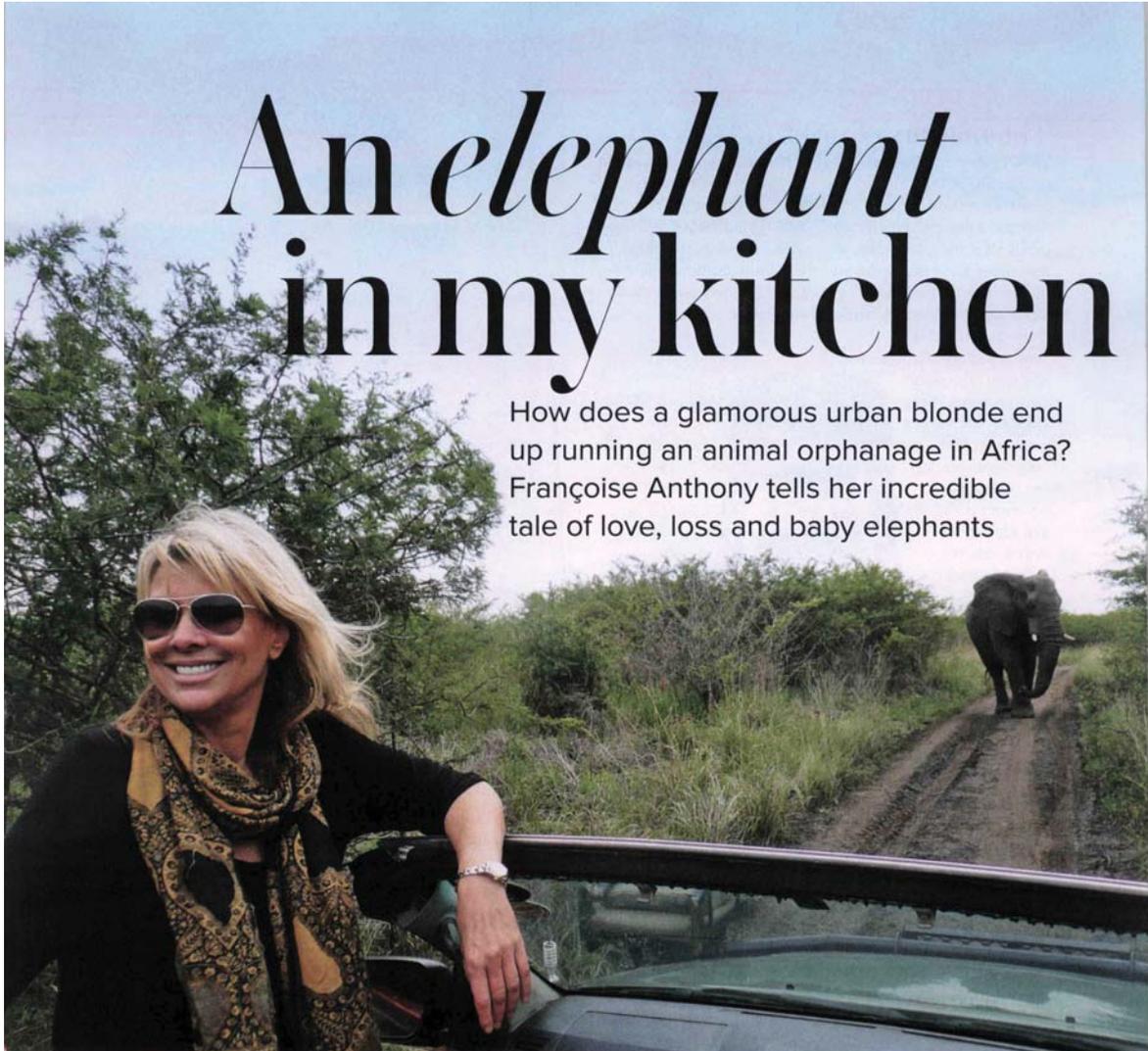


An elephant in my kitchen

How does a glamorous urban blonde end up running an animal orphanage in Africa? Françoise Anthony tells her incredible tale of love, loss and baby elephants



The first time Françoise Anthony visited the South African bush with her then-boyfriend and later-to-be husband, Lawrence, she had no idea what was in store. "I was a city girl," she laughs. "I'd never been to a zoo, I'd never even owned a pet! Suddenly, here we were surrounded by rhinos. Lawrence said a group of them was called a 'crash'. I was terrified."

