal talking to the person on the other side of me.

But, looks can be deceiving. One of the men had recently returned to Nigeria after receiving his MBA from Harvard and beginning a promising business career. His father, one of the chieftains in the area, had died and he was called back to take up the position. Though it would change his life and bring him back into the traditional demands of religion and constituency, he felt it his duty. Given his background, he was fully at ease with me and we had a wonderful conversation. There was much to learn beyond the color and ceremony of this celebration.

Kids

One of the ways I coped with my "ambassador's wife" life was to work. In Nigeria, I was very fortunate to be able to teach in the American school. I taught first grade and my time spent in the classroom with my little six-year-olds are some of my warmest memories of my diplomatic life. One of my little students was the daughter of the man who managed the Nigerian 7UP business.

One day, one of the other children was celebrating his birthday at school. His mother brought the usual cake and ice cream, plus a Coke for each child. The mother and I were busily going around the room opening the drinks when the young lady whose father managed 7UP came shyly to me with her open bottle of Coke. I was desperately trying to think of how to comfort her about all the Coke in the classroom and where I could get her something else to drink.

I needn't have worried. She simply smiled at me and announced: "I hate Coke, but I love to drink it." And so she did.

... and Angels

First-grade students make the most delightful companions, but they can cause a teacher stress even when they are being very, very good.

This story took place on a very average school day when we were studying the seasons. I was explaining and showing pictures of trees that had lost their leaves. I then showed an evergreen tree and started to explain the difference between the two kinds of trees.

At this point, a little girl raised her hand and looked so excited that I called on her immediately. (I was actually pleased to see her enthusiasm, because she was not one of my brighter students and she seldom participated in class discussions. Sitting here at my computer all these years later I can still see the sparkle in her green eyes that day.) She happily announced that she knew why those trees did not lose their leaves. She gravely went on to tell the story of an angel who fell to earth and was kept from hurting herself by a tree that held out its leaves for her. The angel rewarded the tree by ensuring that it would not lose its leaves in winter.

I thought a bit about her explanation and decided that the other children would learn their science facts soon enough. For today, I would let them believe in this angel. How could I have done otherwise and deflated the excitement of the little angel in my class?

Justice

Most of us loved the experience of living in this vibrant, colorful, and dynamic, if admittedly corrupt, country. The Nigerian people were a lot of fun, and those working in American homes and businesses and the school were hard working and loyal. Petty theft—usually of things not used—was rarely mentioned.

We teachers did not at first notice the slow disappearance of films and videos from the school library. We were, after all, practiced in improvising when something was not available, when the electricity went out, no water came out of the tap, or the phones were dead. So how much could we be surprised when the film we wanted to show our students was not in the library?

Eventually, however, a few teachers became suspicious when more and more requested films were unavailable. So an inventory was made and it was discovered that thirty or more films were missing.

One of the Nigerian school employees decided to set a trap. Unbeknownst to the school staff, he took it upon himself to sleep in the library. He was soon rewarded. One night, he watched in amazement as a coat hanger was lowered from the transom above the door and the lock was opened from the inside. The thief carefully opened the door and turned on the light. He was immediately recognized as a trusted fellow Nigerian school employee. He ran away, the self-appointed detective called the police, and the thief was soon in jail.

After some time, the school staff became concerned when no trial date was set and our petty thief started to deteriorate in his cell. He was not abused in any way, but he was not being fed properly or allowed to exercise or given medical attention. Efforts to withdraw the charges or force a trial date met with no success. We started bringing food and blankets and medicine to the man, but we were too late.

His death cast a lasting pall on the teachers and staff at the American school. Surely, this was one punishment that did not fit the crime!

Chieftaincy Ceremony

In early 1988 in Nigeria, we were very excited to be invited to attend the three-day chieftaincy ceremony of an American friend, Natalie. She was receiving the honor of becoming a white female chief in a small village near Ibadan because of the work she had done there to improve the lives of the women. She had contributed to the construction of a workplace for the women to produce a popular yam-like product. Childcare and health education were provided at the place.

We left Lagos very early on a Friday morning and drove to Ibadan, where we joined a sort of caravan of people and continued on to the little village over bumpy, dusty paths that were almost roads. After parking the cars and buses, we were escorted to the location of the ceremony by people playing instruments, mostly

“talking drums.” Our escorts walked backwards and drummed right in our faces. As they kept this up, we were expected to “spray” them, which meant we had to put paper money on their foreheads. The money stuck because it was hot and the drummers were sweating. The money was removed so quickly that I guess it wouldn’t have mattered much if it hadn’t stuck.

The whole scene was so unreal: hot and crowded and noisy and ever so colorful. It was just plain fun! Princeton caught a pickpocket with his hand in Princeton’s pocket. The man said “sorry” and disappeared into the crowd. We were moved around to various seats of honor (most people had to stand). In the end, Natalie was whisked away and no one really got to see the actual ceremony. She returned with a sort of branch in her hair and a coral necklace. She was now a chief. Lunch for about five hundred people was served (very slowly) with a lot more drumming.

Lodging had been found for us in a home in Ibadan, and we were provided with outfits to wear to the dinner that evening. Princeton and I wore clothes made of the same material and when we arrived at dinner found about forty other people also dressed in clothes of the same material. We were thus designated as part of Natalie’s tribe. Again, there were hundreds of people at the dinner. Afterwards we learned to dance to the beat of those drums.

There was such a happy atmosphere that even our driver came and joined the dancing. He was quite good, but said that Princeton and I looked funny doing Nigerian dancing. I’m sure he was right. We even looked funny just standing in our loose-fitting, one-piece, stiff African-material clothes and hats. Tall and elegant Natalie looked perfect.

The next day, our tribe of forty was taken to Oshogbo, the cultural center of western Nigeria. Our host was a man named Twin Seven Seven, because his mother had had seven sets of twins and all the babies had died except him. A colorful and flamboyant artist and musician, he was at one time a politician. He had been involved in a terrible auto accident that left him with a bad limp (which didn’t seem to slow him down a bit). He believed that the “accident” was an assassination attempt and so dropped out of politics.

He took us for an “audience” with the Oba of the area (a sort of royal person who greets you from a throne and has men with swords standing on either side of him). We paid our respects.

We would return to Oshogbo many times. We would visit the sacred park, where fantastic statues from the Yoruba religion had been constructed by a mysterious woman who had come from Austria, converted to the Yoruba religion, and rose to become a high priestess. We also went often to the home of Twin Seven Seven to hear his band, to admire his art (even to purchase one of his paintings), and to enjoy the warmth of his and many other Nigerians' friendship.