

Perhaps there was some slight sound - a footstep on the gravel or a door swinging - but something jerked me back from the edge of sleep and I sat up, not quite awake and afraid without reason. Then the dog began barking.

He started that sharp, penetrating yap-yap-yap that he reserved for Africans. He had a different, less hostile greeting for white people; an intensely colour-conscious Johannesburg dog. All the dogs were like that, from the time they were puppies, and ~~nothing~~ ~~Extrixix~~ I was incapable of training them to behave differently, to stop terrorising the dustmen, delivery boys, servants who came past the gate.

The violence of the afternoon sun blinded me after the half-dark of the room with drawn curtains. There was the softly recurring sound of water striking the leaves and dripping down as the sprinkler turned in a wide arc over the dry grass; imposed over that, the tight hard barking of the dog, angrily confronting a young man who stood against the wall.

I seized the dog's collar and ordered him to keep quiet - without effect. The young man mumbled something I could not hear.

'Are you looking for someone?' I asked him.

'Missus?'

'Who do you want?'

'I'm Sampson, Missus, doesn't the Missus remember me? Maria's son, Sampson.'

'Oh yes, of course. I didn't recognise you - I haven't seen you for a long time. How are you, Sampson?'

'I'm alright, Missus.'

So we stood for a few moments, Sampson turning his hat round and round in his hands, gazing at it, while I still held the straining collar of the dog.

'Well, what can I do for you, Sampson?'

'I want Maria, Missus.'

'Maria! But she doesn't work here now. Surely you know that. Isn't she still living in Alexandra?'

Another pause. Then Sampson mumbled, 'She still in Alex, Missus.'

'Then why don't you go there?'

'No permit,' he replied. 'They arresting people, raiding every

night. So I can't go to Alex.'

Again we both stood in silence. Then I said, 'Well, I'm sorry I can't help you, Sampson.'

Still he made no move, gazing at the hat turning in his hands. At last he said 'I thought perhaps the Missus would let me have a room for a few days. I will work for the Missus. Just to stay for a little while.'

There was an empty room in the yard. He could stay there. Ronald would object because he did not have a pass. I had tried to get him one years ago and failed. It would, in effect, be breaking the law. Ronald hated anything that was not strictly according to the rules. But Maria's son - all that miserable trailing around from office to office . . . stupid, pointless.

'You can get arrested here too, Sampson. They've been raiding the backyards a lot in the past few weeks.'

'Yes, Missus, I know. But safer than Alex.' The hat twisting round and round. Look up, look at me, speak to me directly, not that mock-humble eyes-down deferential stance. Oh well - !

'Just for ~~xx~~ two or three days then. But not longer. You'll have to make some other arrangement as soon as you can¹'

At that he did look ~~xxxxx~~ directly at me, and I felt surprise and even a sense of shock. His face was not humble, and his expression was not grateful. I saw in his eyes what seemed like a stony hostility, even contempt. But the voice that thanked me was as respectfully polite as before.

The ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ recollection was sharp and absolute. Precisely in the same way Maria had come to me for the first time, more than twenty years before. The time was the same, the quiet time of afternoon, the street empty and still, the dog barking, and then the shock of insolent and hostile eyes . . .

Twenty~~three~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ years ago. My eldest son was a baby, only a few weeks old. He kept me up at night, so in the afternoon I was resting, almost asleep, when I had been jerked awake by the slight sound, then the dog barking.

~~It was not the same house, not the same street, but the circumstances were the same. The week-day stillness of afternoon in a white suburb in early summer. The hose turning and spraying on the grass, still waiting the arrival of regular summer rains. Someone crouched against the yard wall, seeming to seek protection from the aggressive anger of the dog.~~

'Don't be frightened,' I said. 'He barks a lot, but he won't hurt you. Are you looking for someone?'

The same question. And she had given the same answer:

'Missus?' A whisper, looking downwards and away from me.

'What's the matter?'

She said something I could not hear and I repeated again, 'What's the matter?'

'They chased us,' she said.

'Who chased you?'

'Tsotsis. They chased my sisters and me.'

'Where are your sisters?'

'Outside in the street. The tsotsis caught them. I ran away. I ran here.'

I turned and hurried down the side of the house to the front garden. It had not been the same house, then, and not the same street, ~~But~~ ~~the~~ ~~house~~ ~~was~~ ~~the~~ ~~same~~ ~~and~~ ~~it~~ ~~had~~ ~~been~~ ~~a~~ ~~different~~ ~~dog~~. But all the other circumstances were the same. The weekday stillness of afternoon in a white suburb in early summer. The hose turning and spraying ~~the~~ ~~grass~~ ~~with~~ ~~regular~~ ~~summers~~ ~~rain~~ ~~s~~ sending an arc of glistening drops high over grass that had barely become green. Summer rains were late that year and the ground was burningly dry.

The dog ran after me, followed me out into the street. Outside my house, in the middle of the road, stood a young man and a girl; a little further down the street was another couple. They stood, the two pairs, in identical poses, boy and girl close together, facing each other, unmoving. There was nothing else to be seen, no cars, no passers-by. The whole street lay quiet in the brilliant sunlight with only the dog barking at my heels. And the two couples like ~~dots~~ ~~dots~~, motionless, the girls standing with heads bowed, the boys looking down at them, as though in a film, full of uncomprehended significance and a feeling of foreboding.