Some 30 years later, Françoise, 63, is now an undisputed wildlife

expert, and the boss of the Thula Thula game reserve and lodge in the KwaZulu-Natal province, which she, and renowned conservationist Lawrence, created together.

They made the most unlikely couple. Françoise was a sophisticated blonde with a high-flying career at the French Chamber of Commerce, while Lawrence was a craggy, bearded South African with a passion for nature. They met in a taxi queue in London, where both were travelling

on business. "In that chance moment my life completely changed forever," she says, speaking from Thula Thula. "Without it, I would probably still never have seen an elephant."

Lawrence soon persuaded Françoise to move to South Africa and, in 1999, the couple opened the reserve. Lawrence then talked her into adopting a herd of highly dangerous wild elephants. The animals were wreaking havoc in the region and putting themselves in constant danger

memoir

of being shot. At first, the troubled animals charged any human who approached them, but Lawrence developed such a close bond with them he earned the nickname 'The Elephant Whisperer'. Over the years, they grew in numbers from nine to 29.

"There were some serious ups and downs, but Lawrence and I made a good team – he was the person who managed everything to do with the animals while I was behind the scenes dealing with the staff, the catering." The only time Françoise was left in sole charge of the animals was during the 2003 Iraq War, when Lawrence went off to rescue the animals from Baghdad Zoo – a mission that's now being turned into a film. "That was bloody tough. I was very glad to see him back," admits Françoise.

Losing Lawrence

It was a stormy morning in 2006 when Françoise received a phone call telling her Lawrence, who was away for work, had died, quite unexpectedly, aged 61, of a heart attack. "I was numb with shock, totally lost. I didn't know where to start, how the future could work."

Within hours of the news, all the reserve's elephants arrived at the couple's house in a procession, the first time they'd come near in six months. "We were all in shock and the elephants sensed it. They crossed miles and miles of wilderness to mourn with us, sitting in front of the house for hours like they do when one of their own dies. Just looking at them made me gather myself. I realised that I was on my own, but that I had to carry on. I couldn't leave. Everybody needed me – the animals and the 50 or so people that we employed. Somehow, we all had to survive together."

The elephants – who returned the following year exactly on the anniversary of Lawrence's death – buoyed Françoise through the turbulent next few months, as she rapidly educated herself about conservation and running the reserve. While some staff helped her, others were hostile to their new, female boss. "They regarded me as this foreign

blonde and didn't trust me to hold Thula Thula together," she recalls.

The task facing her was daunting. Like all African game reserves, Thula Thula is a target for vicious poachers who will stop at nothing to obtain rhino horns. These are worth hundreds of thousands of pounds on the black market in Asia, and are sold to people who believe – wrongly – that they can cure cancer. Right now, three rhinos a day are killed in South Africa, and poaching of other species such as elephant and giraffe is rising rapidly.

Just two weeks after Lawrence's death, poachers shot at one of the orphan rhinos Françoise was caring for, only just missing him. Soon afterwards, she heard a baby elephant had trapped his face in one of the hundreds of snares hidden all over the reserve's 4,500 hectares, leaving him unable to suckle his distraught mother. A helicopter had to scatter the herd before the calf could be tranquillised and the snare removed.

"The poachers are incredibly violent," Françoise says. "They have no heart, no consideration for anything. If they carry on at this rate, within 20 years there will be no more wild animals left in Africa."

To fight back, Françoise founded an animal orphanage to raise babies whose mothers had been slaughtered. Like many reserve owners, she eventually made the heartbreaking decision to "dehorn" the reserve's two adult rhinos, Thabo and Ntombi, so the poachers had nothing to steal. "For years I said 'A rhino without a horn is not a rhino' but in the end I had no choice if I was to save them. The rhinos don't feel the horn being removed, but I couldn't bear to see it."

