Happy Event
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There were so many things in life you couldn’t ever imagine yourself doing, Ella Plaistow told herself. Once or twice she had said it aloud, too, to Allan. But mostly it grew, forced its way up out of the silences that fell upon her like a restraining hand during those first few days after she had come home from the nursing home. It seemed to burst through her mouth in a sudden irresistible germination, the way a creeper shoots and uncurls into leaf and stem in one of those films which telescope plant growth into the space of a few terrifying vital seconds.

Silence followed it again. In her mind, if she had spoken inwardly, to herself; in the room, if she had spoken aloud. The silence that covers the endless inward activity of shuffling for a foothold, making out of a hundred-and-one past justifications and pressures the accommodations of a new position for oneself. It was true, of course. You start off as a child, pretending to think the blonde doll prettier than the brunette, so that your loved sister may fall into the trap of choosing the one you don’t want for yourself. You go on by one day finding your own tongue glibly acquiescing to a discussion of your best friend’s temperament with someone whom you know to be her disliked enemy. And before you know where you are, you have gone through all the sibilings and inveiglings of taking somebody’s work for less than it is worth, throwing someone into an agony of jealousy for the sake of a moment’s vanity, pretending not to see an old lover lest he should not seem impressive enough in the eyes of the new one. It is impossible to imagine yourself doing any of these; but once done ...

And of course he was quite right. She certainly didn’t have any regrets. They had two children, a girl and a boy (the wrong way round, as they said—the girl was the elder—but it’s dangerous to have everything too much the way you want it!) who were just old enough to be left with their grandmother. Allan’s new partner was thoroughly reliable, the bond on the house was almost paid off; at last there was nothing to stop Allan and Ella: they had booked to go to Europe, in the spring of next year. So to have allowed themselves to be stopped by this—! To be, instead, this time next year, caught up in chemists’ bills and napkins and wakeful nights all over again! No, they had brought up their babies, had loved and resented them and were content with them, and all through eight years had planned for this time when they would suddenly lift themselves clear of whatever it was that their lives had settled into, and land, free of it, lightly in another country.

Because it was something that Ella could never have dreamed she would ever do, in a week or two the trip to the nursing home slipped away into the unimportance of things that might never have happened. She was busy planning next winter’s clothes for the children—it would be winter in South Africa while she and Allan were in spring in Europe—and getting the garden into shape because they hoped to let the house for the period they were to be away, and if they wanted a decent tenant the place must look attractive. She was just beginning to feel really strong again—undoubtedly that business had left her a little weak—and it was just as well, since she had so much to do, when, of course, servant trouble started.

The old house-cum-garden boy, Thomasi, began quarrelling with Lena, the native maid whom Ella had thought herself lucky to engage two months ago. Lena, a heavy, sullen, light-coloured Basuto, represented in her closed-in solemnity something that challenged irritation in Thomasi. Thomasi was a Basuto himself—Ella had the vague conviction that it was best to have servants who belonged to the same tribe, rather as she would have felt that it would be better to
have two Siamese cats instead of one Siamese and one tabby, or two fan-tailed goldfish rather than one plain and one fancy. She always felt puzzled and rather peevish, then, when, as had happened often before, she found that her two Basutos or two Zulus or two Xhosas did not necessarily get on any better than one would have expected two Frenchmen to get on simply because both were French; or two Englishmen simply because both were English.

Now Thomasi, barely five feet tall and with that charming, ancient, prehuman look of little dark-skinned men with bandy legs, was maddened by the very presence of Lena, like an insect circling angrily around the impassive head of some great slow animal. He quarreled with her over dusters, over the state of the kitchen sink, over the bones for the dog; he went about his work shaking his head and ruminating with volcanic mutterings.

“If you’ve got anything to say, come out and say it,” Ella said to him, irritated herself. “What’s the matter now?”

“That woman is too lazy, madam,” he said in his high, philosophical, exasperated voice.