When I went up to ~~to~~ the nearest couple I saw what was wrong. The boy held both the girl's wrists in a tight grip, level with his chest. She could not move.

I stood in front of him and said 'Let that girl go!'

He raised his head slowly and turned it slightly to look straight at me. He wore a cap far down over his eyes, and he had to hold his head back to see from under the brim. The top of his face was in shadow. From the black shade emerged flared nostrils and full lips from which hung a cigarette.

He looked at me silently for a few moments; then without releasing

his grip, barely moving his mouth, he said, 'Madam?'

'Let her go,' I again demanded.

Although half his face was in shadow, the look and the voice expressed the utmost insolence; even contempt. He drawled slowly, the cigarette moving with his slightly-moving lips: 'Is this your girl, Madam?' then again with different emphasis: 'Is this your girl?'

'Take your hands off her - let go of her wrists!'

Again a long pause, then the drawling voice: 'Is this your girl, Madam?' He looked at me without moving. 'What is she to you?'

I glanced up and down the empty street. The dog barked intermittently and uselessly at my side, instinctively ready to retreat if he saw a leg move in his direction. ~~The girl did not speak~~ The youth ~~watched me~~ watched me from under the peak of his cap; tall, young, thin, hard, wearing a loose faded shirt and trousers belted tightly over narrow hips.

The girl did not speak, move or even raise her head; she gazed steadfastly at the ground. Some yards away the other youth was watching us, also without moving. The sun beat down, heat shimmered along the street.

He spoke again. 'She is not your girl, Madam.' He seemed to be amused. He repeated '~~What is she to you?~~' contemptuously 'What is she to you.'

I then said desperately and stupidly 'Let her go, I tell you, or I will phone the police.'

He almost laughed. 'Call them, Madam,' he said with the utmost amusement and without relenting his grip. 'Go on, call them.'

I was angry and frustrated to the point of tears. I stood between them and seized hold of his hands, and pulled at them. They were like iron. I pulled and pulled at his hands and cried 'Let her go, I tell you! Let go of her wrists! You must let her go!'

Suddenly he relaxed his grip and took a step backwards. The other youth, watching him, did the same. The girls did not move.

'Take her, then,' he said, 'if you want her so much.' He was detached and amused. 'Take her. She is yours.'

I said to the girl, 'Come,' and indicated the house. The two girls followed me to the gate. The young man removed the damp end of his cigarette and threw it away. He put his hands on his hips and watched us. He called after me, 'You are very brave, Madam. I congratulate you!' The voice was sardonic.

This room where I am lying now - this bare room where I am waiting for evening to bring ~~him home~~ someone home - even this, small as it is, shabby as it is, was something we ~~have~~ have given half our lives for, and even so it is not really ours.

When we first came to Alexandra, Armstrong and I, we had already been married for several years and we had never ~~had~~ had a home of our own. ~~It was~~ We started our married life in half a room where newspapers pasted together and hung from a string divided our portion of the room from that part occupied by the Makadines. ~~They were~~ We were sub-sub-tenants. Alfred Makadine rented the whole room from Busile who rented the house from the landlord. Landlord unknown. The rent money was collected by a man, an African, who worked for a firm of rent-collectors who in turn collected on behalf of landlords and companies who owned property in Alexandra Township.

The lack of privacy imposed its own way of life on all of us living in divided rooms in crowded houses. The men kept away from home as much as possible. In the evenings they went to the shebeens and often they slept with women of the shebeens. We wives made our own furniture from salvaged boxes, tins, cardboard cartons and newspaper, cutting the paper into scallops and patterns to cover our shelves and tables. We added what homely touches we could - curtains made from ~~old~~ old skirts, vases thrown out by the white madams ~~reclaimed~~ reclaimed from the dustbin, pieced together, to hold a couple of artificial flowers.

We cooked on fires made in old paraffin tins in which holes had been punched; out in the yard, from early morning the smoke from the ~~braziers~~ braziers rose to hang in a blue haze over the whole of Alexandra, obscuring the shacks and huddled houses and tin roofs beneath a pearly veil. The children lived their lives in the yards, out on the streets, among the dongs and ditches and rubbish mounds, coming home to eat in the yards and sleep in the crowded, sub-divided rooms. In winter they shivered around the yard-fires, holding stiff fingers around tins of hot water or porridge. In summer, if the

torrential storms broke before supper was ready, then they ate a cold meal on the floor of their rooms, with rain in a deafening hammer on the ^{roofs} and water pinging in the tins placed on floors and beds to catch the drips from the leaks.

The shared life I had known as a child in Charlestown in Natal, in what was really country, not a town at all, was very different from the kind of communal living that we tenants and sub-tenants and sub-sub-tenants had in Alexandra Township. The space, the sun and the rain in Charlestown absorbed, dried and eliminated human discharge and waste; the veld was limitless; dirt dispersed with the wind. In Charlestown, too, even when home had little more than one room, it ~~was~~ enclosed a family unit bound together by the ties of close relationship and common upbringing.