Dark days

Despite heightened security, last year two men armed with axes and guns breached the electric fence of the animal orphanage. These poachers held six young volunteer staff hostage,



Elephants grazing near the guest lodge; baby Tom with Françoise in the kitchen

seriously assaulting one, then shot two 18-month-old rhinos for their tiny horns. One died instantly, the other was badly injured so they defaced him while he was still alive, poking out his eyes, in keeping with the Zulu superstition that eyes have memories.

"It was a nightmare, the lowest point of my time here," Françoise says sadly. "I have no children, my family are the animals and staff at Thula Thula, and I am responsible for them. For a while, I lost faith in mankind and all hope we could ever save the rhinos."

To keep motivated, Françoise focused on joyous memories such as the time she discovered a 10-day-old elephant in her garden. "It was like a dream – very strange because it's unusual for a calf to lose its mother. The herd was miles away at the other end of the reserve; the baby could have been attacked by a hyena or a snake. She weighed about 120 kilos [18 stone] and, after chasing her for a long time, we pushed her into >>

Baby elephants are the most sweet, gentle, adorable little things



Françoise with rhinos Thabo and Ntombi; with staff members; and with Lawrence



the house and there she was running around the kitchen and trying to eat my lounge. It was just delightful; you simply cannot be scared of a baby elephant. A baby rhino can bowl you over but these are the most sweet, gentle, adorable things."

The team fed the calf water and milk through the pierced thumb of a latex glove. "She had been away from her mother for more than 18 hours, so she drank and drank and then, like all babies, she had a little nap in my living room!"

Guiding spirit

Later that night, Françoise's team returned the baby to the herd. "It was very risky – the elephants might have charged us in the dark and they might not have wanted to reintegrate a baby who'd been with humans. Happily, the mother took her back and today the baby's a naughty four-year-old and thriving. But it will always be a mystery why she wandered off in the first place. Many of my staff believe Lawrence's spirit guided her to me because he knew I'd keep her safe."

Françoise was also enchanted by the friendship that developed between a hippo, Charlie, and a rhino, Makhosi, both less than a week old. Both had been brought to her orphanage terrified and disoriented. "Makhosi ran straight up to Charlie, climbed onto his mattress, snuggled up and

went to sleep. After that they were inseparable, cuddling up together if they were cold. If one demanded a bottle, the other would too," she recalls. "Humans can learn so many lessons from how different species of animals accept each other."

Most of all, Françoise's spirits were kept high by the elephants she and Lawrence had nurtured and who, in her toughest times, were always there for her. "We had a terrible drought two years ago. I was very concerned; so many reserves had to put down their game because there was no grass to feed them. Finally, it rained and – of all the water pools

in the reserve – the entire herd headed to the one outside my house, tumbling around happily in mud dug up with their tusks and trunks that flew through the air in huge arcs. It was spectacular, like a show that was saying 'Thanks for the rain'. For all of us living here, there is a sense that we are survivors. We won't give up."

So busy was Françoise managing the reserve that finding love again

never occurred to her. "I really was not looking, I thought I was going to immerse myself in Thula Thula for the rest of my life," she says. But four years ago in a bar with friends, she met Clément and they quickly fell in love. "He has been my rock. With the life I lead you have to be tolerant. Clément is always so gentle and understanding."

A key moment in the relationship came when she first introduced Clément to the elephant herd. "The oldest bull, Gobisa, strode right up to the 4x4 and stopped in front of Clément, then floated his trunk over his chest, exploring his face. My rangers said as the herd's old man he had to check out my new mate, and he left reassured that I was happy and had found someone who would never come between me and them."

Clément lives two hours away in Durban, but Françoise remains at Thula Thula. "There's so much to do, there's never a dull moment," she says. Besides planning the reserve's 20th anniversary celebrations, she's also about to open a volunteers' academy to teach future generations about conservation. "Retiring is not even in my vocabulary," Françoise exclaims. "I still think I'm 20. When you have a goal, you don't see the years go by. With a focus you don't feel age."

An Elephant In My Kitchen by Françoise Malby-Anthony is out on 26 July (Sidgwick & Jackson) w&h



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