It was difficult to think of old Thomasi as something quite like oneself, when he rose to his hind legs. (Yes, one had the feeling that this was exactly what happened when he got up from polishing the floor. Of course, if he had been dressed in a tailored American-drape hopsack instead of the regulation “kitchen boy” outfit that was a cross between a small boy’s cotton sailor suit and a set of underwear, he might not have looked any funnier than any of the small, middle-aged Johannesburg men behind their directors’ desks.) “Look, Thomasi, she does her work. I’m satisfied with her. I don’t want you to go making trouble. I’m the missus, and she works for me, not you, you understand?”

Then, later in the day, Ella would relent. Having shown Thomasi the hand of authority, she could approach him on the other level of their association: that of common concern for the house that they had “run” together for nearly six years, and whose needs and prices and inanimate quirks both understood perfectly.

“Thomasi?”

“Missus?” She might be strolling in the garden, pretending that she was not seeking him out. He would go on wielding the grass shears, widening and snapping like the sharp bill of some great bird imprisoned in his hands.

“What has she done?”

“Well, I tell her the dog he mustn’t have the small bone. Yesterday I tell her. Now she doesn’t say nothing when I tell her. This morning I see she give the chicken bone to the dog. All that small bone, you know, the missus keep for the cats. Now when I say why you give that bone to the dog, the dog he’s going to get sick, she just look me . . .”

The coffee cups left unwashed from the night before.

The iron left switched on while she went to her room after lunch.

And too many friends in her room at night, too many.

“I think she makes the kaffir beer,” said Thomasi.

But at this complaint Ella was ready to discredit all the others, again. This was Thomasi trying to cook something up. If the girl brewed kaffir beer in her room, Thomasi would be her first customer, not the informant seeking to get her into trouble.

“Listen, Thomasi, I don’t want to hear any more of these tales and grumbles, you understand? I’ll see if Lena works properly or not, and I don’t want you interfering with her.”

As she would give her children a handful of sweets each to equalize some difference between them, Ella cleared out a cupboard that needed cleaning anyway, and gave Thomasi an old shirt of Allan’s, Lena a cheap blue satin nightgown that she had bought to take to the nursing home and that she somehow felt she didn’t want to wear again. “I must keep the peace”, she said to Alan. “I’m not going to go training another new girl now. I must stick it out with this one until we go. She’s a perfectly nice girl, really—a bit sulky, that’s all. But you know what an old devil he can be when he wants to. I shouldn’t be surprised if what’s behind it is that he fancies her, and she’s not interested. Shame, he looks such a little old wizened imp of a thing next to her, she’s such a hulking, big-breasted Juno.”

But the gifts did not quiet for long whatever it was that inflamed Thomasi’s malice. The following month, on a Monday morning, Ella found Thomasi alone in the kitchen, cooking the greasy, metallic-tasting fried eggs that were his idea of a white man’s
breakfast. Lena, he said, bearing his message from across that neat stretch of grass and crisscross washing line that was the no-man’s-land between the lives of the white people in the house and black people in their back-yard quarters, said she was sick this morning. She would do the washing tomorrow.

“Are those for the master . . .?” Ella indicated the eggs but lacked the courage to complain. “What’s wrong with Lena?”

Over the frying pan, Thomasi gave a great shrug of disbelief and contempt. “What does she say?”

Thomasi turned around to the young woman in the soiled pink dressing-gown, the dark line of her plucked and dyed white-woman’s eyebrows showing like pen strokes on the pastel of her fair-skinned face, unmade-up, faintly greasy with the patina of sleep. His brow drew in, intricately lined, over his little yellowish eyes; he said with exaggerated poise and indifference, “I don’t know how she’s sick. I can’t say how a person she’s sick when there’s noise in her room all night. When people is talking there, late. Sometimes I think: She got someone staying there, or something? Talking, and late, late, a baby crying.”

Ella went out, over the stones and the grass, across the yard to the native girl’s room. The grass was crisp with dew and the chill struck through the old sandals she liked to wear instead of slippers; long threads of spider-web danced between the clothes-line. She knocked on the door of the little brick room; the window was closed and curtained. She knocked again and called softly, “Lena?”