The houses in Alexandra brought together all of us diverse people from all over the land, from towns and from the countryside, often speaking different languages, and with different customs and personal habits. And forced us to lead a life utterly exposed each to each, completely shared from the stinking latrine in the corner of the yard to the very dust where the children sat to eat their evening meal; from the water-tap down the street where the children queued with buckets and tins, to every discussion, argument, quarrel, or act of love between husband and wife. All was displayed, all gossiped about, tossed around the yards, all known to all. A baby crying at night disturbed not one family but many, and a husband who was drunk too often and beat his wife found himself the target of not one, but a dozen whipping tongues.

Any deviation from this enforced communal life required great effort of will and concentration, like that of the eldest Makadine boy who was always hunched up with knees near his chest, both cheeks supported by the heels of his hands, the middle finger of each hand firmly planted in each ear, reading books and studying; in summer against the wall of the house while the yard around him seethed with agitated life, in winter next to a box on which a candle stood. Such self-imposed isolation was difficult and rare. Most ~~of~~ made no attempt to withdraw; most of us allowed ourselves to be submerged.

Mud and dust. Mud in summer when the rains tore down the unmade streets, turning gutters into churning rivers in which children sometimes drowned. Mud in which cars slithered, skidding tyres digging deep ruts that later the sun would harden and bake. Dust in winter when the ruts crumbled and disintegrated and flew up in great clouds behind every car and cart, or was whipped over the township by the biting winds of August.

Dust hung for five dry winter months over the open square where the Alex buses had their terminal. The buses - green dragons they were nicknamed - with wooden seats and flapping torn blinds transported us from Alex to our jobs in Johannesburg and back again

the ruts crumbled and disintegrated and flew up in great clouds behind car ~~and~~ cart, or was whipped over the township by the biting winter wind.

Dust hung for five dry months over the open square where the Alex buses had their terminal. The buses - 'green dragons' * with wooden seats and flapping torn blinds - transported hundreds of thousands of passengers from Alexandra into Johannesburg and back again every week, the only transport for the nine ¹/₂ miles into town. The thump of their engines warming up on winter mornings was an alarm clock for all those who lived in surrounding streets. The queues began long before it was light and the returning workers continued to arrive long after it was dark. In the packed buses at peak hours in the early morning a seat was a valuable possession enabling the passenger to doze for another half-hour.

~~Summer mornings were~~ In winter the buses were freezing, but the passengers were at least dry. In summer the biggest hardship was the return journey when the season of afternoon storms set in. Just as the city poured its workers out into the streets for the rush home, clouds massed in the sky and the sudden, ferocious rain poured down in solid sheets.

Like hundreds of others living in Alexandra, Jena had to catch the bus home after it had left the depots. Domestic workers in white suburbs along the bus route waited in queues for an hour or more until the town rush had subsided a little. ~~Neither there~~ There were no shelters, neither at the terminus in town nor at the stops along the route. The smell of soaked clothing and shoes in the buses * in summer was part of Alex life, ~~neither there~~ the lively talk and sometimes the songs in the waiting queues was also part of Alex life. The buses from town wound uphill to the white suburban flatland of Hillbrow, then along the main route to the north, Louis Botha Avenue, passing through white suburbs all the way. The peak-hour traffic was a congestion of private cars, interspersed with the big red double-decker buses that carried white passengers only to the white ~~suburbs~~ suburbs of Orange Grove, Highlands North, Bramley.

Friday night was danger-night on the Alex buses, because there were tsotsi gangs operating to relieve men and women of their weekly pay. Money was stuffed down bosoms, in the soles of shoes. The buses were much safer than the trains that took African passengers to Orlando Township. You were all right if you came home at a reasonable hour. It was dangerous to ~~be~~ walk in the streets of Alexandra alone and after dark. Nobody went out alone at night, if they could help it.

Jena worked in a flat in Hillbrow and lived the life ~~of~~ controlled by the Alex buses; queued early in the mornings to be in her ~~kitchen~~ white madam's kitchen before seven; queued every afternoon to be home again by seven in the evening.

She wanted to bring the children to Johannesburg, but the half-room with its paper curtain deterred her. And children died too easily in Alex. In winter the little ones frequently died of coughs; every winter, too, some children and adults as well died from the fumes of a brazier brought in to warm a room where the doors and windows were closed. In summer more children died of dysintery, the 'summer sickness.'

The very first room I had - the first room where I slept by myself, I mean - was just like this room is now; small, dark, bare . So much like this, even to the old bedstead and ~~concrete~~ ~~floor~~ ~~and~~ ~~concrete~~ floor. I loved it and hated it. It gave ~~me~~ ~~the~~ ~~first~~ ~~private~~ ~~living~~ ~~life~~ ~~the~~ ~~sense~~ ~~of~~ ~~having~~ ~~it~~ for the first time in my life the feeling of having a place that was mine, my own private place; ~~the~~ ~~world~~ to go inside and lock the door and feel away from people. But I was lonely and ~~re~~ restless and no sooner had I begun to enjoy this feeling of being by myself when I longed for someone to talk to and wanted to be with other people.

The room was in the backyard of Mrs. Richter's house, and I was fifteen and 'raw' - a raw country girl in Johannesburg for the first time, in my first proper job. My employer liked to get girls straight from the country, young and inexperienced girls like myself, and train them to work in her house in her way.