“Ma’am?” The voice came after a pause.

Ella opened the door with difficulty—natives usually tampered with the doorknobs in their rooms, making them removable as an added protection against intruders—and, finding it would open only halfway, edged her way in. The room had a warm animal smell, like the inside of the cupboard where old Lixi, the tabby, lay with her kittens at her belly, purring and licking, purring and licking. The air in here had nothing to do with that other air, wet and sharp with morning, just outside; it was a creature air, created by breathing beings. Although the room was small, Lena in her bed seemed far away. The bed was raised high on bricks, and it was half-curtained, like a homemade four-poster. Some sort of design worked in red and purple thread trailed around the hems of the material. Lena lay, her head turned to the angle of her raised arm on the pillow. She seemed to be taking some communion of comfort from her own tender exposed armpit, close to her face.

“Are you sick, Lena?” said the white woman gently.

The black woman turned her head back and forth once, quickly on the pillow. She swallowed and said, “Yes.”

“What do you feel?” said Ella, still at the door, which she now saw could not open properly because of a cupboard made of boxes which was pushed half against it.

“My stomach, ma’am.” She moved under the fringed travelling rug that was her blanket.

“Do you think you’ve eaten something that’s made you sick?” said Ella.

The girl did not answer. Ella saw her big slow eyes and the white of her teeth come out of the gloom.

“Sometimes I’ve got a cold in my stomach,” the girl said at last.

“Is it pain?” said Ella.

“I can do the washing tomorrow,” said the voice from the great, hemmed-in agglomerate of the bed.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” said Ella. “I’ll send Thomasi out with something for you to take. And do you want something to eat?”

“Only tea, thank you, ma’am.”

“All right then.”

She felt the woman’s slow eyes watching her out of that room, which curiously, despite its poverty, its soapbox cupboards fretted with cut-out newspaper edgings, the broken china ducks, and the sword-fern draped in strained crepe paper (the ornaments and the fern were discs from the house), had something of the richly charged air of grand treasure-filled rooms of old houses heavy with association, rooms much used, thick with the overlaid echoes of human conourse. She thought, for some reason, of the kind of room in which one expects to find a Miss Havisham. And how ridiculous! These two whitewashed servants’ rooms neatly placed out of the way between the dustbin and the garage! What had they to do with Dickens or flights of fancy—or anything else, in fact, except clean, weatherproof, and fairly decent places for the servants to sleep? They belonged to
nothing and nobody, merely were thrown in along with the other conditions of work.

On the kitchen step Ella stopped and shook each foot like a cat; her feet were sopping. She made a little exclamation of irritation with herself.

And when she had dressed, she sent Thomasi out to the room with a dose of chlorodyne ready-mixed with water in one of the old kitchen-glasses. She got her younger child Pip ready for Allan to take to nursery school and saw that her daughter Kathie had some cake to take for her school lunch in place of the sandwiches Lena usually made.

“Darned nuisance, mmh?” Allan said (suppressing a belch, with distaste, after the eggs).

“Can’t be helped, I suppose,” Ella said. “I wouldn’t mind so much if only it wasn’t Monday. You know how it is when the washing isn’t done on the right day. It puts the whole of the rest of the week out. Anyway, she should be all right by tomorrow.”

The next morning when Ella got up, Lena was already doing the washing. “Girl appeared again?” called Allan from the bathroom. Ella came in, holding one of Pip’s vests to her cheek to see if it was quite dry. “She doesn’t look too good, poor thing. She’s moving terribly slowly between the tub and the line.”

“Well she’s never exactly nimble is she?” murmured Allan, concentrating on the slight dent in his chin, always a tricky place to shave. They smiled at each other; when they smiled at each other these days, they had the conspiring look of children who have discovered where the Christmas presents are hidden: Europe, leisure, and the freedom of money they had saved up were unspoken between them.

Ella and Allan Plaistow lived in one of the pleasantest of Johannesburg suburbs: gently rolling country to the north of the city, where the rich had what amounted to country estates, and the impenetrable possessors of good taste had small houses in an acre or two of half-cultivated garden. Some of the younger people, determined not to be forced back into real suburbia through lack of money, kept chickens or bred dogs to supplement the upkeep of their places, and one couple even had a small Jersey herd. Ella was one of their customers, quite sure she could taste the difference between their, and what she called “city” milk.

One morning about a week after the native girl Lena had delayed Ella’s wash-day, the milk delivery cart was bowling along the ruts it had made for itself along the track between the dairy and the houses in the Plaistow’s direction, when the horse swerved and one wheel bowed down the tall grasses at the side of the track. There was a tinny clang; the wheel slithered against something. Big Charlie, the milk “boy,” growled softly at the horse, and climbed down to see. There, as if it had made a bed for itself in the long grass the way an animal turns round and round before sinking to rest, was a paraffin tin. Big Charlie stubbed at it once with his boot, as if to say, oh, well, if that’s all . . . But it gave back the resistance of a container that has something inside it; through his toes, there came to him the realization that this was not merely an empty tin. It was upside down, the top pressed to the ground. He saw an edge of blue material, stained with dew and earth, just showing. Still with his foot, he pushed hard—too hard, for whatever was inside was light—and the tin rocked over. There spilled out of it a small bundle, the naked decaying body of what had been a new-born child, rolled, carelessly as one might roll up old clothing, in a blue satin nightgown.

It did not seem for a moment to Big Charlie that the baby was dead. He gave a kind of aghast cluck, as at some gross neglect—one of his own five doubled up with a bellyache after eating berries, or the youngest with flies settling on his mouth because the mother had failed to wipe the milk that trickled down his chin from her abundance when she fed him—and knelt down to make haste to do whatever it was that the little creature needed. And then he saw that this was hardly a child at all; was now closer to those kittens he was sometimes ordered by his employers to drown in a bucket of water or closer still to one of those battered fledglings found lying beneath the mimosa trees the night after a bad summer storm.

So now he stood back and did not want to touch it. With his mouth lifted over his teeth in a superstitious horror at the coldness of what had been done, he took the crumpled satin in the tips of his fingers and folded it over the body again, then dropped the bundle back into the paraffin tin and lifted the tin onto the cart beside him.
As he drove, he looked down now and then, swiftly, in dismay to see it there still beside him. The bodice of the nightgown was uppermost and lifted in the firm currents of the morning air. It was inside out, and showed a sewn-on laundry label. Big Charlie could neither read or write so he did not know that it said in the neat letters devised for the nursing home, E. PLAISTOW.

That, of course, was how Ella came to find herself in court.

When she opened the door to the plainclothes detective that afternoon, she had the small momentary start, a kind of throb in some organ one didn’t know one had, of all people who do not steal and who have paid their taxes: an alarm at the sight of a policeman that is perhaps rooted in the memory of childhood treats. The man was heavily built and large-footed and he had a very small, well-brushed moustache, smooth as the double flick of a paintbrush across his broad lip. He said in Afrikaans, “Goete middag, Mevrou Plaistow?” And when she answered in English, he switched to slow, stilted English. She led him into the living room with a false air of calm and he sat on the edge of the sofa. When he told her that the Evan’s milk boy had found a dead native baby in a paraffin tin on the veld, she made a polite noise of horror and even felt a small shudder, just back of her jaws, at the idea, but her face kept its look of strained patience: what had this gruesome happening to do with her? Then he told her that the child was found wrapped in a blue satin nightgown bearing her name, and she rose instantly from her chair in alarm, as if there had been a sudden jab inside her.

“In my nightgown?” she accused, standing over the man.

“Yes, I’m afraid so, lady.”

“But are you sure?” she said, withdrawing into anger and hauteur.

He opened a large brief-case he had brought with him and which she had imagined as much a part of his equipment as his official English or the rolled-gold signet ring on his little finger. Carefully he spread out the blue satin, which still kept, all refracted by creases, the sheen of satin, despite the earth stains and some others caused by something that had dried patchily—perhaps that birth fluid, vernix caseosa, in which a baby is coated when it slips into the world. The sight filled her with revulsion: “Oh, put it away!” she said with difficulty.