The room had an iron bedstead with an old, thin mattress, and a wooden box; nothing else. I brought my own blankets and Mrs. Richter gave me ~~a~~ piece of cloth which I hung across the window as a curtain. In addition I had a cotton dress which I wore both for working and for sleeping, and a skirt, a blouse and a jersey. I had a pair of shoes, old shoes; and a small cardboard box with a few little things in it: a comb, a piece of mirror, a piece of towelling, a purse. Such things. And that was all. I did not even possess underclothes, or anything like that.

Mrs. Richter, however, provided uniforms: two pink overalls that buttoned down the front and had sleeves, like dresses; three white aprons and three white caps. The overalls, aprons and caps had to be kept absolutely clean and starched.

In that room my life began to take the shape it would have for so many of its years; housework from early morning until evening every single day of the week except Thursdays, the day off, and alternate Sunday afternoons. The routine and the work was much the same wherever I went, except that then, when I was so young and 'raw', I was paid only £1.10 a month.

At half-past five every morning the alarm clock that Mrs Richter gave me woke me up. No need to dress - I was dressed enough to start the day; splashed water on my face and hands ~~fre~~ at the sink outside the kitchen, used for doing the family's washing. By half-past six I had cleaned out the small round stove in the kitchen and laid and lit a new fire; this heated the water in the house. I had scrubbed the kitchen floor, and washed up any cups and plates that might be left over from ~~the~~ ~~previous~~ ~~evening~~ late visitors on the previous evening. While the ~~kettle~~ water in the kettle was getting hot, I went to my room and changed from my own old dress into a clean uniform, then made tea, arranging cups and pot on a tray with a cloth that Mrs Richter embroidered; cloths with sprays of flowers; I thought them very beautiful.

A cup of tea was placed carefully (so important not to slop any of it into the saucer!) on the table next to the bed of Mrs

d

Richter's son; then the tray and teapot taken to the room of my master and mistress. After that there was breakfast to prepare; ~~the table in the dining room to be laid~~; porridge, eggs and bacon to be cooked; the table in the diningroom to be laid in the way Mrs Richter had shown me, wiping each knife and fork and plate as I put them down. By the time Mrs Richter came into the kitchen in her dressing gown, everything was ready, and I waited in my starched white apron and cap, ready to serve at the table.

crockery and cutlery and put everything away. Mrs. Richter by this time had retired to rest in her room and Jena had anything up to two hours to herself.

Then she made afternoon tea and took it to Mrs. Richter on a tray covered with an embroidered, lace-trimmed cloth. Mrs. Richter pulled herself up into sitting position on her bed, fussed a little with her hands on her hair and invariably said: 'Thank you, Jena. Do you know what vegetables to prepare for dinner?'

She rooted around on the bedside table for her glasses. 'Have we enough potatoes?X The Boss likes peas with his chops. You'd better prepare the peas now.' She invariably referred to Mr. Richter as 'the Boss', ~~xxxxxx~~ when speaking to Jena, and to her son as 'the young Boss.' Sometimes she spoke of herself as 'the Missus', - 'the Missus is very cross with you Jena, the windows are filthy!' 'Don't make such a clatter with the dishes after lunch; the Missus is tired. Think of others besides yourself.'

Once a week she ~~played~~ spent the afternoon playing bridge. The women went to each other's houses in turn, so the bridge afternoons did not come to Mrs. Richter's own home more than once a month

Under Mrs. Richter's guidance ~~she~~ prepared vegetables, helped to make soups, sauces, puddings. By six o'clock ~~she~~ was once more in her starched white apron, laying the table for dinner. When the evening meal was over ~~she~~ cleared away, did the washing up, and finally when all the dishes were put away and the floor swept clean ~~she~~ went to ~~her~~ room with ~~her~~ plate of leftover food and slices of bread and ate by the light of a candle stump before ~~she~~ went to bed, wearing the same cotton frock that she wore at all times under her overalls.

That was ~~her~~ day every day except Thursdays and alternate Sundays. On Thursdays she finished ~~between 11 and 12~~ ^{finished between 11 and 12 in the morning} and ~~retiring~~ ^{and was home then} at about 8 ~~when going into the kitchen to wash the dishes.~~ ^{when going into the kitchen to wash the dishes.} On every other Sunday ~~she~~ was free from the middle of the day until the following morning.

On Mondays ~~the~~ wash girl came and did the week's washing, and on Tuesdays she came and did the ironing. When she was there, Jena had someone to talk to. The rest ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~the~~ ^{the} other days ~~she~~ was silent and saw nobody.

Mrs. Richter grumbled a lot, but she did not shout, nor did she frighten Jena. She spent a lot of time and care on the preparation of food. Groceries were ordered by phone once a week, carefully checked on delivery by Mrs. Richter, and ~~xxxxxx~~ put away in cupboards which were kept locked. When they arrived Jena was given a weekly ration of sugar, mealie-meal and cheap coffee. The coffee ~~she~~ kept and took home to her mother, making do ~~herself~~ with water added to the grounds of the Richter coffee-pot. Meat was ordered three times a week by phone, and weighed and inspected on delivery. Mrs. Richter baked all her own cakes and biscuits. She was very fond of baking. ~~What abilities she had ever possessed, what artistic talents, xxxxx into what creative urges, went into the fashioning and decorating of~~

She was like an artist in the kitchen

biscuits, tarts and layer cakes. She taught ^{me} ~~Jane~~ basic recipes for biscuit and cake-making, and showed ~~her~~ how to bake pastry, so ~~I could~~ ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~the flour~~ ~~and the ground~~ be pressed, as it were, for the real work of finishing and decoration, the variations and combinations of cherries, walnuts, almonds, chocolate, the infinite possibilities of icing sugar plus water and just a few drops from those rows of tiny bottles, vanilla, peppermint, lemon, strawberry flavours; green, pink, yellow colours; icing bags through the small nozzles of which were pressed shells, roses and fluted whorls. With ~~her~~ glasses slipping down her nose and sweat gleaming on forehead and upper lip, Mrs. Richter turned and twisted between table and oven in a ~~willow~~ ^{stately} domestic dance (~~stately~~), floured hands raised above the mixing bowl, or kneading the silky dough for coffee cake, or lifting the wooden rolling pin with a light movement at the end of each turn, so as not to ~~press~~ the air out of the pastry.

^{cooking or baking} Mrs. Richter grumbled a lot, but she did not shout. She taught ~~Jane~~ ^{me a Stabant} ~~Jane~~ to make, and equipped ~~her~~ ^{gave me} with essential knowledge of how to work in white peoples' houses. Once a week she spent the afternoon playing bridge, and this meant that once a month the bridge-players came to Mrs. Richter's house. Then there were two days of preparation of biscuits, tarts, cakes and snacks to be prepared and laid out on lace doyleys. The women ate all afternoon, to repeated cries of 'I mustn't, really, I've put on too much weight!' and 'I'm on diet, really I am . . . oh well, just this once!'

And as they ate, and in between the playing, they talked. They talked a little about clothes, a new dress or hat; a little about relatives - an adolescent daughter or a new grandchild; a little about mutual friends; but mostly they talked about their servants.

On the never-ending servant question, the subject that could not be exhausted and could not pall, there were two kinds of one-upmanship. The first, the favourite with most of the women, was to outdo each other with stories of stupidity, laziness, ingratitude, dishonesty and generally the trials of employing black boys and girls (they were all, and always remained, boys and girls, no matter ~~what~~ how old they were - houseboy, cookboy, gardenboy, milkboy, and generally 'the girl', although sometimes, more rarely, 'the nanny.')

"I gave her so many clothes - didn't charge her a thing for most of them, they only needed a little mending to be as good as new. And my old winter coat - I let her have it for a pound, it cost me seven guineas four years ago - then she just ups and goes, simply disappears. She took all the clothes with her, alright, trust them! And Percy and his wife were coming for dinner that night. I had to do everything - everything - myself, all the housework, the shopping, the cooking . . ."

"I've told him over and over again, Jim, if you soak the green vegetable and then cook them in too much water, you destroy all the vitamins. He says Yes, Missus, Yes Missus, and then when I come in the kitchen I find the saucepan full of water, boiling away, the plate turned up high - you just can't get it into their thick heads . . ."

I was there, but I don't think they ever noticed me, a thin dark shadow in the background serving tea and clearing away empty plates. Not only to these women in this home, but to white people in all the homes where I worked and where my friends worked, the servant was like part of the furniture. We were not people, not ~~human~~ humans. They talked about anything in front of us and thinking about it now I don't believe it ever occurred to them that we could understand what they said. We were black 'boys and girls', and all of us, all our lives, no matter how old we were, remained boys and girls; the cookgirl, the houseboy, the gardenboy, the milkbby, and most often, and generally, 'the girl', although sometimes in homes with toddlers we were called 'the nanny'. At that time, I accepted it too, and did not really think about it. ~~zx@nlyzwhhnxixxasxoidzrx~~ In any case, at that time, I was truly a girl. Only when I was older did I experience a pang when a three-year-old would run in to the house where I was working and cry 'Mummy, let me have a tickey, there's the icecream boy!' The icecream boy. He was a married man with a family and even a grandchild. Icecream boy.

Even then, however, at Mrs Richter's, I wondered why they were always talking about their servants. And why most of them tried to outdo each other with stories of the stupidity, laziness, ingratitude, dishonesty and generally the trials and difficulties of employing black boys and girls. Talk, talk, talk.

"I gave her so many clothes - didn't charge her atthing for most of them, they only needed a little medning to be as good as new. And my old winter coat - I let her have it for a pound, although it cost me seven guineas four years ago - then she just ups and goes, simply disappears. She took all the clothes alright, trust them! And Peŕcy and his wife were coming to dinner that night. I had to do everything - everything - myself, all the housework, the shopping the cooking...."

"I've told him over and over again, Jim, if you soak the green vegetables and then cook them in too much water, you destroy all the vitamins. Potatoes you can soak, but not the green vegetables. He says Yes, Missus, Yes, Missus, and then when I come in the kitchen I find the saucepan full of water, full to the top, boiling away, the plate turned up high - you just can't get it into their thick heads..."