“You recognize it?” he said—pronouncing the word as if it were spelled “racognize.”

“It’s mine all right,” she said. “It’s the one I gave to Lena a few weeks ago. But good God—?”

“It’s a native girl, of course, the one you gave it to?” He had taken out his notebook.

Now all sorts of things were flooding into her mind. “That’s right! She was sick, she stayed in bed one day. The boy said he heard a baby cry in the night—” She appealed to the policeman: “But it couldn’t be!”

“Now if you’ll just tell me, lady, what was the date when you gave the girl the nightgown . . .” Out of the disorder of her quicker mind, his own slow one stolidly sorted this recollection from that; her confused computation of dates and times through the measure of how much time had passed between the day Pip chipped a tooth at nursery school (that, she remembered distinctly, happened on the same day that she had given Thomasi a shirt and Lena (the nightgown) and the morning the washing had not been done, became a statement. Then she went, haltingly because of her nervousness, into the kitchen to call Lena and Thomasi. “Thomasi!” she called. And then, after a pause: “Lena.” And she watched for her, coming across the yard.

But the two Africans met the fact of the policeman far more calmly than she herself had done. For Africans there is no stigma attached to any involvement with the forces of the law; the innumerable restrictions by which their lives are hedged from the day they are born make transgressions commonplace and punishment inevitable. To them a few days in prison is no more shaming than an attack of the measles. After all, there are few people who could go through a lifetime without at least once forgetting to carry the piece of paper which is their “pass” to free movement about the town, or without getting drunk, or without sitting on a bench which looks just like every other bench but happens to be provided exclusively for the use of people with a pale skin. All these things keep Africans casually going in and out of prison, hardly the worse—since it is accepted that this is the way things are—for a cold, buggy night in the cells or a kick from a warder.
Lena has not a pleasant face, thought Ella, but thought too that perhaps she was merely reading this into the face, now. The woman simply stood there, answering, in an obedient Afrikaans, the detective’s questions about her identity. The detective had hitched his solid rump onto the kitchen table, and his manner had changed to the impatient one customarily used for Africans by all white persons in authority. The woman appeared weary, more than anything else; she did not look at the detective when he spoke to her or she answered. And she spoke coldly, as was her custom; just as she said, “Yes madam no madam,” when Ella reproached her for some neglected chore. She was an untidy woman, too; now she had on her head a woollen doek again, instead of the maid’s cap Ella provided for her to wear. Ella looked at her, from the doek to the coloured sandals with the cut thongs where they caught the toes; looked at her in a kind of fascination, and tried to fit with her the idea of the dead baby, rolled in a nightgown and thrust into a paraffin tin. It was neither credible nor did it inspire revulsion. Because she is not a motherly figure, Ella thought—that is it. One cannot imagine her mother to anything. She is the sort of woman, white or black, who is always the custodian of other people’s children; she washes their faces and wipes their noses, but they throw their arms around somebody else’s neck.

And just then the woman looked at her, suddenly, directly, without a flicker of escape, without dissimulation or appeal, not as a woman looks to another woman, or even a human being to another human being; looked at her out of those wide-set, even-lidded eyes and did not move a muscle of her face.

Oh, but I don’t know her, I know nothing about her . . . Ella recoiled, retracting to herself.

“She’ll have to come along with me,” the detective was saying, and as the woman stood a moment, as if awaiting some permission, he told her in Afrikaans that she could go to her room if she wanted anything, but she must be quick.

Ella stood near the door watching her servant go slowly across the yard to the little brick room. Her own heart was pounding slowly. She felt a horrible conflict of agitation and shame—for what, she did not know. But if I go after her, she seemed to answer herself, what can I say to her? Behind Ella, the detective was questioning Thomasi, and Thomasi was enjoying it; she could hear from the quick, meaningful, confidential tones of Thomasi’s voice that he was experiencing all the relish of a gossip who finds himself at last in the powerful position of being able to influence the lives of those who have forced him out into the cold of a vicarious recorder.