"She absolutely ruined my new blòuse. I told her, Annie, use a cool iron on that material, but I was out all afternoon, and when I came in ..."

"I'm keeping a whole location, her and all her family, and ~~she~~ she has she got a family! Kids walking in and out of her room the whole day. What they only take out with them under their skirts, I don't know. That's where all my sugar goes, and the mealie meal, always asking me for a little more sugar, she can't possibly use so much in one week ..."

Smoothly, complacently, between the dealing of cards or handing round of the tea, Mrs Richter boasted about her girls.

Glances at me, in my shining white apron and smart cap, from the women at the tables when I first brought in the food. Whispers that carried through the open door as I went out with laden tray.

"That's a new girl you've got, isn't it? She looks a bit young..."

And Mrs Richter, firmly and clearly: "Yes, the last one got pregnant, I sent her home. But I like a young girl, you know, I train them myself. Then they know exactly how I like things done. None of your sophisticated types, they're too cheeky. I show her how to do things and to the best of her ability, she does it. Of course, I always supervise everything myself..."

And on other occasions: "I must say I've always been lucky with my girls. I treat them well and they look on me as they would their own mother."

Yet she knew nothing at all about me, nothing about me and I am sure about any of the girls who worked for her. She could scarcely remember which one was me, and she was always calling me by the names of other girls from the past - "Dora! I mean Agnes - no Jena. . . ." It was a totally impersonal relationship. She required certain standards of efficiency and obedience, that was all. She required the basis on which she could make her ~~xxxxxx~~ claims. To Mrs Richter I was not a person at all, I was simply the girl who did the work.

And I knew everything about her, and her husband and son. I knew when there had been a quarrel the night before, not because I had heard any of it, but just by the way Mr Richter acted in the morning, and I would take extra care with his breakfast to try and make him feel better. I knew she disliked ~~any~~ all her sons friends, male and female, and did not want them brought home to the house. I knew she was jealous of her sister who lived in a bigger house in a different suburb and who drove her own car. I knew she had a weakness for a particular kind of chocolate, and kept a ~~xxxxxx~~ supply hidden in a drawer, and did not share it with anybody. I knew she did not read the books she bought, but left them lying open on a table when she expected friends. I knew she read her sons letters when he had gone to work, and that he kept some in a special wallet that he always carried with him, ~~and that~~ ^{which} she could not obtain.

Although Mrs. Richter was very careful about her household provisions and kept everything locked away in cupboards, the rations of sugar, mealie-meal, coffee and 'boys' meat' which she doled out to me were reasonable enough; I usually managed to save enough sugar and mealie-meal over the month to take to relatives in the townships. In addition there would be food left over from the Richter's meals. I had a bigger and more varied diet than I had ever known before.

So I was well-fed, and I was learning new things, and I had a room of my own. But I was lonely. Only on Mondays and Tuesdays when the washgirl came did I have someone to talk to, and the best part of the day was eating our lunch sitting in the sun on the step of my room. The rest of the week was shut-in and ~~is~~ silent. Myself padding quietly around the house murmuring 'Yes, Missus', and trying to do

exactly what I had been told. Thursdays cleaning out my room and scrubbing its floor, washing my dress and myself as well, from head to foot. Perhaps walking up to the local shops later on, and back again. I was too timid to go into the centre of town - it was weeks before I saw the big shops and busy streets in the middle of Johannesburg. I had aunts and cousins in the townships, but the journey there and back took a long time from the suburb where I worked, and cost too much money; so it was undertaken only rarely, when I would take ~~thing~~ my gifts of surplus sugar and coffee.

My firstroom. I left after two years, when my mother called me to come back to our home in Charlestown, in Natal. I would have returned to Mrs. Richter had she wanted me, but by then I had become more confident, and felt I should be earning more money, and she preferred to get another 'raw girl' and start training her all over again.

The family next door employed a girl, Muriel, who was everything that I was not. On her hands and knees, polishing the glass-bright stoep with vigorous sweeps of her strong arms, Muriel would call to me if she saw me in the yard, or shout at me as I swept the steps, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ undeterred by distance or intervening noise.

Although she worked with tremendous energy and speed, Muriel held her employers in absolute contempt. The shouted conversations which she conducted in the vernacular were full of mimicry of the whites in her household and mine, and stories told with noisy laughter of the tricks she liked to play. I think she enjoyed it all the more that her white madam could hear it all, but understood nothing.

'She sends me to the shops,' Muriel would shout, 'to buy her some cigarettes. Round the corner there's my friend Sophie - she runs a small-time shebeen on the top of those flats. So I just drop in for a drink and a little talk. Then an hour later, I remember she's waiting for her cigarettes. Why were you so long? she asks me. Oooh, Madam, I tell her . . . You just don't know, Madam, how crowded that shop is! They take no notice of me! White people come, they serve them, I wait, I ask, they serve the white people all the time, they take no notice of me! I could stand there all day until the shop is empty, then they ask me what I want.'

Or another day when she had been visiting Sophie on her way to buy a loaf of bread, Muriel would call to me: 'You know what I tell her this time? Oooh, Mamdam! There was such an accident at the shops! A dog ran in chasing another dog, and made a lady fall over with her bag, everything all over the floor, and one of those little boys just grabbed her purse and ran out, and we all chased him down the street . . .'

'Did you catch him?' I asked naively, and Muriel doubled up with laughter.

'Did we catch him! I made it all up - it never happened! She's such a fool, she'd believe anything!'

I was amused in a shocked and frightened kind of way at this cool cheek. I would not have dared to be like Muriel.

It was only when I was much older that I understood Muriel, and the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ undeclared war she fought against her employers. She was an intelligent person, a capable worker, and held her employers in absolute contempt for their studied airs, their indolent ways. When she mocked and villified them, right under their very noses, she carried her war into the enemy camp. For a while she reversed the roles, she had the upper hand, and paid them back for the stinginess and humiliations of her servitude.

And it was Muriel who finally moved me to find another job.

'That Mrs. Richter!' she told me. 'She's just a fat old cow. She never pays a proper wage, she never gives you a rise, you can work there for fifty years, she won't pay you a penny more.'

'Don't be a fool,' she told me one Thursday afternoon in my room. 'There's lots of jobs in this town. You can get a job anywhere. What's the matter with you?'

'Well, she's taught me everything, I'd feel mean to go now just when I'm really getting useful.'

Muriel shook with her bitter laughter. 'You care about her?' she cried. 'You think about her? When does she ever think about you? Wouldn't she get rid of you tomorrow if it suited her? You're crazy. You work like a dog for next to nothing. Her fault if she loses you, because she's so mean!'

~~At last~~ At last, after nearly two years, I took her advice and left for a better-paid job. So I was launched on my career as a domestic servant, and so I had a succession of rooms that were mine for a while

Mrs Richter gives Muriel

Mrs Ingram

A state of war existed between the servants and 'the old Madam' - Julia's mother, who shuffled around the house all day on stiff, rheumatic legs ~~xx~~ keeping a watch on the household activities.

All blacks were lazy, childlike, dishonest and irresponsible to Mrs Ingram, who had come to Johannesburg when it was a mining camp, and whose husband had possessed all the aggressive energy and drive of those men who arrived with nothing in their pockets, little education, no particular skills but a furious drive to make money; which he did.

Having passed all her adult years ~~xx~~ in charge of a large house, ~~with~~ living on a scale that required several servants, accustomed to entertaining frequently and to handling the problems of many guests; having brought up and seen married off her own two daughters and her son - all with University degrees that had been acquired (at least in the girls' case) purely for the purpose of furthering their marriage prospects, and not as foundation for any intended career; having lost her own husband at the age of sixty plus, with the usual Johannesburg disease of his group - thrombosis; and having no interests at all outside those arising from her immediate family, her only passion apart from the grandchildren being ~~xxxx~~ bridge - the card-game, not the building of - she ~~keptxxxxxxelfxxxx~~ had come to live in her elder daughter's house so that she could keep herself satisfactorily occupied, watching the servants.

The servants refused to take any direct orders from the old Madam, and had a variety of effective ways of balking her so that she could never obtain any real authority in the household.

'Joseph, you must polish the dining-room table. It really looks awful.'

No reply. Joseph continues carefully and slowly to polish a glass, holding it up to the light, turning the cloth round and round

'Joseph - did you hear me? I'm talking to you. You haven't polished the dining room table for three days.'

'Im cleaning the glasses, Missus.'

'You can leave the glasses for later. It won't take you five minutes. Here you are - I'm expecting friends this afternoon for bridge.'

Joseph then leaves the glasses spread out on the kitchen table and goes to polish the dining room table, taking much longer than he would normally.

Later Julia comes in, having been shopping, and calls 'Joseph, take these glasses away! There isn't anywhere for me to put

18

the shopping.'

Joseph starts his tirade as he removes the glasses: 'I was seeing to the glasses. The old Missus came in and said I must polish the dining room table. I told ~~her~~ him No, I must do the glasses. He say No, you must polish table. What must I do, finish glasses or polish table?'

~~Then Julia, with intesen irritation:~~ Then Julia, with intesen irritation: 'Mum, I've asked you dozens of times not to give the servants jobs to do. They resent it so much. If there's something you want them to do, just tell me and I'll see that it's done.'

'But Joseph knows he's supposed to polish the dining room table every two days - it's not a special job. And I had friends coming.'

'But he was busy with the glasses.'

'He had plenty of time to do both jobs. What was he doing all morning? I saw him - sitting outside in the yard for nearly an hour.'

'It was his breakfast break.'

'An hour's breakfast break?'

'Mum, he's up at six every single morning. He doesn't have a thing until ten. He's entitled to an hour off in the mornings.'

'And a couple of hours in the afternoon, and every Thursday and Sunday - '

'Every other Sunday - '

'And how many Sundays~~s~~ have you said, you can go off if you wish, Joseph, there isn't anything to do, and then you have to prepare tea and supper and do everything yourself?'

'Please, Mum, I like to do things my way.'