Ella said suddenly to the detective, “Will you excuse me now, please—” and went away through the house to her bedroom. She was standing there still, some minutes later, when the detective called from the front door, “Thank you very much, lady, hey? We’ll let you know—” and she did not come out but called back, as if she were at some task she could not leave for a moment, “I’m sorry—will you find your way out . . .

But she could not forbear to bend apart the slats of the venetian blind in time to see the back of Lena, in one of those cheap short coats—jeep coats, they were called, beloved of suburban African girls—getting into the police car. It’s unbelievable, she told herself; she didn’t look any fatter than she does now . . . And she did the whole week’s washing . . .

The moment Ella heard the car drive away, she went to telephone Allan. As she dialled, she noticed that her fingers were fumbling and damp. I’m really upset, she thought; I’m really upset about this thing.

By the time the court case came to be heard, the quiet, light-coloured Lena lying in her bed that day with her head turned to her arm for comfort, standing obediently before the questioning of the detective in the kitchen, was changed in Ella Plaistow’s mind into the ghoulish creature who emerged out of discussion of the affair with friends and neighbours. A woman who could kill her own baby! A murdener, nothing less! It’s quite awful to think that she handled Pip and Kathie, other women sympathized. It just shows you, you never know who you’re taking in your home . . . You never know, with them . . . You can send them to a doctor to make sure you aren’t harbouring someone who’s diseased, but you’ve no way of finding out what sort of person a servant is. Well, Thomasi didn’t like her from the first, you know, Ella always said at this point. Ah, Thomasi, someone would murmur, now he’s a good old thing.
So that when Ella saw the woman Lena in court, there was something disquieting and unexpected about the ordinariness, the naturalness of her appearance: this was simply the woman who had stood so often at the stove in Ella's red-and-white kitchen. And where was the other, that creature who had abandoned her own newborn child to the cold of the veld?

Embarrassment precluded all other feelings, once the white woman found herself in the witness stand. Ella had never, she said again and again afterward, felt such a fool in her whole life.

"You are, of course, a married woman?" said the magistrate.

"Yes," said Ella.

"How long have you been married?"

"Eight years."

"I see. And you have children?"

"Yes, two children."

"Mrs Plaistow, am I to understand that you, a woman who has been married for eight years and has herself borne two children, were not aware that this woman in your employ was on the point of giving birth to a child?"

Of course, the man must have thought her quite moronic! But how to explain that one didn’t go measuring one’s servant’s waistline, that she was a very big well-built woman in any case, and that since she must have been well into her pregnancy when she started work, any further changes in her figure were not noticed?

He made such a fool of me, Ella protested; you can’t imagine how idiotic I felt.

The case dragged on through two days. The woman herself said that the child had been born dead, and that since no one knew that she was pregnant, she had been "frightened" and had hidden the body and then left it on the veld, but post-mortem findings showed strong evidence that the child might have lived some hours after birth, and had not died naturally. Then there was Thomasi's statement that he had heard an infant cry in the night.

"In your opinion, Doctor," the magistrate asked the government medical officer, in an attempt to establish how much time had elapsed between the birth and death of the infant, "would it be possible for a woman to resume her normal day's work thirty-six hours after confinement? This woman did her employer's household washing the following day."

The doctor smiled slightly. "Were the woman in question a European, I should, of course, say this would be most unlikely. Most unlikely. But of a native woman, I should say yes—yes, it would be possible." In the silence of the court, the reasonableness, the validity of this statement had the air of clinching the matter. After all, everyone knew, out of a mixture of hearsay and personal observation, the physical stamina of the African. Hadn't everyone heard of at least one native who had walked around for three days with a fractured skull, merely complaining of a headache? And of one who had walked miles to a hospital, carrying, Van Gogh-like, in a piece of newspaper, his own ear—sliced off in a faction fight?

Lena got six months' hard labour. Her sentence coincided roughly with the time Ella and Allan spent in Europe, but though she was out of prison by the time they returned, she did not go back to work for them again.¹