'Your way, your way,' the old woman would grumble. 'You're too soft with them, that's your trouble. They're laughing behind your back. They take everything they can lay hands on - sugar, tea - only last week you had to send out for extra sugar, they'd taken the whole month's supply, that girl Freda's the worst of the lot, she's feeding a whole location in the backyard, I've seen her daughter - the one you gave all those clothes to - leaving her mother's room with a carrier bag, she didn't come with a carrier bag - half the month's groceries inside it, I daresay, taking them home to the location for all the rest of their family you expect me to stand and gatch quietly while my daughter's being robbed? I've never in my life seen servants so well fed and with so little to do as in this house, they're kids are looking health'

than your own children - '

'For heaven's sake, Mummy! You're talking absolute nonsense!'

'Well, that's what you say, my girl. And that new girl, Maria, she's being spoilt like the rest of them. She was a good, ~~shy~~ quiet, respectful girl when she first came, now she's getting cheeky like the rest of them '

It was a familiar monologue, and although each time that there was a quarrel over giving orders to the servants, there would be a passive period during which Mrs Ingram observed, muttered, but refrained from actually telling them to do anything, soon she would ~~revert~~ find herself impelled to interfere and there would be another row.

Joseph and Freda had their own means of retaliation, sometimes by the method of forcing a direct confrontation - that is, by leaving some work undone, some object deliberately in the way, so that Julia would ~~be forced to~~ have to notice it and ask why it had not been removed, so providing the opening for the complaint against Mrs Ingram. Sometimes they preferred silence, a deep, thundery, oppressive silence which, they knew very well, upset Julia and irritated her husband Ronald.

'What's biting Joseph tonight? He's as black as thunder.'

'Oh, he and Mum had a row - she told him he had to wash the kitchen floor, he said he had to do the garden, if he's not in the garden before lunch he complains he can't get the work done.'

'~~It's a bit of a~~ If there's too much work in the garden, get someone in to help him. But for heaven's sake let's not have him brooding around the place with a chip on his shoulder all the time.'

'We don't need anyone else. She can't get used to the idea of not being in charge of the household. You know how it is - she was the one in charge for all those years, now it's hard for her to sit back and see me do it. She still thinks I'm a young girl, not capable of what she calls the responsibility.'

~~It's a bit of a~~ She had been ^{forced} ~~forced~~ by circumstances to abdicate her position, which was the centre of her life, and this in itself required difficult readjustment, because she was not one who could accept retirement. But it was more than that. She was not only supposed to have retired, she was completely and absolutely redundant. She had no function in the household at all. Nobody needed her, and there was nothing that she could do that contributed in the slightest way ~~to~~ to the running of the house or the pattern of their family life.

She was not needed to keep an eye on the children when Julia went shopping, because Freda was there to look after the children, The babies slept in their prams under the trees in the garden,

or were taken for sedate little walks along the suburban streets to the park on the corner. The older children were at school in the mornings - Freda or Joseph accompanied them to the school four streets away, so that they did not have to cross any roads by themselves; and incidentally carried their school cases or satchels for them. At two o'clock there was always a row of servants, male and female, waiting along the fence by the side of the school, ready to take the school cases from the hands of the white children and accompany them home.

She was not needed to baby-sit ^{when} ~~at~~ Julia and Donald went out in the evenings, because Freda would sit up in the kitchen until they came home, and in any case Mrs. Ingram needed to retire early, and could not climb in and out of bed easily because of her stiff legs, should one of the children need her.

She was not needed to help prepare meals, because that was Maria's job, under Julia's supervision. Julia was an efficient cook, and kept a large refrigerator and a freezer stocked with so much food that there was never a Sunday evening supper or unexpected arrival of visitors that upset her.

There was not a single facet of domestic life that was not done by someone else: shopping, preparing food, cooking, clearing away, laying tables, washing up dishes, washing clothes, ironing, sweeping, ~~polish~~ dusting, polishing, and all the work connected with rearing children. African servants had rendered ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxx~~ white grandmothers a redundant class of people.

The children loved her and came to her only when they were very small. As soon as they began to become the least bit independent, they resented her over-protective attitudes, and defied her reminders to 'take your jersey' 'don't forget your handkerchief'.

Maria, still deeply imbued with attitudes of parental respect and deference to the older generation, was more tolerant ^{of Mrs. I} than the other servants. And Mrs Ingram fastened on to Maria as someone who appeared to need her, or at least did not ~~actively~~ overtly try to be rid of her. She showed Maria how to do many things that Maria could do perfectly well already; and even taught Maria her own, special pastry recipe, ~~xxxxxx~~ and the recipe for the coffee-walnut cake, so that the girl could help prepare the cakes and snacks for the bridge guests. Thus, of course, rendering herself, Mrs Ingram, even more redundant than before.

But Maria, always ^{polite} ~~respectful~~ and always considerate ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ to Mrs Ingram, a reflection of her own deep feelings of respect and affection for her parents, became the old lady's favourite, and for a long time made an unconscious contribution to the ^{pleasant} ~~pleasant~~ planning of the home. As long as she could pretend, at least to herself if not to the other members of the family, that one person - Maria - needed her, there was some purpose left in being alive, in being there at all. Even her health improved during this period; her rheumatism troubled her much less and she was able to get around by herself a great deal more and was not so

Collection Number: A3299

Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: **Historical Papers Research Archive**

Collection Funder: **Bernstein family**

Location: **Johannesburg**

©2015

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the *Hilda and Rusty Bernstein Papers*, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.